THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CURRENT GROWTH OF PILGRIM ROUTES: TASKS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE CHURCH

The Revd. Dr. Conor Fegan

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Introduction

I want to firstly, once more, welcome you to one of Fife and Scotland's oldest churches, St Drostan's in Markinch. A church which has stood for over 900 years, in a location that has reportedly been a site of Christian worship for over 1400 years. The building has undergone extensive redevelopment, from the destruction of the post-reformation years, to the expansion of the Victorian era, and the maintenance of the modern. It does not look the same inside, but through it all, our Norman tower has remained resolute, a beacon in this small town, once the capital of Fife, drawing visitors, worshipers, and now, after centuries of the very notion of Pilgrimage being figuratively (and possibly literally) a dirty word in polite, reformed, Scottish Presbyterian circles, we once again welcome pilgrims, walking the Fife Pilgrim Way.

Hopefully, this short address will be an opportunity to explore the topic of the Pilgrim Way in Fife, but also grow to understand its potential as a modern take on an ancient practice from the perspective of a Church of Scotland community. To see it not only as a way for the church to engage with the society around it, but also as a method of engaging with a world, a people, that, despite having less and less space for traditional forms of worship and Christian practice, still finds itself, themselves, searching, yearning for spiritual fulfilment. For that is what a pilgrimage is – not a destination, but a journey – from ancient times to the modern, pilgrimages, whether termed as such or not, are a method of people setting out on a journey of self-discovery, of stepping out from the everyday, or the normal. For whoever undertakes such a journey, there might be an element of exploration, reflection, or desire to find something more, learn something new, experience something different. And the Fife Pilgrim Way, along with others, is not simply a path, but a bridge to a deeper spiritual experience, to a greater understanding of our landscape and urban environment, to our historical context, and ultimately to ourselves.

Context

The route we find ourselves on today stretches from North Queensferry or Culross in the south of Fife, to the pilgrim city of St Andrews in the north. Traveling through large towns and cities to villages, it covers the picturesque landscape as well as purposefully passing through former mining towns and areas far from the typical tourist routes. All along the way, it is marked by historical sites of Christian spiritual significance. Much like each journey is different, with different challenges and experiences, the reasons for embarking upon them are equally varied. They encompass religious devotion or a search for divine intervention, to seek healing, whether physical or spiritual, or of course, to pay restitution for some sin or misdeed. But they are also undertaken due to the desire for personal transformation. Whether this is connected to a desire for a religious experience, or indeed a desire to make a change in one's life or outlook, to seek out a challenge, get healthy, see the world, or simply go for a walk.

There is no hard and fast rule in the modern world for what a pilgrimage is, and in my own experience as a custodian of one of the gateways on a pilgrim route, those I speak to most regularly can't fully explain why they have undertaken such a journey, for most often it is the case that all these reasons come into play to a greater or lesser degree. And this is no different from our medieval forbears. Saint John of the Cross, for instance, laments that 'many set out and make these pilgrimages for recreation rather than devotion'. And its use as an instrument of justice gives us the excuse to hear the poetic words of Jacques de Vitry, the Theologian and Chronicler, who complained about the hordes of 'wicked, impious, sacrilegious, thieves, robbers, murderers, parricides, perjurers, adulterers, traitors, corsairs, pirates, whoremongers, drunkards, minstrels, jugglers, and actors unleashed on the Holy Land by the courts of Europe'. The medieval reasons

for embarking on a pilgrimage were just as varied and, frankly, probably more interesting than those of today.

Mapping the Route

But something remarkable has happened over the last three or four decades. Pilgrimage is back, and back with a bang. This – you have to call it a phenomenon – has also hit Scotland, which has seen nine 'pilgrim ways' open in the last few years, with at least three more in preparation. And in 2017, the Church of Scotland's General Assembly broke the silence of over 400 years to commend pilgrimage to the contemporary church. At that Assembly, a deliverance was passed, to 'affirm the place of pilgrimage in the life of the church and encourage congregations to explore opportunities for pilgrimage locally and how to provide practical and spiritual support for pilgrims passing through the parish'. And two years later, at Dunfermline Abbey, with all due acclaim, the modern Fife Pilgrim Way was launched. A route designed by the Fife Coast and Countryside Trust.

