

## Sermon for St David's Day, 1 March 2020

### The Reverend Professor Thomas Watkin

‘... Sut y gallwn wybod y ffordd?’

‘... how can we know the way?’ (John, xiv. 5b)

† Yn enw'r Tad, a'r Mab, a'r Ysbryd Glân. Amen.

Rhaid i mi ddechrau trwy ddiolch i'r Deon ac i'r Cabidwl, gan gynwys yr Esgob, am eu gwahoddiad caredig i mi bregethu yma heno yng Nghadeirlan ein nawddsant ar wyl ein nawddsant. Mae'n anrhydedd ac yn fraint, ac yr wyf yn hynod o ddiolchgar. I am very conscious of what a privilege and honour it is to be invited to preach in this place on this day. Diolch yn fawr iawn.

Rwy'n cofio'r tro cyntaf i mi ddod yma. I first visited St David's in the 1960s when I came here with the Upper Rhondda Sunday School Teachers Association on their annual pilgrimage. Even as a thirteen-year-old, I was struck by its immense peace and seemingly innate holiness. Doubtless on that visit, we were reminded how significant a place of pilgrimage St David's was and remains, and how according to the curious calculations of medieval Catholicism, two visits to St David's equalled one to Rome, and three to one to Jerusalem. One cannot help suspecting that unscrupulous mediaeval travel agents, or their equivalents, would probably have made the most of such advertising copy. This year is being marked as a Year of Pilgrimage both in the Diocese of Llandaff and in the Church of England where it is coupled with being the Year of Cathedrals, and I understand, indeed I can confirm, that – in true mediaeval style – one can acquire and have stamped one's own Pilgrim Passport to mark one's various visits, albeit that the recorded visits will not – as far as I am aware – entitle the holder to substantial remissions from Purgatory. I saw in a recent edition of the *Church Times* that St. David's is the one and only location in Wales at which a Pilgrim Passport can be bought.

It's well-known that the English word *pilgrim*, and even more obviously the Welsh word *pererin*, are both derived from the Latin word *peregrinus*, which gives a number of modern languages their word for 'pilgrim'. However, the term *peregrinus* had been used in ancient Rome long before it came to be connected with Christian pilgrimage. For half a millennium spanning the last centuries of the Roman republic and the first centuries of imperial rule, *peregrinus* was the word used in Latin for a 'foreigner' – but a particular kind of foreigner – a friendly foreigner as opposed to a foreign enemy.

*Peregrini* were persons who were not Roman citizens but who came to Rome or its territories in friendship, quite often to trade. Like later pilgrims, they were called *peregrini* because they had travelled through the fields, *per agros*, to reach their destination. Their presence, as is so often the case with foreign nationals to this day, boosted the commercial prosperity of the city and its empire, and brought peace with its trading partners. Not being citizens, *peregrini* could not conduct their businesses according to the civil law of the citizens, but instead the Roman authorities provided alternative legal arrangements for them to trade while at Rome both with one another and with the native Romans, together with a magistrate to look after their interests. They were, in short, made welcome. Many became permanent residents.

Permanent residency not unnaturally led some to aspire to become full citizens, a privilege which was, for much of the period, jealously guarded. It was however granted to those whose way of life and service to the city was thought to merit that reward, although in many cases advancement to citizen status only occurred after two or three generations had passed.

In this aspiration to full citizenship, one sees perhaps a parallel between the *peregrini* of ancient Rome and the pilgrims of the Christian era. Both aspired to become citizens of a city to which they were not entitled to belong: in the one case, ancient Rome; in the other, a different Eternal City. Both were prepared to travel in pursuit of their respective goals, and adapt their way of living so as to move a benevolent ruler to grant them what they could never claim as of right.

Regardless of whether he or she undertakes geographical journeys to shrines such as this one, every Christian is, in a sense, on a journey, a journey which it is hoped will lead to their ultimate arrival – and acceptance as full citizens – in the kingdom of God.

Just as the *peregrini* who made their way to ancient Rome and the pilgrims of later ages who travelled to the shrines of Christendom needed to know the route to their destinations, so too those who journey along the path of the Christian life need guidance as to how to reach their desired destination, which brings us back to the Apostle Thomas' question "how can we know the way?" – "sut y gallwn wybod y ffordd?". His question was not new. Moses had made a similar request to God as he led the children of Israel through the wilderness: "dangos i mi dy ffyrdd" – "show me thy way", and the Psalmist is equally demanding, when he sings: "Shew me thy ways, O Lord: and teach me thy paths". God revealed himself after a fashion to Moses, and Christ answers Thomas with the declaration: "Myfi yw'r ffordd" – "I am the way". In his very person, God the Son fulfills the Psalmist's confidence that God will show the faithful "the path of life".

