PILGRIMAGE AS PROPHETIC WITNESS

Wendy Lloyd

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One of my current preoccupations is supporting folk who want to either go on pilgrimage, typically to or from the Isle of Iona along the rugged and remote south coast of the Isle of Mull, or who want to come to Mull or Iona on a self-led retreat and want a bit of spiritual accompaniment or direction while they are here. And sometimes I do a bit of both, blending spiritual direction/accompaniment with pilgrimage guiding. You'll find me at 'Mull Another Way'.

As my day jobs for most of my working life, I've worked in education and communication roles in International Development and the work of peace and justice. So, when I had a growing interest in pilgrimage I sought to join the dots of with my working life. On some level I think I probably sought to make this integration in order to shift some guilt about going for a lovely long walk when I knew so many were having to take long arduous journeys without choice.

Pilgrimage Intention

Pilgrimage, for me, is about setting intention to walk with and towards God. It is a journey of inner and outer transformation. And it in those familiar words of Micah 6:8 that I find companionship

> 'He has told you, O Mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God?

Most of my working life and discipleship had focused on the acting justly part of this verse from the minor prophet. Pilgrimage, particularly those journeys undertaken along Scotland's west coast have certainly helped me to understand a little of what it means to walk humbly

While I have a significant appreciation of the pilgrim routes across Scotland, and certainly commend to you the work of the 'Scottish Pilgrim Routes Forum' - my understanding of pilgrimage is not only about those journeys undertaken on designated pilgrim routes. So when I set out on the West Highland Way and Cape Wrath Trail, back-to-back, a number of years ago I undertook that with as much of an intention of pilgrimage as I had the Camino Primitivo to Santiago de Compostella a few years earlier. Or the 'Faith in Cowal' pilgrim routes a few years since.

And if there is a route that will help you understand what it is to walk humbly more than most it is the Cape Wrath Trail. Failed river crossings, navigation errors, and the isolation of eerie bothies certainly catalysed my prayer life! Pilgrimage has helped me to flip that Micah 6:8 verse on its head. It is in walking humbly with my God that I cultivate a love of kindness that enables and inspires me to act justly. Approaching life the opposite way has led to burnout. Activism without kindness, love and humility is exhausting, 'an erosion of the soul' *(Christina Maslach)*!

On the Cape Wrath Trail I found much help and even healing in the words of Oscar Romero - which I hope might lighten the load a little for those of you more drawn to the idea of the outer journey of prophetic witness than of the inner journey of personal pilgrimage:

> We cannot do everything and there's a sense of liberation in realising that. This enables us to do something and to do it very well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

Prophetic Witness

That said….

There is a long tradition of pilgrimage as prophetic witness that you may already be familiar with. My understanding of pilgrimage as prophetic witness is about being on an active journey towards a better possible world. This idea distilled for me when processing my experience of walking the Camino Primitivo. A journey I had undertaken in 2014 during a surge of violence in the Middle East with the bombardment of Gaza and the shooting down of a Malaysian airline flight over

eastern Ukraine. Both of these contexts of conflict have escalated incredibly since and are nothing on a par with the violence and atrocities we are witnessing today.

I remember being particularly world weary watching these events unfold on the TV screens of the various places I paused for a coffee or a cool drink on the way. Processing this weariness with a friend, they helpfully drew my attention the peaceful pilgrimage that happens daily on the way to Santiago de Compostela, particularly during the summer months. Tens of thousands of folk setting their intention towards a better possible world, or at least a better possible life. Every day, bearing witness to the kindness and love of humanity, creating community and of demonstrating what is possible when we journey together, in step with each other.

Pilgrimages for peace happen regularly - such as the pilgrimage that walks to the Arm Fair in the UK each year (www.peacepilgrimage.com) There were many pilgrimages calling for a ceasefire in Gaza, during Lent of this year (2024) and the pilgrimage continues while the violence does www. gazaceasefirepilgrimage.com. Annual pilgrimages take place to the location of the next round of United Nations climate change talks (Conference of the Parties). This was particularly noticeable for us here in Scotland when COP26 took place in Glasgow in 2021.

