

Reflection for Advent 1B 2020 Reverend Marilyn Obersby

Well, here we are again, setting off on our journey to Bethlehem. Every year we journey anew, every year we have many opportunities for fresh insights along the way. Each year it's a pilgrimage of hope and of promise, a new beginning to a 2000 year old story.

As we prepare to set out there are decisions to be made, packing to be done. It's a long journey and a difficult road if we really engage with the season and what it signifies. Travelling light would probably be the best way to go, if we can manage it. So what about all the baggage we've acquired and been dragging along with us over the past year and even before that? How much will we be able to let go, what might hold us back from even starting out on the journey? What of all the pain, all the griefs and sadnesses, the grudges held and unresolved, the bitterness, the unforgiveness, as well as the physical, mental and emotional exhaustion, that weighs us down and prevents us from setting off on our Advent journey with a light heart and joyful anticipation?

This past year in our lives has been hard – a global pandemic with all its ramifications to contend with – for many of us, unable to see and hug family and friends locked down or far away. Just as in Jesus' time, there has been chaos on the world stage, with the ensuing instability that accompanies that. Add to that those who have lost their livelihoods, their homes and those who have lost someone precious to them, and it seems to many an overwhelming and hopeless situation. Are we able to lay that aside to concentrate on the journey?

For this is a journey we each must make, if we choose, unburdened with another person's baggage. Neither can we rest on the faith of our parents or grandparents. We must each make a conscious choice of surrender to Christ himself.

Once our backpack is filled, our travelling cloak drawn around us, staff in hand, we prepare to say goodbye before we leave. We ask for the courage to say goodbye to desires and longings that are no part of what Jesus wants us to know and to have and to love. A last minute check in our heavy pack might reveal we are still laden with other possessions we hold dear – people, ambitions, pride, habits or desires that need to be jettisoned before we can leave home.

Going on pilgrimage is to enter into the unknown, and it's often unexpected moments on the way there, or even on the return journey, that are the most life giving and life transforming, rather than the destination itself, important though that is. So it's what happens during our journey to the manger that has the potential to be life changing, before we even arrive at the stable to celebrate the

awesome arrival of ‘Emmanuel’ – ‘God with us’ – in the person of a tiny, helpless baby asleep on the straw in a manger.

Along the way, there will be decisions to be made at liminal points in the journey. There will be crossing places – which way will we go? Will we be tempted to turn around and go back, because it’s all too hard, back to our safe and well known customs of Christmases past? Will we give up and give in to the secular world’s ideas of preparation for the Christmas season?

When I was on pilgrimage in Ireland, following the way of St Kevin, the leader read to us a reflection, written by a Jesuit priest, who had made the same pilgrimage some years before. We stopped at the halfway point, also the highest point of the track, an exposed, weathered spot, with wind buffeting us from every direction. Behind us we could clearly see the way we had already come. Ahead, down the mountain, the track was shrouded in mist. There was no way of knowing what possible obstacles or pitfalls lay ahead, and we each had to decide for ourselves, whether or not to continue. The priest’s poem is called “Trasna’ – in Gaelic ‘the crossing place’ and I’d like to read it to you as a metaphor for the journey we are each called to make through the season of Advent, deciding at various junctures whether we still have the courage, the endurance, the persistence, to follow the route all the way to the stable, welcoming and coping with whatever insights may come to us, about our lives, on the way.

TRASNA

The pilgrims paused on the ancient stones
in the mountain gap.
Behind them stretched the roadway they had travelled .
Ahead, mist hid the track.
Unspoken the question hovered:
Why go on? Is life not short enough?
Why seek to pierce its mystery?
Why venture further on strange paths, risking all'
Surely that is a gamble for fools - or lovers.
Why not return quietly to the known road?
Why be a pilgrim still?
A voice they knew called to them, saying:
This is Trasna, the crossing place.
Choose! Go back if you must,
You will find your way easily by yesterday's fires;
There may be life in the embers yet.
If that is not your deep desire,
Stand still. Lay down your load.
Take your life firmly in your two hands,
(Gently... you are trusted with something precious)

While you search your heart's yearnings:
What am I seeking? What is my quest?
When your star rises deep within,
Trust yourself to its leading.
You will have the light for *first steps*.
This is Trasná, the crossing place.
Choose!
This is Trasná, the crossing place
Come !

Raphal Cortsidine

Pilgrimage is a circular route, and as TS Eliot writes: ‘when we come back to the place where we started, we will know the place for the first time.’ And so, when our place of departure on the journey becomes also our place of arrival, and we do ‘know the place for the first time’, what has changed? In seeking and travelling what have we found? In penance have we travelled the long, hard road to restitution? What of ourselves do we bring to others from the journey, what of Christ do we bring to others?

Every yearly journey through the Church’s seasons is one we make afresh, straining to listen with the ears of our hearts, trying to see with the eyes of Christ, as we make our pilgrimage, day by day becoming, hopefully, slowly but surely more like the Christ in whose footsteps we tread.

To start us on our way, I’d like to read from a poem written by Minnie Louise Haskins:

“I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year,
‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown!’
And he replied: ‘Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.’ ”

Lord Jesus Christ, Messiah, as we come to each crossing in the road, paused, having to commit ourselves decisively each time, may we persist in our decision to travel the road to Bethlehem in your company this Advent season. **Amen.**