What is most interesting, from my perspective anyway, about the creation of the Pilgrim Way is, however, that it combined not only a desire to encourage tourism and exploration of the county of Fife, but that this secular body works in lockstep with representatives from Christian Churches, ensuring that it is the churches that have become the 'gateways' or way markers along the route, rather than simply using the towns and villages. We see in this project potential for engagement between the Church and civic Scotland in a new and interesting way that brings distinct benefits to both.

Modern Revival and Accessibility

The Fife Pilgrim Way is one of many Scottish pilgrim routes; there are currently seven fully waymarked:

- St Kentigern's Way – 150 miles, starting at Glasgow Cathedral
- Fife Pilgrim Way
- St Magnus Way in Orkney
- St. Cuthbert's Way – starting in Melrose
- Borders Abbeys Way – starts and ends in Melrose
- Deeside Way in Aberdeen
- Forth to Farne Way – starting in North Berwick to Lindisfarne

with others being planned.

All across the country, local groups and churches are taking advantage of this renaissance in Scottish pilgrimage. Using this ancient idea as a means of engaging with a modern world, using these routes, so long travelled by our forebears, as a way of encouraging people to get out and see the country around them – something the Covid Pandemic certainly helped with. In essence, it is hoped that the Fife Pilgrim Way showcases the rich cultural heritage of Fife.

Local communities have preserved traditions, stories, and crafts that enrich the experience of modern pilgrims. The path, it is hoped, will also bring economic benefits to these communities, invigorating local businesses and tourism.

Now, briefly, to give you an idea of the route, it must first be said that 'The FPW is not necessarily the authentic old pilgrim way, just a version of one of them, because there were many ways to St Andrews depending on where you started or where you landed on the Fife Coast'. The routes crisscrossed Fife, joining forces here, veering off there. There was no one route or way; therefore, those tasked with compiling a new one had carte blanche.

The route that has emerged, then, has sought to take those traveling the way, not only through the tourist hotspots of the East Neuk but instead guide them through parts of the county that do not necessarily appear on most people's top ten holiday destinations. These include inland towns,

former mining towns, and the newer settlements such as Glenrothes. Through this endeavour, the new 'Way' is replicating an ancient theme, taking travellers away from daily life or typical journeys and into new experiences, different places, places that most simply pass by. The hope was, and continues to be, that this would lead to regeneration, tourism, and income for local businesses. And in some cases, my own in particular, it has meant a huge change in the life of the local church, if due time and energy is invested to take advantage of the opportunity that it presents.

Markinch

To give you one example, at the halfway point, this town and parish of Markinch have taken particular advantage of the pilgrim way. As a church, we have seen it as an opportunity to reach out and draw in; we have seen thousands of visitors over the last 5 years, pilgrims, tourists, and even some locals who had never been through the doors of our church, which has stood here for almost a millennium. We have gone from being a church on the hill, distant from the community, to being one at its heart, with a steering group running our day-to-day activities, made up of representatives from the church, the local heritage group, and formerly the Community Council.

Of the tens of volunteers who act as tour guides and ensure that the building is open 7 days a week, seven months of the year, around a third come from the community and had previously no connection with the church. In an age where the Church of Scotland, in particular, is searching for a way to engage with the society around it, we have grasped this as one way to do just that. It has changed, drastically, the life of our church community, it has seen many of our members get much more involved, it has seen friendships arise, social events be organised, and given the wider community a greater sense of ownership over a building which we, of course, cherish as a parish church, but could not justify as a one hour a week enterprise.

The Fife Pilgrim Way, maintained by a secular organisation, with its main concern being physical wellbeing, tourism and the promotion of the Fife countryside, has contributed significantly to what the Church of Scotland obsessively calls 'mission' in our parish, and we have become an example for others hoping to replicate this success all along the route.

Restoration and Waymarking

The Fife Pilgrim Way has made great efforts to make the route safe and navigable for the widest possible range of people and abilities. Through the help of local organisations, the Council and the Fife Coast and Countryside Trust, they have restored paths, and made signs, kept cut grass – one of my own members even felt compelled to engage in some vigilante topiary – taking some secateurs to a particularly bothersome bush, I think under the cover of darkness. Clear waymarking, accessible information, maps, and well-marked resting points ensure that this route is an attractive proposition for those contemplating the journey.

