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THE AWESOME JOURNEY

Life's pilgrimage



David Adam

SPCK

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To Denise, my companion and guide on life's journey

For the sake of Greek learning men go overseas . . .
but the city of God has its foundation in every seat of
human habitation . . . the kingdom of God is within.

St Antony

God who made man that he might seek him – God
whom we try to comprehend by the groping of our
lives – that self-same God is as pervasive and
perceptible as the atmosphere in which we are bathed.
He encompasses us on all sides, like the world itself.

Teilhard de Chardin, Le Milieu divin
(London: Fontana Books, 1975), p. 46

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ꝛ Introduction ꝛ

For pilgrimage to be real it has to be a moving experience in more than simply a physical sense. True pilgrimage is about the opening of our eyes, our ears and our hearts, not simply about travelling. It has to do with relationships rather than with destinations; it involves seeing this world as God's world, and the people in it – including ourselves – as people loved by God. Pilgrimage is more about the heart than the soles of the feet! Too often Christians have given the impression that you should turn your back on the world, rather than thrill to its beauty or be moved by its order or mystery. We need to show by the way we live that we believe this is God's world, that he is its creator and that he loves it. Creation is a good place to begin to appreciate the wonders of God that are all around you. The psalmist declares, 'The heavens are telling the glory of God: and the firmament proclaims his handiwork' (Psalm 19.1). God has given us this world; he has placed us in it, and like the rest of creation we are here to reveal his glory.

As well as being God's creation, this world is also the subject of his love. He did not make the world to be destroyed or despised; rather, even though it has been marred and disfigured, he seeks to redeem it. As God came down to earth in Jesus Christ, so we need to come down to earth – 'humus' and 'humility' are, after all, closely linked. For pilgrimage to get off to a good start it is necessary to acknowledge our relationship to the earth and to seek to approach the mystery

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of God through what he has made. The Celtic Christians talked of three books of revelation: the New Testament, the Old Testament and creation. To understand the New Testament, you need some understanding of the Old Testament, and to understand the Old Testament you need some understanding of creation. If your attitude to the most humble parts of creation is wrong, your attitude to God will be wrong too, because if you say you don't love the world, how can you love its creator?

Sometimes, on pilgrimage, we will have to go slowly: it is not the distance we cover that matters so much as the discovery that we are walking on holy ground. Take your time now and think over these words by Teilhard de Chardin:

All around us, to right and left, in front and behind, above and below, we have only to go a little beyond the frontier of sensible appearances in order to see the divine welling up and showing through . . . by means of all created things without exception, the divine assails us, penetrates us, moulds us. We imagined it as distant and inaccessible, whereas in fact we live steeped in its burning layers. *In eo vivimus*. As Jacob said, awakening from his dream, the world, this palpable world, which we were wont to treat with the boredom and disrespect with which we habitually regard places with no sacred association for us, is in truth a holy place, and we did not know it. *Venite adoremus*.¹

However you look at life, you live in an amazing world. These days, we are privileged to be able to view the world from outer space. Images of our blue earth are truly awe-inspiring and humbling. In the entire universe, as far as we know, there

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is only one speck in the Milky Way that will sustain human life, and that is planet earth. This in itself is a cause for wonder. If the earth had been 15 per cent further away from the sun it would have been frozen; if it had been only 5 per cent nearer the sun, all water would have evaporated and it would have been a desert. But, in what is quaintly described as the 'Goldilocks Effect', it is 'just right', with a 'not too cold, not too hot' atmosphere, and the right ingredients within it for our survival. In many ways this unique world looks as if it was prepared for our arrival, and that is awesome.

When I was asked by a much-travelled friend, 'How far have you journeyed today?' I replied, 'Well in the last hour, about 64,000 miles.' Did you realize that at this very moment you're hurtling around the sun at 64,000 miles an hour? In one year you will travel 584 million miles to end up back where you started! And that is but a small part of your awesome journey.

When I was growing up my mother would often say to me, 'There really is no one like you,' or 'After God made you, he threw away the mould,' in response to which my father usually mumbled, 'Thank God.' I was never sure whether it was a compliment or a plea to conform. However, I have grown to appreciate more and more that each one of us is a special person, a one-off, a unique being. There really is no one like you in the whole universe and that in itself is awesome. The components that make up your body have been around since the beginning of creation, yet the trillions of drifting atoms have assembled in a pattern that has never existed before and never will again. This unique, special, never-to-be-repeated creation is you. No one else sees quite

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as you see, or hears quite as you hear. You can be recognized by your fingerprint, the pattern of blood vessels of your retina, your hair, your saliva and by samples of your DNA. Even if you are an identical twin, you have your own unique gifts to bring to the world, and the world will be the poorer without them. Again that is awe-inspiring.