These are only a few of the obvious ways that pilgrimage takes on meaning as prophetic witness, of pilgrimage as part of the practices calling for change and for a turning away from what is harmful. Orientating us towards and bearing witness to a better possible world. And I think this orientation is also implicit in many pilgrimage experiences.

Another Way

When we set out along the remote, rugged south coast of the Isle of Mull on pilgrimage we may not be bearing witness to anyone publicly - there's no one there to see us! But I think there are three ways that this journey engenders a personal transformation that helps us on the journey from walking humbly, to loving kindness, to acting justly in the world. These ways include the strengthening of resilience, connecting with Creator and Creation and cultivating empathy and solidarity with those forced to undertake arduous journeys.

Resilience is required to do the work. To go on pilgrimage has helped me to regain perspective and hope. Whether absorbing the deep time of the rocks of Assynt and appreciating again that whatever challenge we are facing, 'this too will pass.' Being physically active on an arduous journey strengthens me physically and it strengthens my resolve in the world. Being on pilgrimage is simply a practical and physically present experience. And the world needs practical, present and hopeful folk to keep on keeping on addressing and responding to the challenges we are all facing today.

Going on pilgrimage often exposes us to both the need to care for Creation and of how Creation cares for us. The plastic pollution on the shore of the otherwise pristine beaches, the diminished ash trees, the overgrazing by overpopulated deer, the prolific invasion of the rhododendron…Going on pilgrimage on Mull naturally confronts us with the reality hidden behind the statistics, the most recent 'Living Planet' report by WWF tells us that wildlife populations have plunged by 73% in 50 years. The biodiversity, soil and climate crises demand our careful attention and response. And yet pilgrimage also often reveals how Creation cares for us. The awe and wonder we experience on the high cliffs over Carsaig is an injection of wellbeing for mind, body and soul. That awe factor deepens our sense of connection with Creator and Creation, as Kathy Galloway reminded me before I set off on my Camino de Santiago experience:

> Whether the context for pilgrimage is solitude or community, we will be drawn deeper into the mystery of God and care of Creation.

The forced removal of people from the land is a story that is familiar to us here in Scotland. On pilgrimage on Mull we pass through a number of clearance villages, the most notorious one being Shiaba, where 130 folk were given order to leave in 1845. Today 117.3 million people are forcibly displaced across the world, according to the UN International Organisation of Migration. 75.9

million people are displaced within their own country. The choice to go on pilgrimage is not the same as the unchosen arduous journey of those having to move to safety. However the practice and metaphor of pilgrimage can remind us of our original Christian identity as 'People of The Way'. It has the potential to help engender a sense of solidarity and a deepening of empathy for those many folk vilified and stigmatised for seeking safety, refuge, asylum and a better life. It is also an opportunity to enter into the rich experience of reciprocal hospitality.
When the Church of Scotland accepted the deliverance reintroducing pilgrimage as part of the Church's worship practice in 2017, many of the folk who spoke in the discussion at the General Assembly talked of their wonderful experience of offering hospitality to passing pilgrims. Hospitality is a reciprocally positive and beneficial experience, no less so when welcoming a stranger who is sure to become a neighbour. 'It is in the shelter of each other that the people live.' (*Celtic proverb)*

To receive and give hospitality is a vulnerable experience. It is to open yourself up to the unfamiliar, it is to risk getting things culturally wrong and it also expands your horizon and your heart. It is an even more humbling experience to hope and ask for hospitality. Like pilgrimage, it leads us yet further into an understanding of what it is to walk humbly with our God.

Pilgrimage as prophetic witness can be as explicit and bold as a protest march to places of power, or it can be the accumulation of many folk increasingly rediscovering this ancient practice to transform their own lives and in turn to help transform the world.

Wendy Lloyd

Wendy Lloyd is communications manager for the Iona Community and a trustee of the Scottish Pilgrim Routes Forum. She regularly supports pilgrims in making meaningful journeys across the Isle of Mull through her Mull Another Way initiative. With pilgrimage in mind, she has also trained as a spiritual director at Sarum College.