

To be a pilgrim?

'Bunions' is an ecumenical, loose association, of guys who are interested in authentic spirituality for men. We are ok about sharing regarding the irritants of Christian pilgrimage and learn a lot from each other. We meet monthly to share what we call 'bunions' – a thought, reflection, observation, insight, question that relates to our faith journey as men. Our guiding rule (about the only one that we have!) is that everyone has opportunity to speak and should be listened to with respect and care and what is said will always get discussed. At one such meeting I was struggling with the notion that perhaps we should engage in a literal pilgrimage, perhaps we should literally walk with no agenda for several days, with no resources or plans other than to let the heart of God guide the rhythm of our steps. I think deep down I was having the perennial doubts about the safety and comfort of my own faith experience. Or perhaps I was having yet another mid-life crisis that might spur my sacred journey! I was wondering what it would be like to follow God's Spirit in a moment by moment way that acknowledged that I did not know where the wind blew from or where it was blowing. The inner struggle was related to a suspicion that perhaps it was something I should actually do rather than just contemplate. I was a bit uncertain about whether it was an idea I should share as a 'bunion' in the group; it seemed a bit daft to me, that was until one of our group said, 'what do you think a pilgrimage is?' I shared my thoughts and committed myself, with anyone who was willing to join me, to the journey – a hasty decision to repent at my leisure!

A date was set and an offer was made for other 'Bunions' to join, the purposes that I identified for the journey were:

1. To go away for several days with no food or money or equipment of any kind. Just the clothes you stand in.
2. To follow Gods leading in travelling wherever we believe we are being led (whether together as a group or in 2's and 3's).
3. Not to plan this before hand but to trust God's leading and direction - whether in mission or retreat or both or neither!

On the morning of Friday 29th August 2003 Laurence Tindall and I set out together for a 3-day pilgrimage. My own feelings as I approached the time were ones of confusion and a degree of fear. Was I doing this for the right reasons, what would happen, were we being responsible or reckless, what about leaving my family, would God really be with us?

On the morning of our departure I read Psalm 107 and was struck by the seeming relevance of several verses:

Verse 1. *His love is eternal* – to pilgrims old and new.

Verse 7. *He led them by a straight road to a City* – this became particularly significant to me when Laurence said that he felt we should go to Bristol!

Verse 9. *He satisfies those who are thirsty and hungry* – whilst lack of food would not do me much harm I was aware that in removing key elements of what Maslow would call our 'hierarchy of need' (e.g. food, shelter etc) it did present an interesting perspective on life. Everything that we ate (and we ate well – ranging from hedgerow berries to a delightful roast dinner!) felt as though it came directly from God. The same kind of gratitude and delight that often accompanies eating in the outdoors accompanied every meal for me! The kindness of those that provided so generously seemed tangible evidence of their love and God's grace.

Verse 15. *They must thank the lord for His constant love* – as we travelled our constant liturgy became “God is good – all the time - all the time - God is good”. To be honest it was a deeply moving expression as each corner we turned, each new experience and each stranger we met proved the truth of our liturgy.

We met outside of our church and after stocking up on caffeine in the church office with a cup of coffee - we prayed together about the way forward. We had decided to carry a bottle of water, a toothbrush and a rucksack with enough warm clothes for the overnights. As we prayed we were joined by the nine-year-old daughter of our church cleaner. She decided to blow our minds by demonstrating her reading skills by reading a prayer of dedication and commissioning for us! Laurence and I looked at each other with a sense of wonder, not for the last time on this journey as it transpired! The reading was about how we are in God's service and we decided that this was something that we would make ourselves available for as we travelled. On a lighter note we left the church, with our nine-year-old priestess, singing ‘Follow the yellow brick road’!

It seemed interesting that our church was about to engage in an experiment with the global virtual church, as Telewest was due to film the Sunday service for the internet, whilst we were exploring the more localised immediate world. Complimentary aspects of mission that we acknowledged in our prayers with Tim the church administrator before we left.

As we walked away from the church we walked across Round Hill, a real place of spiritual significance to me. I recounted to Laurence how I had once sat on the hill, ecstatic with the knowledge that all things were possible if I only had faith. I told him how I had talked with God saying, ‘we could even move this hill together!’ And how I had sensed God's humour as I looked down the hill to where some of the hill had been moved to build a community centre that I had helped to establish – ‘Steady on, I've already moved part of it for you!’

