



SALLY WELCH

# PILGRIM JOURNEYS

*Pilgrimage for walkers and armchair travellers*

### **The Bible Reading Fellowship**

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## Introduction

The path stretches out ahead, sunk deep between the hedgerows, which rise to a height of some six or eight feet either side, like green walls, festooned with flowers and plants as if celebrating some perpetual festival. Two rows of oak trees tower over the thick hedges, stern and tall, their solid trunks reaching high into the sky, branches intertwining across and over, creating a tunnel-like space, cool and green. The light is dim, filtered by thousands of green leaves carefully positioned so that each one should catch some life-giving light. Here and there, a gap in the branches allows a narrow shaft of sunlight to pierce the shade, illuminating a stone or a plant like a spotlight on the carving of an ancient and historic building. Narrow and edged with grass, the honey-coloured stones and mud show evidence of the hundreds of feet that have passed that way, pilgrims following the Way—seeking transformation, enlightenment, peace, God—all sorts of names have been given over the centuries. It is inviting and exciting, beckoning us on to discovery and adventure, encounter and delight; we need simply to take that first step.

Such paths can be found all over the British Isles and Europe, leading through wild countryside and large cities to pilgrimage destinations as famous as Rome or as little-known as Binsey. Pilgrimage destinations such as Iona and Lindisfarne within the UK receive over 150,000 visitors a year, while Santiago de Compostela in Spain numbers its pilgrims in the millions.

However, such bald statistics do not do justice to the growing interest in the spirituality of pilgrimage as something not simply concerned with the journeys of those physically travelling but as a way of living and thinking. True pilgrims do not cease to be pilgrims once the journey is complete: they take the lessons and insights learned from the journey

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back into their lives at home. These lessons are often learned through encountering and overcoming the challenges and difficulties of the journey, however long or short it is. They are reinforced by the hours of reflection that are part of the gift of a pilgrimage—time and space to think and reflect, to allow insights to sink deep into heart and mind. On the return to everyday life, with its daily routines and obligations, it is easy to forget those lessons, to bury them deep beneath the usual round of work and recreation. How valuable might they be if they were incorporated instead into a pattern of praying and living that could gradually conform the life of the pilgrim to one of constant pilgrimage, sharing the route with others who sought the way of the gospel, looking towards the eternal destination, the heavenly city which is our goal.

This book aims to share some of the lessons learnt by pilgrims while on their journeys, and to show how such lessons do not stop at the end of the journey but can be adopted and absorbed by those who have travelled and those who have not. Insights gained on the journey can be incorporated into the spiritual life of every day, bringing new ways of relationship with God and with our fellow Christians, offering support and encouragement as we face the joys and challenges of life. Using pilgrim routes as a starting point, each chapter explores a different aspect of pilgrimage, offering reflections and approaches that can be used at home and away.

## 9 Respect the community

### THAMES PILGRIM WAY (Oxford to Binsey)

After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. He said to them, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest. Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; cure the sick who are there, and say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you."' "

LUKE 10:1-9

One of the most joyous experiences of a pilgrimage can be the encounter between the one who travels and the one who offers hospitality and rest. The hostels along the main Camino de Santiago de Compostela are, for the most part, staffed by volunteers, people who give up some months, years or even the greater part of their lives to provide food and lodging to those who are making the long and arduous journey through the Spanish countryside. These dedicated men and women offer not just physical nourishment and rest, but also encouragement and support, information and advice to those who travel. Most of the pilgrims who receive this hospitality are deeply grateful, aware of the sacrifices that are being made for them. Only

a few treat the generosity of their hosts as their due, their arrogance disturbing the harmony of the community and threatening the tradition of hospitality graciously given and received. Just as a piece of litter dropped carelessly in the middle of a forest mars the landscape that surrounds it, so an assumption of privilege can alter the peaceful coexistence of traveller and host. It is the duty of each pilgrim to treat with respect and gratitude all that is offered to them along the way, and to offer politeness and thankfulness in return.