But I suppose the great question remains – why? Why does an otherwise sensible person decide to set out to walk through deepest darkest Fife, enduring the cold and the wet, and the wet? Well, if there are any Fifers here; the answer is obvious – it's the only place in the world worth being in… but for the rest of us… why do people use this route, what is it that draws the modern person out of their cosy home to endure a walk like this with all the uncertainties that it can present?

As I have said, some embark on this route, simply as that, a route, a path to walk along for exercise, for nothing other than another way to get the step count up. But this is not the only reason, I would venture to say it is very much in the minority of reasons. The reasons why people set out on modern day pilgrimages are as varied and variable as those of our medieval forerunners.

People still set out on such journeys with a quest for a deeper spirituality and for mental, physical, and psychological healing, oftentimes mixed with a sense of adventure, or a desire to break free from hum drum everyday life, and broaden horizons. Very much like those who up sticks from the city and move to the countryside in search of a different kind of life. Spiritual Pilgrimages are still undertaken, whether they are termed as such or not. The sentiment remains, the desired

outcome may be different – for instance most modern day pilgrims in Scotland may not describe their journey as one seeking the transitory properties of physical proximity to the bones of a saint, or site of particular religious or spiritual significance. But the desire for change remains for many.

There remains a real desire to attempt to re-orient lives away from self-centredness. To try to start again, using a long journey as a break with the past, trying to start over or create a shift in one's life. Similarly in a world of convenience for so many a nudging curiosity for a simpler more straightforward life (if only for a short time) is attractive to some. We once had a chap who came quite literally with a bag on his back and sandals on his feet with nowhere to stay, and having again, literally sung for his supper in the local hostelry, was given a bed for the night before setting out on his way. Who says hospitality is dead!

And this is another factor of pilgrimage – the desire or need for company. For many it is as St John of the Cross complained, a recreational social endeavour, one that brings people together in a different way. Fife's Pilgrim Pastor regularly leads groups from all over the country along the path stopping off in various churches. The volunteers in this church have repeatedly cited the chance to meet new people as a core reason for them giving so much of their time. It is little wonder really after years of isolation and a trend in society towards more insular lives.

Beyond this there is also a distinct rediscovery of the importance of place, of landscape, of the natural environment, of our connection to all of these things, as well as the widespread interest in history, tradition, and in particular local history which has seen heritage groups spring up all over the country, and the relatively new phenomenon as the Church of Scotland begins to dispose of a great number of A-Listed and historical church buildings – of local parties setting up trusts to run them. And of none of this is to mention the growing awareness and importance placed on the obvious benefits to physical and mental wellbeing that exercise, fresh air, and company can provide. And of course there is the conscious and unconscious spiritual or religious aspect to such an undertaking that cannot be ignored. Pilgrimage as a concept is deeply rooted in religious understanding. Whether that is Christian or indeed one of the other major faith traditions.

For pilgrims of the past and present, the journey offers an opportunity for self-reflection, spiritual growth, and a connection with the divine. The rhythm of walking, the serenity of nature, and the encounters with fellow travellers create an atmosphere conducive to introspection. An atmosphere that allows one to transcend the experience of the everyday, to move beyond that which is necessary and encounter something other. It is well known that organised and traditional religious practices have been on the decline over the last half century or more. Fewer people find purpose or meaning in the practices that many of us within the Church of Scotland hold very dear. But that does not mean that faith, that spirituality has suffered the same fate. Instead, many find spiritual fulfilment, connections, and relationships with the divine, in different ways, in practical, physical ways of seeking out God's presence, one of which is undoubtedly pilgrimage.