You can choose to blend in with the crowd or to stand out – it's up to you. The danger is that we take things for granted and go by default with the flow, but isn't that what dead things and debris do? Only the living can move upstream. We are called to raise our sights, to break free of our self-imposed boundaries, to open our eyes to opportunities and our minds to adventure. And there is an even greater journey waiting, for we belong to more than the earth. Each of us is not merely a body but also a living soul. The world that we thought was beyond is actually here: heaven and earth are not separate but interwoven. God is in our midst, and the more we are aware of this, the more exciting our awesome journey becomes. It is a pilgrimage of life, and life in abundance. Come and explore with me!

On this journey, we need to discover a place that is special to us, one that creates a sense of wonder and awe. If we do not have such a place, we must set out to find one, as it is important that pilgrims carry such a sacred place within them when they travel. Angelus Silesius, the German mystic, writing in the seventeenth century said:

Though Christ a thousand times
In Bethlehem be born,
If he is not born in you,
You are still forlorn.

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Our sacred place, where we encounter the incomprehensible, will be a place that is forever new. Travelling in depth as well as laterally is what distinguishes us from tourists. We do not merely clock up places we have been to and sights we have seen; we are also on a journey of being, an inward journey which cannot be easily catalogued or grasped but is a great adventure nonetheless.

Travel with me as we look at God's question to Adam, and how it relates to us now. Moving on to Abraham, we will explore ideas of life as pilgrimage and our awareness of, and openness to, others and the great other who is God. With Jacob, we will investigate if we have encountered a holy place that has opened our eyes to things invisible before. The story of Moses and the burning bush is concerned with someone whose heart was ablaze in the presence of God. Let us hear God's call to Moses as a call to us to move on in commitment and obedience: as St John Chrysostom said, 'It is not enough to leave Egypt; one must also enter the Promised Land.' With Elijah, we will explore times when we run out of resources and have no power to help ourselves. We will look at how God is our might and our salvation, someone we can only love because he first loved us; someone we cannot find unless he comes to us. When God calls to us in darkness and weakness, we need space and stillness in order to hear him. The record of Isaiah and the empty throne, which comes next, reveals how we react when our very foundations are shaken and talks of being emptied in order to be filled. We then look at the story Jesus told about 'The Prodigal Son', which is about faith and relationships and learning where true righteousness lies. Like the son, we need to re-turn, to repent, to discover love, acceptance and forgiveness. Moving

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on, St Paul writing from prison invites us and the Philippians to rejoice in the Lord, and to stop searching for what we already possess. On this awesome journey – which calls us to make new discoveries, to reach out, to show God’s love – we need to know we are not on our own, for God is with us.

This life is meant to be a journey of delight, a pleasurable exploration into the wonders and mystery of the world and our own being. It is a journey of love: a journey with God and into God. The aim is to discover, in the words of Shakespeare from *Twelfth Night*, ‘journeys end in lovers meeting’. Yet in another sense it is a journey without end, for it is concerned with eternal life and a relationship with God who is eternal.

I believe the Scriptures have much to say to us. The realities they speak about are the realities that we experience today. At the deepest level, our place in, and our relationship with, the world are much the same as those of our forebears. In a way, the Bible is the story of our life and our relationship with God. There is a lovely tale from Tanzania about a woman who was asked why she always carried the Bible around and never any other books. She replied, ‘You can always read books; only the Bible reads you.’

A word or two about the use of the word ‘awesome’. Words, like money, can suffer from devaluation, and if used inappropriately, their impact may be lessened. It might help to think of someone trying to understand an experience by reading about it rather than by doing it first hand: they don’t really know what they’re talking about. After all, you can’t appreciate the thrill of being on a mountain top from reading maps, but only by climbing up there. In the Anglo-Saxon poem ‘The Seafarer’, the poet says of landsmen that they have no experience of his deprivations on the sea in winter:

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He who lives safely on land
does not understand how I fare,
careworn and cut off from my kinsmen
on ice-cold ocean weathered winter
in exile on an icy sea.

You have to have been in the grip of winter at sea to fully understand. Similarly, it's difficult to comprehend biblical encounters with holiness or glory – or, on a more human level, deep love – until we have experienced it. You can read love poems and encyclopaedia entries without truly knowing what love is. And there is a great division between those who have experienced the earthquake-like, life-changing thrill of something that is truly awesome and those who tend to use the word loosely to describe anything that excites them a little. The first group would own to a sense of awe, an awareness of the 'presence that disturbs', an entering into the 'cloud of unknowing'; the second would be quite oblivious to this dimension. God is with all of us but many are unaware of his presence. *The Awesome Journey* is an attempt to help us on our way.

