

Address at the Service of Celebration of Saint David

on the 900th Anniversary of his international recognition,
and affirmation of St Davids as a Place Of Pilgrimage

The Most Reverend Andrew John, Archbishop of Wales
St Davids Cathedral, 25 July 2023

Celebrating Pope Calixtus II and St David

In 1123, Callixtus II issued a Papal Bull and declared that two visits to this great place was equivalent to one visit to Rome. In the context of the piety of its time, this was significant in the way one's time in purgatory was marked. The more visits the less time you do.

It might seem a strange idea to many of us now but then it was real and vital and spoke powerfully of the new status accorded to St Davids as a place of pilgrimage and spiritual significance. Still today, it has a national and international reputation drawing thousands here each year to visit the shrine of St David, to drink in the rich history and to be still and pray in one of the chapels or chancel of this wonderful Cathedral.

One of the more recent developments in the landscape of faith has been a rediscovery of the power of journeying, of pilgrimage and experiencing this as something more than physical and where the journey is as important as the destination. Whatever has excited this renewed interest in exploring the ancient, thin places, of needing to slow down and mark our steps more deliberately, it seems to me that 900 years is quite long enough to justify some reflection on the capacity of place and journey to inspire faith and renew us!

This rediscovery has been unexpected and even counter cultural and I want to explore this a bit further. And to begin it has brought with it an awareness that life itself a journey and that we reflect, even if momentarily, that greater journey to which we are called which is knowing Christ and the transforming love of God. St Paul referred to the race which was set before him and towards the end of his life how he had run the race and completed the task, there was now waiting for him the victor's crown.

Tracing in our earthly walk, reminding ourselves of the pilgrimage to eternity seems to me at odds with a society which runs its course with little thought for

eternity. The speed of life can be relentless but too often we look back and wonder where have the years all gone?

In his book 'Human Traces', Sebastian Faulks, describes the hopes and aspirations of two young psychiatrists who long to change the world. Through their own struggles, failings and the challenges of the task they set themselves, they approach older age with more measured hopes and aspirations. And at the end, Sonia, married to one of the doctors wonders if the agony of life was worth it? 'Her footprints were now in the mud, left and right', he wrote. 'The long trail of her footprints, stretching back towards the sea became indistinct as each one was filled with water and edged in upon itself. In a matter of minutes, as darkness began to fall, the shape of the foot was lost at every pace until the last vestiges of her presence were washed away, the earth closing over as though no-one had passed by'.

The gift of pilgrimage today is the invitation to become aware of our mortality and of a canvas in which eternity are the margins. Stepping out of the everyday is to step into journey of faith which will one day be no longer a blur but a clear encounter with God, face to face.

And this journey, with its eternal boundaries draws us away from the busyness and routine. Something shifts when we embark on a journey either walking or travelling by other means. We press the re-set and the immediate, the everyday is replaced with a slower set of steps to a destination that is beyond us. Crafting space to experience new things might be as simple of observing the world around us, noticing things which too often fly by in the speed of our car and are no more than a fleeting blur. But the need to slow, to appreciate and to notice can only happen when the start the journey.

Richard Foster the author of many Christian books put his finger on it when he wrote: 'busyness is not of the devil, it is the devil'. The slowing down, the stepping back brings with it an invitation to simplicity. Paired back, very often en route, there is new capacity to remove the clutter which can dominate our lives; things which we might need in the everyday (or not) but which can filter out the simple delights of simple things.

Bunyan hinted at the challenges in that beautiful Puritan hymn:

Those who would valiant be
'gainst all disaster,
let them in constancy

follow the Master.
There's no discouragement
shall make them once relent
their first avowed intent
to be a pilgrim.

Of course David himself modelled the simple life: grounded in the ascetic tradition with its rigours, he understood well that the small things actually count and that life, lived well has the kind of simplicity Jesus spoke of when he instructed his disciples to take no extra tunic nor cloak nor purse.

The pilgrim shows us that a culture of MORE can inhibit the good life. And the political implications of this are as stark as they are challenging for us in our choices as individuals.

And the final reflection I want to offer is about the interaction between place and person. There is a sense in which the pilgrim allows the places travelled, to pass through them as much as they travel through those places. What I mean is that the pilgrim not only crafts time to see the world anew but is changed by it. Something sticks.

And this movement brings us back to the heart of why we are here and what this place offers. Ultimately it is not a question of engaging with a rich history or enjoying the serenity of this place but being ushered into a deeper experience of God revealed in Jesus Christ. This was Davids deepest desire and why he founded his community. In a sense, we are his legacy here today but not because we stand in this place only but because we have seen that following Jesus Christ is the greatest adventure, the authentic pilgrimage which shapes us here and now and leads us finally to our place at his side.

May we journey well. Amen.

+Andrew Cambrensis