We walked on through Mount Road and met a man that I had known for many years through my involvement in community work there. We talked and he shared his fears about forthcoming treatment that he was to have for a terrible liver complaint that had been so badly aggravated by his drug and alcohol addiction. Steve was scared to die and more sad than I had ever seen him. He was so glad when we offered to pray; he didn't just show polite acceptance that these two cranks had suggested we pray in the street, he actually welcomed our offer with a sense of welcome relief and gratitude that I found quite humbling. We prayed together and his AMEN certainly demonstrated no bashfulness, just a sincere reaching out to God for His help and wholeness.

As we left Bath I suggested that we take the cycle track route to Bristol to Laurence as it was more scenic and quiet. Laurence remembered the singing as we had left church – “Follow the yellow brick road” – so on the road we stayed! As was the case so often, when we stopped to think or pray about our direction, an event that seemed to affirm our choice of route occurred as we then met John, who was thumbing a lift into Bath, with his dog. We stopped and talked with John to discover that he had slept in local woods the night before under a tarpaulin that had collected water gradually during the night leaving him drenched! He was drying out in the sun as we chatted and shared our stories. He was very interested in our journey and I soon realised that any conversation that we had, when we described ourselves as pilgrims, would soon become of interest in relation to discourse about faith! John shared with us how he had lived in a Christian community but had eventually gone back to the road, I think drugs and drink may have exerted some influence? One of the things that he said really made me think deeply about

how Christianity has been 'packaged'. He said that he felt like a 'hypocrite', as he could never be good enough to consider himself a 'real' Christian. How has Christianity become so closely aligned with codes of behaviour? Why is it that popular belief seems so obsessed with an image of Christianity that is about people that are seen as 'good'? I confess that I am rarely good and that the occasional time when I am I only have to dig lightly to discover some warped motivation. For me Christianity is about grace, it is an unfinished journey, work in progress, a canvas that could well be painted a new and more surprising colour altogether! I felt shamed by John's faith, it was honest and admirable and it seemed to me that his own notion that he was 'half a Christian' made him twice one! We shared information about good places to go in Bath to find a place to get dry and sleep. It was now that I wished we had some money rather than just the offer to pray with John, but he didn't see it that way as he affirmed our prayers together. I wonder perhaps if the welcome we offer strangers should also be applied outside of those that call at our homes, the bible tells us that by doing this we might inadvertently welcome angels, I guess there are one or two angels on the roads too!

As we approached the end of a dual carriageway we decided to call on some dear friends in Corston on route to Bristol. We stopped in the local church to read and pray. Laurence read the commissioning of the 72 disciples that Jesus had sent out during his ministry and as this scripture suggests we decided to leave our peace at the places we were to visit. We walked across a field to our friend's house and met a man repairing a dry stone wall, it was great to chat with Brian and he was happy to have us pray for him and his wall! It was also good to pray with our friend in Corston, who has not been too well, and it was a special treat to share in the roast dinner she had prepared as well! The dinner was enhanced by brilliant conversation with the whole family who were intrigued by our antics, life the universe and everything was covered, whilst enjoying special hospitality!

Back on the road we took a detour to look at and pray over Rose and Pat's double-decker bus, which we hoped would soon be taking good news onto the roads. We walked on to Keynsham in a sudden downpour, rested a while and then moved on to the edge of Bristol. As we approached Bristol, at Brislington, I thought of good friends who I had not seen for about 8 years and who had recently written to Donna and I with words of encouragement for us and our daughter Hannah who is still quite ill with ME. We decided to call in on them and discovered that Margaret thought this must be of God as she and Matt, her husband, were only talking about me that morning! We had a great conversation that covered many aspects of life and faith – all washed down with more food and tea! Margaret prayed for us as we left – remembering all of my family by name.

As we approached a park on the edge of Bristol I noticed a group of young people; they were the 'types' of young people that others would probably avoid. We approached the lads, who were drinking lager, smoking dope, spitting at anything that moved for target practice and generally exploring their identity in relation to loud music and fast cars! We needed their help. I asked them where they would sleep if they were sleeping rough that night, which turned out to be a great conversation starter! "Who are you?" "What is a pilgrimage?" "What is a Christian?" "Why does God let bad stuff happen?" We ended up having an extensive impromptu faith debate! The lads were great, they gave us careful advice about where to sleep and where we should avoid and they were quite concerned about our well being – even offering us some of their dope! They also worried about how we would stay warm in the night, especially when they heard that we had no gear, not even matches. One of them gave me his lighter straight away and another grabbed some dry paper from his car as it had rained and he was worried that we might not get a fire going. Then my chin nearly hit the floor when they asked us to pray for

them. So we asked God's blessing on the lads, especially hoping that they would stay out of any 'scrapes' that seemed likely to come their way!