The Thames Pilgrim's Way stretches for 100 miles, from Radcot Bridge, Oxfordshire in the east to Wraybury, Berkshire in the west. It follows the route of the Thames Path, but it is more than that. Through the initiative of Rt Revd John Pritchard while he was Bishop of Oxford, the path that follows the River Thames as it flows through the Diocese of Oxford has been given a spiritual dimension, one that enables pilgrims to reflect on different aspects of their spiritual as well as their physical journey.

The Way begins in the remoter regions of west Oxfordshire, where the Thames is only just navigable and settlements are small and infrequent. For many miles the pilgrim may not see any sign of human life or habitation, kept company solely by the cattle grazing at the water's edge and by the rich and varied birdlife that frequent the area. Gradually, the places bordering the river become more populous; bridges begin to carry traffic across the water, and small villages can be seen nearby.

The path leads through Wolvercote on the outskirts of Oxford, before accompanying the Thames (renamed the Isis for this section) through the city itself, offering a glimpse from its banks of the magnificent buildings of Oxford University. Just before the dense building and business of the city itself, however, the river borders Port Meadow, an ancient meadow which has not known the plough in over 4000 years. The meadow stretches out on the north bank, grazed by placid cattle that remain undisturbed by the frantic efforts of runners and rowers or the sounds of children and dogs being called for as they escape the traces that normally hold them so closely.

Just before the Pilgrim's Way crosses the river to touch briefly the ancient meadow, a simple gravelled path leads to the right. Unsigned and uninformative, it gives no indication of where it leads, although a small cluster of houses can be seen in the distance, perhaps offering a clue to the destination of the path. Unprepossessing as it appears, however, to the pilgrim who chooses to step aside for a few hours and follow this path to its conclusion a rare gift is given—a hidden treasure set apart for the delight of those who are prepared to seek it.

The path leads initially to the village of Binsey, a small cluster of 17th- and 18th-century cottages, now mostly owned by Christ Church, one of the colleges of the University of Oxford. Well kept and self-consciously charming, they are gathered around a small green, at one corner of which can be found the Perch tavern, at another the road leading from the busy Botley Road into Oxford, and, at the furthest edge, a small track winding away from village, river and city. Following this track, the pilgrim is plunged into deep countryside, with only the hum of traffic from the bypass reminding the walker that other people exist at all. At the end of the track, now lined with sycamore trees, a small iron gate leads past a pen of goats and through a copse, then opening out into a small churchyard, at the end of which nestles a simple church.

The church itself is dedicated to St Margaret of Antioch, but the nearby well is associated with St Frideswide, a Saxon saint—perhaps an indication of two different Christian communities trying to draw together in the local operation of their faith. According to legend, St Frideswide was the daughter of Didan and Sefrida, the king and queen of Oxford. Didan founded a monastery where Frideswide wished to live, this being a typical event of Saxon times, with religious houses ruled by royal leaders. The villainous Algar, king of Leicester, fell in love with Frideswide and sent men to plead his suit. Upon her refusal, they tried to kidnap her, but 'as the holy virgin spoke, their eyes were struck blind'. On repenting of their deeds they were healed, and returned to Algar, who, undeterred by their tales of sudden blindness, set out in person, 'mad with rage and fury' to capture the princess.

Frideswide, however, was warned of his approach by an angel and she escaped to Bampton, where she remained for three years, working many miracles.

On their eventual return to Oxford, Frideswide and her companions decided to pause at Binsey for a period of retreat. Finding an isolated rural place called Thornbury, they built an oratory and obtained 'by prayer' a well. Frideswide's monastic life continued at Oxford, as did the miracles that occurred even on the occasion of her funeral.

With the legendary elements extracted, the facts of St Frideswide's life do imply that, as abbess of Oxford priory, the settlement at Thornbury (or Binsey as it became known) was used by her as a place of retreat until her death in 727.