The first disciples had the unique advantage of having seen Jesus in the flesh, showing them the way in his words and in his works. They had before them the example of his earthly life to follow. They, as St John puts it, “beheld his glory” dwelling among them, “full of grace and truth”.

For those who came after, for us today, the vision is less direct. Yet, dwelling among *us*, there have been, are, and always will be those who, in the words of the proper preface for saints, declare the glory of God in their lives and whom the Holy Spirit enables to “manifest the grace of Jesus Christ”. Our patron saint, Dewi ein nawddsant, is recognized as one such. In the words of Bishop Timothy Rees’ which we sang earlier this evening:

Glorious in the roll of heroes,  
Shines the name of Dewi Sant.

That his life has been commemorated for over a millennium and half as such an inspiration, and the place of his burial in death a magnet for pilgrimage and devotion, bear powerful witness to his Christian achievement.

Yet the known facts about his life are as scarce as they are celebrated. I shall not repeat them here tonight, but some are far from attractive to contemporary eyes, used to the comforts of modern life. Dewi and his companions ate only vegetables and drank only water. They chose to draw the plough themselves not to exploit the labour of animals. Few would sign up to such a lifestyle today, not even for the forty days and forty nights of Lent, let alone for a lifetime. Dewi’s rule seems to have required a lifetime of Lent.

Dydd Gwyl Dewi always falls near to the beginning of Lent or during it; this year it falls on its first Sunday. Lent is a time when we choose to impose upon ourselves a degree of self denial, some deprivation, some – dare I use the word – austerity, so as to increase the pleasures that await when we come to celebrate Easter. The Psalmist, in the beautiful words of Psalm 84, describes as ‘Blessed... the man... in whose heart are... [God’s] ways’ – “the pilgrim paths”, “ffordd y pererinion” as some modern versions of the Bible somewhat anachronistically choose to render the words). He is described as one who “going through the vale of misery use[s] it for a well”. In the season of Lent, we make ourselves experience a little misery so as to draw from it some spiritual refreshment, to find within ourselves a spark of hope to kindle afresh the fire of faith which will bring us to an increased awareness and appreciation of the life-giving love of God when we come to celebrate Easter. Dewi’s deprivations would appear to have constituted a lifetime of such hopeful and faithful preparation in

confident expectation of the joys that awaited the blessed at the end of a lifetime's pilgrimage when they would be received as full citizens in the kingdom of God.

But why were so many others, who did not aspire to so hard a life, drawn to St. David's? What awaited them here on their arrival to satisfy the spiritual thirst that had set them on their way? What was it that they found here after what would have been a difficult and hazardous journey? What do contemporary pilgrims – and tourists – still find here after what is even nowadays a far from easy trek? Do they come to learn the facts, research more about the place's history for themselves, to take pictures and buy souvenirs to show to others? Or is it as T.S. Eliot maintains should be the case for those visiting hallowed places when he writes in his poem *Little Gidding*:

You are not here to verify,  
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
Or carry report. You are here to kneel  
Where prayer has been valid.

They are strong words, and they carry conviction. Generations testify that this is a place 'where prayer has been valid' – strong, relevant – with a strength and relevance reaching back to the saint for whose life, example, fellowship and prayers we give thanks to almighty God today, one who in his life and example manifested the grace of Jesus Christ, the grace which showed others, shows us, 'the way' of which Thomas inquired and which Christ asserted was incarnate in Him.

Dewi, as death approached, is said to have comforted – strengthened – his companions by telling them to persevere in those things which they had learned from him and seen in him, adding that, on this day, 1 March, he would enter what he called the way – “the way of our fathers”.

“A minnau a gerddaf y ffordd”, “y ffordd yr aeth ein tadau”. Ac am ei fuchedd, ei esiampl, ei gyfaillgarwch a'i weddïau, ac am ddangos i ni y ffordd, yr ydym ni a hen wlad ein tadau yn rhoi diolch heddiw i Dduw...

† Yn enw'r Tad, a'r Mab, a'r Ysbryd Glân. **Amen.**