I would venture that if asked, most people would not say they find God is closest within the walls of a church building, instead they might say at the seaside, on top of a mountain, or something like that. What might be termed as 'traditional' forms of worship do not work for a lot of people – they may never have, but there was less choice, traditional ways of speaking about faith do not work for a lot of people – again they may never have and that is partially why churches like the Kirk are in the state they are. But many still want to explore these issues. And pilgrimage is one way of doing this, others might be through art or music, or even through walking prayer labyrinths. For many it is easier, more fulfilling to walk and be active, experience the world and faith, rather than talk, to express their faith in physical ways rather than through discussion groups and bible studies. Many find it encouraging to walk in the footsteps of their forbears. To retrace ancient paths knowing that they walk them in the company of the communion of saints.

The Revd. Professor Ian Bradley convincingly argues:

> that far more Christians now describe their faith as an on-going journey rather than as a sudden decisive conversion experience. The road to Emmaus, where along which the

resurrected Jesus, travelled with two of his disciples for many miles before they recognised him, seems to resonate with more believers nowadays than the road to Damascus where St Paul underwent a sudden blinding conversion.1

Pilgrimage resonates with how many of us experience faith. In a world of uncertainties and competing truths, the option to journey, to stop, to go back a few steps, before going on again, searching, exploring, investigating, what faith is, what it means, who God is, where God is to be found, is often a more compelling and fulfilling method of spiritual engagement, than the often-passive experience of an hour-long Sunday service. This less prescriptive more active method of religious engagement resonates too with a growing trend within the Christian church of recognising the need, not to simply be a church with rigid answers, but one which offers an invitation to explore the questions in the first place.

Pilgrimage is an opportunity for the Church. It is an opportunity to welcome and explore to reach out and meet new people, share new experiences, find new interests, and in many ways spread the mission and message of Jesus. There are of course numerous modern pilgrims whose primary compulsion to set out on this journey is a desire to travel, a sense of adventure or historical interest, just as was the case for our medieval ancestors. Nevertheless, it is important to be careful about making hard and fast distinctions between these categories. For it is a line that has long been blurred.

Undertaking a pilgrimage, such as the Fife Pilgrim Way or any of the others, whether one terms it as a pilgrimage or not, is so often a search for something beyond a holiday. A search for something deeper, more meaningful, whether that is explicitly religious or indeed more in line with the kind of personal development most people crave.

And this is precisely where the opportunity for the church arises. If the Christian Church truly believes it has a mission and message worth sharing, pilgrimage is one of the greatest opportunities to do so today. The churches who engage have the chance to make pilgrims out of tourists, if only temporarily.

It is something we take seriously in this parish, through hospitality, through offering a chance for prayer and reflection. If only for the 15 minutes or an hour that they spend with us, they become pilgrims, they are welcomed into the church, they are shown our values and message even if they aren't preached at, so to speak. Our focus is not filling our pews, however nice that would be, it can't as these people are traveling through, instead it is a conscious decision to try to spread the message we have in the hope that it will bear fruit sometime, somewhere.

Pilgrimage, at its heart is not constrained by parish boundaries or denominational borders, it is an ecumenical pursuit that works for the Universal Church, a practice in barrier breaking and a step on the path towards some form of greater Christian unity an area certainly worth further investigation.

Conclusion

Over the last three or four decades a remarkable change has taken place within churches such as the Church of Scotland. A change has taken place in how we understand faith, spirituality, and human need, as well as human experience. Churches who rejected this practice for so long have begun to see its benefits, have begun to engage with it in a variety of forms.

We have awoken to the simple fact that Pilgrimage offers a real, tangible, enjoyable, and meaningful, way and opportunity to encounter the divine. It offers traditional parish churches a new method of engaging with the world, and offers members – hitherto passive participants in their faith – the chance to become more active, to explore, to connect with their own history, and deepen both their relationships and their faith. Pilgrimage is truly an opportunity, one from which those who embark upon it (or engage with it in some way) can return in some small way changed, healed, refreshed and enriched with their horizons broadened. It gives people the chance to leave their settled routines for a while, walk in the footsteps of the faithful of countless ages and find

new companions on the way. And it offers the Church a new outlook on what its ‘mission’ actually is in a world such as this.

Conor Fegan

is now Team Minister in the Heart of Fife Parish having been called as minister to Markinch and Thornton Parish Church, following a probationary period at Morningside Parish in Edinburgh. He studied for degrees in history and theology with a focus on church history at Aberdeen where he also completed a PhD in practical the