It is not necessary for travellers to know this; nor is it vital that they descend the steps to the well that lies to the west of the church. A small, narrow set of stairs leads to a dark hole, at the bottom of which can be seen the somewhat menacing dark waters, endowed with healing properties by Frideswide herself and a site of pilgrimage for those seeking healing from eye complaints. It is not even necessary to pick up the simple leaflet detailing the historic and architectural features of the church: the original Saxon building has disappeared, and only the Norman chancel and font escaped remodelling in the 13th century; 15th-century windows remain, and furniture dating from a vigorous Victorian restoration. All that is required is to enter this still, holy place and rest for a while, absorbing the atmosphere of peace and prayer that pervade the small building, its simple whitewashed walls providing a protective space within which the mind might wander and reflect, seek and perhaps find healing and transformation.

After a while, when the urge to move on makes itself known, the pilgrim may be drawn to the greatest treasure contained by this unassuming building. Lying almost unnoticed on top of a bookcase by the entrance is a modest book with a pen nearby. It is here that the thoughts and impressions of those visiting this place are recorded and shared with

the people who come after them. In here can be found a record of those who have been before, and the ways in which their lives have been touched and changed by their visit. Some of the comments are simple and factual—a name and an address, for example, simply recording the fact that a visitor has occupied the space for a short while before moving on. These entries might seem to reveal very little, but still they demonstrate a willingness to be counted, as it were, a willingness to become part of the community of visitors to Binsey, in however slight or brief a way.

Other comments appear to be offering a justification for a visit—a connection to the place which means that the visitor merits inclusion. Some of these are by virtue of ancestral links: ‘My gt-gt-gt-grandfather buried here’; ‘My family married here in the mid-19th century’. Others reflect more personal connections: ‘Married here in 1969’; ‘Just 50 years ago we were married here in this church.’ For some visitors, frequency of visit appears to bring with it a kind of status, the visit being a reason in itself: ‘I return yet again to this place.’ These visitors seem to seek something that only the peace of Binsey can offer: ‘Again here, again good, and again thank goodness it’s open.’ A sense of welcome and belonging is shared by many who choose to record their impressions in the book: ‘Visited today and was welcomed warmly by the beauty of the church.’ Some of the entries are conversational, imparting information or recording their knowledge of the history of the church and its associations: ‘Very interesting to learn of the connection with Lewis Carroll’s Alice’; ‘I do believe in God and especially after reading “The Twilight of Atheism”’. The church is addressed as if it were a sentient being (‘Beloved Binsey’) and many writers show a willingness to engage in conversation with the rest of the community of the book. ‘Binsey feels a bit neglected; would you not offer a few flowers?’ enquires one writer, to which the answer is written: ‘Left in peace for now, not neglected, and the flowers are waiting for spring.’

However, the most moving are those that share visitors’ feelings and prayers with the readers of the book—people whom they might never meet but with whom they have a connection through the place of

Binsey: 'This evening we visited the church with our newborn daughter. During the long years of longing for a child, I often visited this church for solace. With thanks for answered prayers.' Even more poignantly, they may ask these strangers for their prayers, to add to their own: 'Please pray for my sister; she's very sick'; 'Please pray for me as I take my exams.'

For the writers in this book, it seems as if it is not about the journey, after all. Over the years, hundreds of people have made their way along the narrow tree-lined track to this small, insignificant church, intending to seek the peace and space for reflection that can be found there, and to offer and ask for prayer. Returning to the medieval emphasis which always lay with the destination rather than the route leading to that place, these pilgrims make the journey, however short, to add their names to the lists of others who have watched and waited in the holy place. They do so knowing that they are not alone, that their feelings and prayers have been shared by others, some of whom have written them down, while the heartfelt longings and rejoicings of others are held in the fabric of the building itself.