I was struck by several things as we walked on to their suggested location for the night – the local cemetery! Firstly, I was so encouraged that altruism seemed alive and well, contrary to populist dogma that young people are selfish and hedonistic, it was such a blessing to receive that young lads lighter. The stark irony for me was that inscribed on the side of the lighter, in bold red friendly letters, was the delightful ditty, "THIS IS MY F***ING LIGHTER"! Secondly I realised that the whole event, as a mission experience with them, would never have happened had we not started with our own need. So often mission seems all too ready to provide answers to questions that no one is asking, or to foist colonial type help upon unsuspecting 'natives'. It occurred to me that Jesus had met with the women at Samaria with the request, "Please give me a drink", he started from His need.

We sat in the cemetery reflecting on the day, wondering if it was real as we remembered a sense of God being alongside us on so many occasions and in so many different ways. The cemetery was overgrown and disused; we moved a bench into a memorial vault to sleep and wandered around the cemetery enjoying a deep sense of peace and tranquillity. It was a Victorian cemetery with stone angels and obelisks which rose above the hedges and brambles as if to watch over the snatches of sleep that we eventually got. We walked into a special garden that reminded us of Eden, the sun set and the moon was rising as we allowed our imaginations to recreate the Genesis stories, it was a special evening. Just before we slept Laurence read Luke 12 v 22-28 that reminded us not to worry about clothes and shelter and that God knew everything – it felt reassuringly appropriate! We were glad of the shelter, but the night was cold and the floor was hard, especially for Laurence, who took more than his fare share on it! The noise of the City continued through the night, amplified police sirens in our alcove shelter broke into our sleep and we were glad to get up at 5.45 a.m. to move on!

Saturday 30-8-03 saw us walking into the centre of Bristol, where we discovered the joys of the centrally heated railway station and broke our fast with the chocolate bars that Margaret had given us the day before. We read Psalm 25 and were encouraged by the reminder that God leads those that fear Him (v. 8&9). We washed and shaved in the station and decided to go to the Cathedral for Matins. We sat in Council Green for half an hour waiting for the Cathedral to open. I enjoyed dipping my feet (and blisters!) in the pond as we warmed in the new sun. I felt very carefree walking across the early morning dew with no shoes on, chatting to local people and enjoying the colours of day. Sure, there were hardships on this journey, but they were eclipsed by a sense of adventure, peace and joy.

In the Cathedral Canon Peter led his congregation, consisting of Laurence and I, in Matins. It was a lovely service and we had another jaw dropping experience when half way through the prayers he informed us that it was the day when the church remembered the anniversary of John Bunyan's death and that we should pray about pilgrimage! The coincidence was not lost on us and a vicar later informed me that, "coincidences happen a lot more when you are close to God!" We enjoyed a great conversation with Canon Peter after the service about the development of the temple and the socio-political context of the Old Testament. He had read 1Kings 7 v 52 – 8 v 30, which is about the Ark of the Covenant being brought into the temple, a kind of political symbol that God was contained in their world and experience. I was struck by the danger that denominations and groups want to contain God in the temples of their own forms and models in much the same way that the Jewish people seemed to want to. This theme relates well to a story recorded by Anthony De Mello that I have found really helpful:

Insinuation

The Master claimed he had a book that contained everything one could conceivably know about God.

No-one had ever seen the book until a visiting scholar, by dint of persistent entreaty, wrested it from the Master.

He took it home and eagerly opened it - only to find that every one of its pages was blank.

"But the book says nothing," wailed the scholar.

"I know," said the Master contentedly. "But see how much it indicates!"

Anthony De Mello, "One Minute Wisdom." p164.

The kind of denominational and ideological ways in which groups want to contain God in their own 'temples' runs the risk of not finding His voice in the corporate expression of His people, in the kaleidoscope of their differing experience, traditions and knowledge of Him.

Laurence and I left the Cathedral and I confess that in our weakness for coffee we prayed for relief from our caffeine addictions by asking God for a cup of coffee! I have to say though that God graciously sent us an angel when we walked through St Paul's, well ok a friend who works at the Crisis Centre, to give us our caffeine fix! We had just finished praying for the churches and projects in St Paul's and Laurence had flipped open his bible at random and amazingly read the scriptures that reminded us that we are worth more than many sparrows (Matt. 6 v 26) and that God was directing and aware of our needs. We made another of those prayer type decisions about which road to walk down when we bumped into Trudie, from the Crisis Centre, who solved our coffee crisis in return for some shared prayer! God is good – all the time – all the time – God is good!

