



**Address by The Very Revd Jane Hedges
Dean of Norwich Cathedral
at the
FURSEY PILGRIMAGE
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One of the interesting things about moving to a new place is that you meet new characters - not just the people with whom you work but people who've played a significant part in the life of that place in the past and continue to influence and inspire people in the present.

When I arrived at Westminster Abbey nearly ten years ago now, I'd heard of Edward the Confessor but I knew absolutely nothing about him; but because his shrine lies at the heart of the Abbey I soon became very familiar with the details of his life and the many stories and miracles associated with him.

In fact he became such a hero for me that I eventually wrote a children's book about his place within the life of nation, suggesting that he should be reinstated as the patron saint of England - because he really is a much better role model than St George.

Well, having arrived in Norfolk sixteen months ago now, I find myself once again meeting new characters, amongst them St Fursey, who I have to admit I had never heard of before coming to this part of the world!

Just like Edward the Confessor, St Fursey I've discovered was first and foremost a devout and compassionate man and did some remarkable things, had the gift of being a visionary and as a result is an inspirational figure to those who have become familiar with his life-story.

It's not surprising that the Venerable Bede wrote of him: "Fursey was renowned for his words and works, outstanding in goodness".

As we gather as a group of pilgrims to honour him today, I don't intend to say a great deal about the details of his life, as no doubt you all know much more about him than I do!

But having read a little about him I'd like to relate a few outstanding features of his life and personality to some of the particular challenges we face in the Church today: the challenges of being committed to mission; of being people of courage and perseverance and of being a church with the readiness to move on.

If you are a reader of the Church Times you can't fail to notice that the buzz word for the Church of England at the moment is mission.

Adverts for rectors and vicars are headed up, "Significant opportunities for mission", dioceses are looking for Archdeacons who are committed to growth and missional development, one Bishop at the moment seeks a priest to develop the mission potential of his palace.

We at the Cathedral have changed the title of our Canon Pastor to Canon for Mission and Pastoral Care.

But this commitment and pouring out of energy on mission is nothing new! Over 1400 years ago Fursey was taking the gospel to people who'd never heard the Good News of Christ and came to share that gospel with the people here in East Anglia, building on the work begun by others shortly before his arrival from Ireland.

His world in many ways was very different from our own and yet in other ways it was no different.

The people of East Anglia at that time were subject to conflict and the threat of invasion and violence, some people struggled to make a living and others lived with pain and disease.

Fursey, like other missionaries of his day followed God's call to bring the love of Christ to all these situations - showing his compassion to the poor and needy, reaching out to the sick, engaging with people with beliefs different from his own, and not fearing to establish his religious houses in areas which might be subject to invasion.

Whatever challenges we face today as we try to engage with a society where many people no longer know the stories of the gospel, where people suffer through poverty or live with chronic sickness, and where all of us wonder what the future might hold with so much conflict and war in our world; we must remember that we are not the first people to be in such a position.

Fursey was inspired to continue in his missionary endeavours through his commitment to prayer and his compassion for others and his example is an inspiration to us to remain faithful; believing that God will work through us to bring his grace to the lives of those we encounter.

Fursey was undoubtedly a character with courage and perseverance.

When he arrived in East Anglia he founded a monastery here - which anyone who has founded anything new, will know will have taken energy and conviction that he was doing the right thing.

He was himself subject to bouts of illness and it was during these times that he was visited by the visions for which he became well-known. Some of these were visions of heavenly delights but others were more troubling visions of the torments suffered by the damned. These no doubt drove him on to persevere with bringing people to faith in Christ.

The stories recorded of his life show that he was not afraid to mix with all kinds of people, including those who were potentially dangerous - he's said for example to have converted a robber who attacked his monks and through his prayers to have obtained the reprieve of six condemned criminals.

As we reflect on the courage shown by Fursey and his perseverance this is an inspiration to us when we feel in our modern world that we face what might seem like insurmountable problems.

It is hard to struggle on when we face financial pressures, or when our congregations are ageing, or when our parishes are being amalgamated with others; but we are called to be faithful in these situations and to continue to trust in God.

And this brings us to that area in which Fursey and others who've gone before us are also an inspiration and that is, encouraging us to be a pilgrim people, always ready to move on.

Fursey moved first from Ireland to England and then later journeyed to France at a time when travel was uncomfortable & often dangerous and in each of the places he came to he set about establishing new communities of monks.

As human beings many of us have a built-in resistance to change and this often grows stronger as we get older.

But one of the great things about being pilgrims is that you can't be a pilgrim without moving and growing in awareness and understanding. We will not all be like Fursey and travel to completely new places where we begin all over again; but like him we are called to be people who are open to change, flexible in our attitudes, ready to adapt to different situations because that is what being truly alive is all about.

Our two readings this afternoon echoed these themes from Fursey's life and were no doubt biblical passages which were an inspiration to him. Micah the prophet had the vision of all people being drawn to the mountain of the Lord to worship the true God.

St Luke tells of Jesus sending out the seventy - all to travel light and to rely on the generosity of others to meet their needs, and going with the good news of the bringing in of God's Kingdom.

Fursey it seems to me truly believed that God's will was to draw all people to himself and he called people to change their lives and to accept the love of God.

Will we, like him be people with a passion for mission and for growing our Christian communities and compassion for people in all kinds of situations that they may see the love of God shining through our lives – just as the people in Fursey's time saw that love in his life.

AMEN