It is a strange community, this—one which finds its centre in a worn, slightly damp notebook in a tiny rural church. Yet it is no stranger than the one that gradually built up around the young man with the unfathomable eyes and radical way of speech who emerged from the wilderness to be baptised by John in the River Jordan. From that first invitation to two fishermen by the shores of Lake Galilee, to the invitation he extends to each one of us, he calls us to become part of that huge community of Christian people that covers every part of the world, from the largest cathedral congregations to the smallest gathering of two or three in prayer. We are asked by Jesus himself to shed our selfishness, our grasping need to possess, our yearning for status and power, and to join him in humility and love, sharing our knowledge and wealth, our comfort and stability with those who require these things, offering generously from our store, knowing that we in return will receive those things which we most need.

It is within this community of fellow travellers along the Way that we will find our longing for a true home at least partially satisfied—a longing for a home that is only dimly remembered or maybe never at all experienced. Just as the visitors to Binsey find the sensations of home in that small, isolated building ('Couldn't get home so came here; a wonderful substitute'), so we may discover it in our own church or among our fellow believers, mindful always that our true home will only be discovered at the end of the journey.

It is through living with, praying for and working among those with whom we share our Christian journey that we will find the company we need if we are to grow and develop in our knowledge and love of the one who first invited us to make the journey. The visitors to Binsey church do not hesitate to bring others with them, to experience the special atmosphere of the place ('Brought a friend to meet a friend') or to celebrate events and occasions: 'The stag crew'; 'I finished my exams. I came here again with my friend.'

Stories of some of these visitors can be traced throughout the books. 'What a beautiful day! Today here in this church, X said she will marry me!' is followed, further on in the book, by the entry 'A year ago we got engaged, standing right here—what a wonderful place to have started our lives together.' So, too, a regular faithful gathering in community to pray and share together will build up a record of God's saving and redemptive actions, enabling the members of that community to look back upon their joint history and see the hand of God at work in all that they have experienced.

The community at Binsey, held within the visitors' book, protected by the sturdy walls of the surrounding building, is a safe place to bring troubles and fears. Some find peace and hope through visiting the church and stopping for a while: 'So peaceful and set apart from a busy world.' Just as Jesus stepped aside so many times during his ministry, to reflect and pray, so we are led to do the same, either on our own or with others. It is through these times of shared prayer that understanding can grow and deepen—our understanding of ourselves

and of each other and of God, who underpins our lives and shares his love with all who ask for it. As Jesus taught his disciples how to pray, so we can learn from him and from others how to offer everything in our lives to God in prayer.

This is not to declare that living in a Christian community, however loosely defined this community is, will not be without its troubles or stresses. It is incredibly hard to share our lives with others, to put the needs of others before our own needs, or even before our desires. Inevitably, there will be times of stress and strain. For the pilgrims to Binsey, stress came with the felling of the avenue of chestnut trees that sheltered the way to the church. Although they were diseased, the loss of these trees caused anger and upset among the writers in the book: 'What the heck have all those trees been cut down for!!! That was a beautiful lane leading up to the church! Complete human insensitivity!!! Very angry.' The effects of the loss are clearly not just upon the beauty of the place, but upon its spirit as well, and the capacity for healing that belongs to Binsey is seen to be in some way damaged: 'The avenue of trees was part of the church and holy well and was integral in making this a special place.' Some people compare the loss of the trees to their own spiritual distress: 'Seeking peace from one tragic loss, I am confronted by the loss of the trees.' However, even as events in Binsey cause distress, so too can they provide healing, as other writers in the book offer consolation: 'The chestnuts lived their life. It was time for them to go and new trees will be planted, then they too will grow (God willing).'

By contributing to the book, by writing an entry in it, visitors become part of the community of Binsey. They find within the book the validation and recognition of their feelings about the place and about its spiritual importance in their lives. It provides a place not only where the story of Binsey can be told but where it can be added to.