At the end of each chapter there are exercises to enable you to put what you have read into practice, to enter into a time of quiet and reflect on your journey. The '5p exercise' is useful both for beginners and for those who want to think more deeply about the Bible. Each part of it can be described by a word beginning with the letter 'P': Pause, Presence, Picture, Ponder, Promise.

Pause It is important to stop and let go of what you are doing. We are usually so preoccupied that we do not have

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room for God to speak. Let God have a chance to enter your life. Remember, God speaks most clearly to those who can keep silent. Calm your mind and body.

Presence God is with you: you live in him and he lives in you. The reason for creating this space is not for knowledge, or peace, or even for love, but for God himself who comes to you. Affirm his presence. Remind yourself, no matter who you are, 'The Lord is with you.'

Picture what the fact of God's presence means for you. It can be good to use a verse or a passage of Scripture to help you see God at work, and to explore this with each of your senses, as if you were preparing to make a film of the text.

Ponder Think what the passage is seeking to say to you. The message will not always be comfortable; indeed, it should often challenge you. When God calls he also sends. Is there something God wants you to do through what you have been picturing?

Promise There is not always something to do, or change, but if there is, promise some sort of action. At the very least, you can undertake to affirm God's presence at various points throughout the day.

The '5p exercise' is a good way of experiencing life and Scripture in a deeper way. Because God is the creator of the world of nature and of grace, it is possible to see images of God at work through his world. In fact God speaks to us through his world, through our senses and through the material things around us.

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God calls you out from where you are.
God calls you to adventure with him.
God calls you on an awesome journey.
Come!

Come where the division between sacred and
secular disappears.
Come and discover that heaven and earth are one.
Come where God dwells in you and you in him.
Come!

Let your life become your prayer,
Let journeying be a walk with God.
Come on a discovery of yourself.
Come!

Get to know and love your own mysterious being.
Discover within yourself sacred space.
Enter into the time which is beyond time.
Come!

Then everywhere will be changed,
Every place will be transfigured,
Where God is known to be with you.
We will go on well-trodden paths and new ways.
You cannot come as an onlooker, that leaves you
on the outside,
Though still you influence us, as we influence you.
Come and share the journey.
Come!

The God who calls you to the awesome journey
Is God who travels the road with you.
Make your home in him and welcome him.
Come!

1

Ꞟ *Where are you?* Ꞟ

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting:
The Soul that rises with us, our life's Star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home . . .¹

The first book of the Bible is called Genesis (a Greek word for 'beginning'), as it opens with the words, 'In the beginning'. Before we set out on pilgrimage it is necessary to reflect on who we are. At the start of his life as a Christian, St Augustine prayed 'that I know me: that I may know thee'. His quest to know God was bound up with knowing himself, and we too need to understand ourselves in a way that is not solely intellectual, but rather involves appreciating our whole being. This kind of knowledge demands a deep loving relationship with oneself, with others and with God.

The first stage towards love is to know that we are loved and that we are loveable. And we surely are, for God created each one of us out of love and for his love. The Book of Lamentations, which could hardly be described as a book of joy, has this great gem: 'But this I call to mind, and therefore I have

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hope: The steadfast love of the LORD never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness' (Lamentations 3.21–23). These words in their turn inspired John Keble to write:

New every morning is the love
Our wakening and uprising prove;
Through sleep and darkness safely brought,
Restored to life, and power, and thought.

And Thomas Obadiah Chisholm to rejoice:

Great is thy faithfulness! Great is thy faithfulness!
Morning by morning new mercies I see;
All I have needed Thy hand has provided,
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!²

We begin our pilgrimage assured of God's love for us. But many setting out on this quest, though they make a good start, then go off course. A midlife crisis is often about the sudden discovery that we have lost our way: we feel as if we have entered a dark wood or a grey fog and are no longer sure where we are going or to what purpose. Perhaps we have let other worldly things take over and become possessed by our possessions. Then there are the people I have met who have a genuine call and longing to proclaim God's love, but who have lost their vision because they are caught up in a mountain of paperwork, or email correspondence, or the arrangement of religious services. Attending to tasks like these is not wrong; indeed, it is often necessary. But it's dangerous when such activities take our focus away from what we should hold most dear. We need to check regularly to see if what we are doing is coming between us and

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