



**2007 Fursey Pilgrimage
Saturday 6th October 2007
Sermon by The Rt Revd Graham James,
Bishop of Norwich**

It was June 1981. I was in a hospital side room beside the bed of a dying member of my congregation preparing to celebrate the Eucharist. He was in his mid 70s and knew for a few weeks that his cancer would bring his life to an end soon. He caused confusion in the hospital because he insisted on being registered as an English Catholic. The Roman Catholic chaplain came to see him and received a lecture on the Catholic and Reformed nature of the Church of England as the true Catholic Church in this land. Les had never forgotten the confirmation classes he received from an advanced Anglo Catholic priest many years before.

He'd been a soldier and planned his own dying with military precision. I was called by the hospital to come and all his family had been summoned from different parts of England. Within a few minutes his children and grandchildren were beside the bed and were it not for the modern context, it could have been a Victorian death scene. Les went in and out of consciousness. He'd requested long before that Psalm 23 to Crimond should be sung. I attempted to pitch it and although Les was drifting in and out of consciousness found the voice to sing more than a few lines the wells of his spiritual memory were deep.

He also said the Lord's Prayer quite firmly and after communion I anointed him and said those words "*go forth Christian soul, from this world...*" He never spoke again and died a couple of hours later, almost as an act of sacramental obedience to his Lord. It is the greatest of all privileges to minister to a Christian at the point of death. Les, who was not always the easiest PCC member, taught me much about how to die as a Christian pilgrim.

Yet today's gospel reading is a rather terrifying warning from Jesus not to put your affairs in order before you seek God's kingdom. "*Let the dead bury their dead*" he commands one person while telling another not to go home and sort things out before they come and follow the pilgrims way to life. We don't get our business done and put our lives in shape before proclaiming the Kingdom of God. We do so within the messiness of life, with things unfinished. That's what Jesus tells us.

It's a right perspective for any pilgrimage. At one level pilgrimages are completed. The pilgrim gets to their destination, whether its Burgh Castle, Walsingham or Santiago de Compostela. But there's another sense in which the destination of any physical pilgrimage is a reminder of a much greater, still to be completed pilgrimage to the heart of God, to the heavenly places, to the place where death and suffering and tears will be no more. For there is a sense in which every pilgrimage is a reminder of death and a preparation for it. At Les's beside all those years ago it seemed as if everything was in order and under control, death fully prepared for and yet the tears of the family and the suffering and sighs of a dying man were reminders that death comes to us in the messiness of life it simply isn't possible to tame it though of course the longing among some for euthanasia is really a way of bringing death, the ultimate stranger, under our control.

Christians were first called followers of the Way. The way is the way of the cross, the way of Jesus Christ, himself the way, the truth and the life. So it's not surprising that Christians have travelled in their mission and seen life's journey as a pilgrimage, a means in itself for following Christ's way.

Pilgrimage as an image of the Christian life has a remarkably uniting character across different Christian traditions. John Bunyan might not have been much at home at Walsingham but his understanding of the Christian life as a pilgrim journey meshes with that of Walsingham pilgrims in our own day and with those of you gathered here, brought together by Fursey, following Christ's way to this place centuries ago.

But what is the point of doing this? What possible use can it be to retrace the steps of long dead saints? Where is the value for being Christian in a very different age and culture? What makes this so creative for our own discipleship and proclamation of God's kingdom?

There's a warning as well as an invitation in what I described as our terrifying gospel today. Following the way of Christ isn't about striking out entirely on our own in a dark country unled, unfed or uninformed. We follow Christ's way led by a light set on the hill and crucial in all this is our memory.

The times my dying parishioner came into full consciousness and found his voice in that hospital more than a quarter of a century ago was when we sang Psalm 23 and said the Lord's Prayer. These lay deep in his memory and brought him to life in God. The scriptures are the memory of God's people, not irrelevant because they are so old but to be taken with us into God's future. In Psalm 77 there's a lament by the writer of that Psalm about "*the day of my trouble*". It's a Psalm for a suffering person or people. Everything's going wrong. But then the Psalmist remembers God's "*wonders of old time*". This is no answer to the problems of the present day but this faithful follower of God remembers that in the past God has transformed situations of hopelessness and helplessness into one's of new life. That's what gives him confidence and hope in his present troubles.

Our memories are important. How can they not be in a faith where we break bread as Christians in obedience to Christ's command to remember him. We remember the story of his last meal with his disciples and his crucifixion, not in order to return to it but to bring it into the present so that it becomes a reminder that we are made for more than our present life and that we take our past with us into the creation of a new future in God.

Here the writings, the story, the witness of St Fursey becomes our own. You've done much to recover the memory of this great missionary in East Anglia, to reconnect with this part of our Christian tradition, and when the Archbishop comes next month and launches the latest edition of Fursey's life a little more of our corporate Christian memory will be restored.

Of all the books written by those who have been held hostage for long periods in our modern world I think the most profound is by Brian Keenan – *An Evil Cradling*. Hostages often have only their memories to draw on and it's astonishing what some of them can recover. Terry Waite published a book called *Footfalls In Memory*, since he found during his time as a hostage that he could recite passages from the bible and the Book of Common Prayer with remarkable accuracy. He found himself exploring the store house of Christian tradition held within himself when he had nothing else.

Brian Keenan had no sort of explicit faith to guide him in quite the same way but his memories of his father were profound. He wrote this:-

“My father, who had died a few years before, was frequently in my thoughts. At first there were simple incidents from family history. Certain moments seemed to become more complete and more filled with meaning. I seemed to understand more about each incident in the history than I did when the event occurred. These memories became less and less a recording of the past. My father became not just simply a memory but more a real presence; a presence I could feel more than see, a comforting reassurance that eased the hurt into a deeply filled sadness, yet that same sadness as it became reflective, lifted me. I began to understand the hurt that was in me. We are all creatures in need of love. My pity moved beyond myself. I wanted to reach out an embrace life. I thought of how those who have gone from us come back to us, a source of strength that fills us with warmth.”

That’s how memory works within Christian scripture and tradition. It’s why the scriptures grow in significance, life and profundity as the years pass. It’s why sacraments of memory are endlessly repeated. It’s why the recovery of the memory of Fursey here is no antiquarian curiosity but something deep within our Christian instinct. These are the things which help us proclaim the Kingdom, live in Christ and follow his pilgrim way, the way to life itself.