

A PILGRIMAGE TO STENTON KIRK

The Revd. David D Scott

Whilst I was minister at Traprain (2010-2019), I worked closely with my neighbour, the Revd. Joanne Evans-Boiten to effect a union between our two charges. The two Kirk Sessions met over a period of seven years to share meals and to build relationships.

On one occasion, we had a retreat in the Village Hall, Stenton. Joanne talked about her retreat house in France which is located on the pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostella. She shared her vision which was later fulfilled in her demission.

For my part, I decided to extend the opening devotions into a mini-pilgrimage. Although the village is small and has around 300 inhabitants, it surprised me how easily the concept could be translated into the geography of the parish.

There were five steps with five read Psalms and one sung Psalm. A short celebration of the Sacrament took place in the kirk and the Doxology was sung. The distance travelled was short and the terrain flat.

Here is the liturgy with all its local particulars. I think it will be illustrative of my conviction that a mini-pilgrimage could be shaped within any parish and could be extended to a much larger area than the one below. It is not necessarily weather-dependent but we had a good day!

Introduction

Pick up your staff and scallop shell and let's go on a pilgrimage to Stenton Kirk! Turn left as you exit the hall and follow me to the gate of the kirkyard by Angie's house! Travel light and travel with someone from another kirk!

Step 1 – The Auld Kirk

Baldred, Aidan and Cuthbert have been associated with the kirk at Stenton. The first written record dates from the twelfth century. The old medieval church was situated here. These are the ruins of the post-Reformation kirk which was built around 1561.

You can still see the doorway and the old tower with the markings of an outside stair leading to the gallery. It's now a dovecot. Behind, there is a burial site which was possibly a sacristy.

It is a fragment of what the church has been. The ruins speak to us about change and decay. They are strangely beautiful. But they are ornaments. We have moved on and away. And so our journey doesn't end here. The church is still changing.

Reading 1 – Psalm 84;1-4

The Psalmist sings about the beauty of God's house in Angie's psalm.

Pick up your staff and scallop shell and let us continue our pilgrimage!

Step 2 – The Font

The stone font belonged to the medieval church at Stenton. It's big compared to the fonts which we have now. It disappeared. When the post-Reformation Church fell into disrepair, it was found again.

Strangely enough, it was buried underneath the floor. It had been turned upside down so that the base formed part of the flagstones. They were really burying their fear of superstitious ways being attached to the Sacraments.

I sometimes think it would be fitting to return this magnificent and substantial font to its proper place within the kirk. But, our custom is to sprinkle water over the baptismal candidate. This is a font for Orthodox immersion!

I noticed that Ripon Cathedral placed their medieval font in a side chapel and converted it into a circular communion table! The font has been covered with a piece of glass with a text beautifully etched upon it.

'That they all may be one.' This is the prayer of Jesus spoken at the Last Supper. Whilst it may not be fulfilled yet around the Holy Table, it is fulfilled through our union with Christ celebrated in the Sacrament of Baptism.



Reading 2 – Psalm 133

The Psalmist sings about the unity of God's people in Ian's psalm.

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Step 3 – Celtic Cross

This Celtic Cross is decorated on all sides with fruit, the dove of peace, the ancient chi-rho symbol, the

four winged creatures symbolising the four gospels, three entwined fish representing the Trinity but no crucified Christ!

The empty cross has always been favoured by the Reformers as a sign of Christ's victory over death. Their liturgical year consisted of Sunday and not much else. This was, of course, a little Easter and something to be celebrated every week.

This gravestone reminds us of those ancient stone crosses which punctuated the landscape – living reminders of Christ's victory over death and places where people like us could stand together in the open air and worship God.

Christ is no longer to be found suffering on a cross but alive in his world. His broken body is to be found in bread and wine and in the broken bodies of 20,000 children who die every day because they have no bread to eat! This is our Good Friday!

Reading 3 – Psalm 118;22-24

The Psalmist sings about the stone which the builders rejected in Tom's psalm.

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Step 4 – Kirk Door

This kirk was built to replace the post-Reformation ruin in 1829. The estimated cost for a simple kirk was £900. But the patroness, Mrs. Hamilton Nisbet Ferguson of Biel, offered an additional sum on condition that her plan was adopted. Everyone agreed!

This much grander kirk designed by William Burn cost £2000 and had a seating capacity of four hundred. The kirk was opened and dedicated by no less a person than Thomas Chalmers, fourteen years away from the Great Disruption and his assault on the Auld Kirk!

He preached on the text, *'For the time is come that judgement must begin at the house of God: and if it first begin at us, what shall the end be of them that obey not the gospel of God?'* (1 Peter 4;17)

Ours is a less confrontational gospel. Our ministry is one of hospitality. Our kirk door is always open – and people enjoy the peace and quiet of this place apart. They tell us all about it in the Visitors' Book.

Reading 4 – Psalm 24;7-10

The Psalmist sings about opening the gates and the doors to the great King in Joanne's Psalm.

Pick up your staff and scallop shell and let us continue our pilgrimage! Inside the vestibule, pick up a hymn book and make your way to the pews at the front of the kirk.

Step 5 – The Inner Chamber

The kirk was built to a traditional T-plan with three doors – West, North and East. Only the East door is used by the people now. The pulpit was in the centre of the south wall and there was seating underneath the Laird's Loft.

As you can see, it now houses the organ in a beautiful conversion. The gallery was added at the end of the nineteenth century. Under the influence of the Scoto-Catholic movement, the church was realigned in this cathedral style.

There is much stained glass and many beautiful gifts. And on the Holy Table, there are gifts of bread and wine which we are going to share together – refreshment for our journey.

We will sing Psalm 121 and then we shall gather around the Table for the Sacrament.

The Sacrament of Holy Communion is celebrated informally around the Holy Table.

The Doxology is sung, the elements are removed from the Table and everyone leaves the chancel to continue the journey.

Pick up your staff and scallop shell and let us continue our pilgrimage!

Step 6 – The Roodwell

The Rood Well is said to be the best example of a medieval well in Scotland. It dates from before the fourteenth century. It has been connected with the monks at Melrose Abbey and may have been built for the convenience of pilgrims.

The well is covered with a beautiful conical stone roof. It is possible that a stone cross sat on top of it. After all, the name 'rood' means 'a cross'. Just before he died on the cross, Jesus said, *'I thirst!'*

At the well, we remember how the thirsty Christ asked a woman from Samaria to give him a drink. In this, He broke down several barriers between women and men and people of different faiths.

The well is a natural meeting place where people are united together in their need for something very basic and find in the living Christ a love which unites and refreshes like water springing up within us unto everlasting life!

Reading 5 – Psalm 65;9-10

The psalmist sings a song about water nourishing the earth in John's psalm.

Pick up your staff and scallop shell and let us continue our pilgrimage and complete the circle at the Village Hall by way of Santiago de Compostela!

David D Scott

spent forty years working for the Church of Scotland mostly as a parish minister in Forth:St. Paul's, Logie Kirk, Stirling, New Kilpatrick, Bearsden and Traprain, East Lothian. After graduating in Pure Mathematics, he spent a year teaching mathematics as a commissioned missionary of the Church of Scotland in Ghana. He was an assessor and director at National Assessment Conference and is presently editor of 'The Record'.