

As many of you know, a group of young people from this parish had the unique opportunity to make a pilgrimage journey to England in June. You will have a chance to hear some of their stories today, so I am here this morning to preface their stories by sharing with you a little bit about pilgrimage in general.

There have been volumes written about pilgrimage and what it is and how to do it properly...and while I won't bore you with those details, I would like to share with you what has become my favorite definition of pilgrimage:

"A pilgrimage is a living prayer that contains all dimensions of human activity – physical, spiritual, emotional. [It] is a journey, assigned by God. It brings the pilgrim not only to a physical place, but out of himself and into the presence of God. All else falls away. There is only the child, his Father, and eternity..." Fr Svet Kraljevic

When many people think of pilgrimage, they think only of a journey to a historically holy site, usually with a group of "holy" people...but really it is much different than that...

Really the most vital component in pilgrimage is that it is a journey toward the heart of God.

Pilgrimage takes several different shapes both in the outset and the outcome – in other words, in how it starts and how it ends.

I tell students at the beginning of every journey that if they return home the same person that they were when they started then they weren't really paying attention.

So let's look at some of the outset and outcomes that we see contained in pilgrimage in Scripture –

- Genesis - Jacob – wrestles with God...comes away with a limp... ..Saw the face of God & yet was saved...overcomes a struggle with man and God. Pilgrimage leaves us stronger and yet physically changed sometimes
- Genesis - Joseph – a journey that others intended for evil ended up being for their own good...sometimes even when the journey's not something we want, it's something God wants for us – sometimes pilgrimage serves in healing broken relationships
- Exodus –Moses - is God among us or not? time of testing – they're being tested while they think they're testing God...sometimes pilgrimage results in a recognition of God's existence, His presence and His providence.
- Matthew - Magi – (magical) know it's important but don't know why...just know enough to fall on their faces – leave everything of value – go home another way – sometimes pilgrimage changes our direction
- Luke - Emmaus – dazed & confused – didn't go the way we wanted – He makes Himself known even in the midst of our confusion and fear and the clarity and peace that comes with that means turning around and heading back to where the confusion and fear began. Sometimes pilgrimage leads to clarity and peace among the confusion and chaos.

- Acts - Saul / Paul - getting things done in the 'name of the Lord' – God makes it clear that His will is different – out of our blindness we can see – didn't waste time – eat, get baptized, start preaching. Sometimes pilgrimage leads to greater clarity of purpose and vision.

Of course the greatest pilgrimage story there really is...that of Jesus...whose pilgrimage Paul describes so well in the Philippians passage we heard today...

He came down from heaven and made the journey in the way that a human would...and He did it with humility and sacrifice and obedience and love...the pilgrimage of Christ from Nazareth to the Cross shows the components that our own journeys should contain.

and as the Gospel reminds us today...He did it with the authority of God...His pilgrimage was assigned by God.

That's what pilgrimage is...a journey to see the God who is WITH us...the God who is FOR us...the God who is ALREADY THERE...

Each one of the pilgrims from St Martins that traveled to England this summer had different starts and different ends...their deepest reasons for going, and the way the journey transformed them will be markedly different for each one.

Perhaps some of them were there to wrestle with God, perhaps some to test, perhaps some went thinking they knew all about God's plan already, perhaps some were dazed and confused...

We made the journey as individuals in community, so we shared some amazing things...the Lord's prayer in different languages, cleaning a cemetery at the oldest church in England, the Eucharist celebrated by a 92 year old friar who looked like yoda, the splendor of the white cliffs of Dover, the Tower of London and the Crown Jewels, STOMP, tortizza, and pancakes that weren't pancakes...

I encourage you to take the time to hear their stories and understand their pilgrimage...it was remarkable...

And what I can say definitively is that we did get an answer to the question that was asked in the Old Testament reading today...IS GOD AMONG US OR NOT??

I truly believe the St Martins pilgrims will tell you the answer is YES. And to that I say...AMEN