So, too, with us and our own communities of family, friends, neighbours and churches. These communities, particularly the ones centred around our churches or worshipping congregations, may seem to be fractured and dysfunctional. It may appear that they

bring little that is good and much that is harmful to our lives. It may seem easier simply to seek solitude and isolation. But, although there will always be occasions when withdrawal from the crowd to reflect and pray is essential and helpful, this way of life is not the one for which we were designed by God. From the first days, when Eve was created as a companion for Adam, the children of God have lived in community. These communities have been small or large, thriving or barely surviving, but never alone. Jesus himself gathered twelve people around him to support him in his journey and to be taught by him in return. The disciples were sent out not alone but in groups or pairs to share the gospel with the people they met. And we are told that 'where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them' (Matthew 18:20).

God wants us to live in community, to share the good news of his love with others and to work together to bring his kingdom nearer. This will not be an easy task; it will require patience, forbearance and unselfishness, but we will not be left to struggle alone, and the moments of joy and love that are shared will prove good compensation for the challenges and trials of living with others. We do not travel alone but in the company of many others, fellow saints throughout the world who, together with us, seek to write the story of God's salvation upon the pages of this earth. As our own individual faith journeys are lived, they become part of that greater story, adding to the glory of God and celebrating his love for his children. The places at which we pause for refreshment and reflection, the communities in which we find a temporary home, become part of our story and of God's, weaving love and peace into the everyday struggles of existence, adding a shining thread of hope to the fabric of our lives and the lives of those around us.

## Reflection

The physical pilgrim, journeying a short or long distance along a pilgrimage route, will find many ways to honour the communities through which the pilgrim road leads. From simple actions such as

following the walker's code of taking only photographs and leaving only footprints, to more intentional kindness such as picking up litter from along the route, the traveller can, if they so wish, even arrange to spend some time at a hostel as a member of the hospitality team, offering the kindness and generosity that they have experienced to others in their turn, enabling the usual hosts to take some time out from their usual round of duties. More intangible ways of expressing gratitude and recognition for gifts received can also be employed.

One habit which can be adopted is that of making a pledge at the beginning of any journey to pause at every church that is passed. If the church is open, it should be entered. Prayers or, better still, a short service of thanksgiving should be offered for the gift of the building and its presence within the community. Church members and the wider community can be prayed for, as well as those travellers who have gone before and those who will follow after. If candles are available, even if it is not your tradition, consider dropping the required number of coins in the wooden box and setting a candle burning as a physical sign of your invocation of blessings upon the place.

If the church is closed, as, sadly, so many churches must be in these days church fixtures and fittings are of increasing value, why not practise 'clypping' the church? This is based on an Anglo-Saxon custom, revived in the 1800s as a way of expressing fellowship and love both for the church and for the church community it holds. 'Clypping' means clasping or holding tightly. If there are enough people in your group, hold hands in a circle around the outside of the church. If you are few in number, you can simply walk round the building as you pray, pausing at each corner for a time of silence. If you have the time and resources, the Arthur Rank Centre ([arthurrankcentre.org.uk](http://arthurrankcentre.org.uk)) offers a model 'clypping service', which can be adapted to suit local needs. The website offers a poem by ee cummings, 'I am a little church', which describes the sense of the unhurried timelessness of a church building, and how this can point us towards God.



**Why do pilgrims walk so much?**

**What do they learn?**

**What lasting good does it do?**

In *Pilgrim Journeys*, experienced pilgrim and writer Sally Welch explores the less-travelled pilgrim routes of the UK and beyond, through the eyes of the pilgrims who walk them. Each chapter explores a different aspect of pilgrimage, offering reflections and indicating some of the spiritual lessons to be learned that may be practised at home. This absorbing book shows how insights gained on the journey can be incorporated into the spiritual life of every day, bringing new ways of relationship with God and with our fellow Christians, offering support and encouragement as we face the joys and challenges of life.

Sally Welch is the Vicar of Charlbury and Area Dean of Chipping Norton. An active pilgrim for over 20 years, she has lectured and led workshops on the nature and spirituality of pilgrimage and labyrinth throughout the UK. She is the editor of *New Daylight* and author of several books on pilgrimage. She worked with Bishop John Pritchard on the establishment of the Thames Pilgrim Way and is currently working on a Cotswold Pilgrimage Network.



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