It seemed right to us to head for North Wraxall. Donna had suggested to me that we should go there as I left home the day before and it just seemed right to go. As it was so many miles away we decided to walk to the edge of Bristol and hitch a ride. We both felt that we needed to sleep in a bed on this night, given the way we ached from the night before and I knew that there was an adjacent hut to the chapel at North Wraxall that Alan and Muriel (the pastors there) would let us use. As we left Bristol we had to go through Easton and Laurence remembered that a person he worked with lived there, so we decided to call. It was a great morning as we chatted and listened to David and his friends – another David, Chris, two chaps called Geoffrey and Tim. The men all had learning disabilities and various sensory problems, they were great in helping me to learn some basic sign language. Again we were well blessed by people's generosity as one of the men signed that we should stay for dinner! Tim, the house leader, invited us and we had omelette with the residents. We left our peace with these friends.

As we left the home we borrowed a paper and pen and Laurence suggested that we write a placard to hitch a ride and added that we should include a Christian symbol (a fish) on it – clever PR! As we stopped by a busy road to Chippenham I had an overwhelming feeling that we would not wait long for our lift and said as much to Laurence. Not long after this I began some banter with the driver of a white van who was sat at traffic lights opposite us - travelling in the opposite direction. "You should give us a lift mate!" I called out. "Where are you going?" he asked, so I showed him our sign. "Are you Christians?" He said, "My parents are Christians", and so the conversation went on. I asked him if he was a Christian. "Not yet", he said ... "We'll be praying for you," I responded. We said goodbye and he drove off. However, several minutes later he had turned his van around and driven back to take us to our destination! It transpired that Dean was a gypsy and he lived in his own caravan near his parents on a settled site and that they had become Christians a couple of months ago. We were thrilled and talked to him

about his own life, work and faith, we explained the gospel and prayed for him as we drove along. Dean was so generous, again he was a young man with a hard image (a Gypsy fist fighter!) and yet he was so gentle and kind, even stopping his van to buy us both a coke!

We arrived at North Wraxall – hoping that we might find a welcome and a more comfortable place to sleep! Alan and Muriel were surprised to see us (they didn't recognise me at first!) and then they welcomed us with amazing hospitality! Muriel happened to be making scones as we arrived! They then packed us a picnic basket, full of food and offered us the use of a hut near the church that even had two beds for us to rest up in! As Muriel packed the bag she put in her last two eggs – “they must have been for you” she said, again we were gratefully humbled by Christian love in action. We slept for a while to awaken to Muriel and Alan's delivery of Chicken and lemon grass soup! We reflected on the possibility of a pilgrimage to celebrate Bunyan's birthday if the fare is so good celebrating his death! However, discovering that he was born in the winter has made me think twice about this!

That evening Muriel and Alan invited us to a barn dance, we spoke to several people about events of the last two days and prayed with some, it was a great evening and I confess it was the last thing I had expected on a pilgrimage! God is good – all the time – all the time – God is good! We slept well!

On Sunday, 31-08-03 Laurence and I reflected together on an article that Alan had given us about stages of faith, it was great to have shared this journey together. Laurence and I identified a few principles that might be needed for future adventures:

- Go in two's, maximum of 3
- Take warm clothes and water
- Maybe wear something that identifies you as a pilgrim (badge, cross, symbol or a hat?)
- Pray and read scripture often

We read Philippians 2 that morning, about Jesus as a servant, and felt that this was a wonderful model of pilgrimage. The morning service was a cosy ecumenical affair and we met many new friends.

The walk back into Bath was peaceful and calm and we met a friend of Laurence's in Batheaston. Again as we talked about what we were doing I was struck by the ease with which discussion went so deep when we talked of pilgrimage.

Reflecting on the journey I have to say that it was a time of great discovery. The physical dimension of pilgrimage was matched by an inner journey of self-discovery and development. Looking back it seems to me that taking risks with God is a key element of our Christian lives and at times our mechanistic and controlled expressions of Christianity could do with a good dose of the mystic flavour of faith that characterises the East. The pseudo-scientific and rationalistic worldviews that dominate our faith in the West leave us at risk of slavery to the twin Gods of intellect and reason. If anything I have been left with an abiding sense that it is important to find the 'yellow brick road' in life and to follow it with a simple childlike trust that gets frowned upon by so many of the faith packages that dominate Christian thinking today.

The road goes ever on...