

Acts 16.9-15

Religious journeys. There are different kinds of religious journey. Pilgrimage: when we go to find healing in a holy place, like Lourdes or Walsingham, or to visit a holy person or a shrine and ask advice or make a penance, or just to pay our respects. People have been going on pilgrimage since the earliest Church – and we have some of their stories from as early as the third century. Like Helena, who travelled to Jerusalem to find the fragments of the One True Cross. Or Egeria, who quartered Europe in the days when many women hardly went out of the house.

Then there is mission, when people go out to convert people to Christ. The Church has always been keen on mission, of course, and nowadays it tends to be very well organized, with large resources and targets to be met in converts and money.

And then there are crusades – supposedly holy wars, which are something between mission and imperialism, with the feeling that anywhere that's important to us ought belong to us. And although the days of Richard the Lionheart and the Crusades against Arab Jerusalem are over, I'm afraid many Arabs, in Jerusalem and elsewhere, still feel that some parts of the western world have a crusading tendency.

More happily, there are the interior journeys, the journeys of the soul which spiritual writers, like Teresa of Avila or John Bunyan, have written about so vividly. No-one forgets Christian's journey from the City of Destruction via the Hill Difficulty and the Slough of Despond and Doubting Castle and so on, and one is so relieved when he finally makes it to Zion!

Then there are visionary journeys, where people like Ezekiel and Daniel and the author of Revelation are swept up and given a tour of the spiritual universe – heaven and hell and future wars and the final triumph of God over evil and death.

And ultimately there is life itself, which is a journey we don't always take much notice of, being taken up with everyday business, but now and then we stop and see how far we have come.

Our reading from Acts today came from the second of St. Paul's three great religious journeys. "We set sail from Troas and took a straight course to Samothrace, the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading district of Macedonia and a Roman colony." Luke is always very informative about places. We call Paul's journeys his 'missionary journeys', and in a sense of course they are, because he wants people to embrace Christ, but it struck me as I was reading them this week, that in some important ways, they are not like other missionary journeys at all.

Two things strike me particularly. The first is that in the circumstances, they're rather disorganized. In these very early days of the Church, people still expected the Second Coming and the Last Judgement to happen any day, and their aim was to save as many

people as possible before it came. But in the Roman Empire, if you wanted to make as many converts as possible, there are some obvious things you would do. You would go to Rome and try and convert the Emperor - because if you got the Emperor, everyone else would follow. (Which is what happened, finally, in the fourth century with the conversion of Constantine.) Failing that, you would try the provincial governors, army commanders, and the big cities.

Paul doesn't do that. He does want to go to Rome, but not to convert the Emperor, and he never goes to Alexandria, the second city of the Empire, and he spends surprisingly little time in Antioch, the third. He doesn't seek out local bigwigs. And he goes rather randomly from place to place: provincial towns and cities, some big, some small. He goes wherever there happens to be a ship going, or where people take him to get rid of him, or where there's a synagogue, or where the Holy Spirit sends him. Occasionally he does develop a plan, but it never works out. Just before today's reading, Paul had decided to go to Asia, but, says Luke, the Holy Spirit stopped him. So he thought he would go to Bithynia, but the Spirit didn't want him to go there either. And then he had a vision of a man in Macedonia asking for help, so he went there. That's typical. And all Paul's journeys except his last, as a prisoner, go in circles, and they involve quite a lot of digressions and going back to places he's already been. They don't exactly progress.

And this seems to me significant, for Paul and for us. Because like other early Christians, Paul does expect the Second Coming, and sometimes he talks about it: "The trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed..." and Christ, "shall reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet." (1 Cor. 15. 52, 25)

But most of the time he is much more interested in the here and now, and with the way we are all with Christ, in Christ, in this life. "Now is the day of salvation!" he says. (2 Cor. 6.2) "As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." (Gal. 3.27) "I have been crucified with Christ, and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Gal. 2.19-20)

For Paul, if we are in Christ and showing the fruits of the Spirit, then the Kingdom is already here. Paul would have appreciated the words that John gives to Jesus in today's gospel: "Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.... Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. ... Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." Christ and the Father had made their home with Paul, and for a man expecting the end of the world, he is amazingly untroubled. And so, in a way, his journeys are an anti-mission and an anti-pilgrimage. Instead of trying to get somewhere and achieve certain results, Paul concentrates on being somewhere – in Christ – and letting the Spirit make Heaven wherever he happens to be.

(This happens sometimes to people who start a pilgrimage, too. They find that the travelling itself becomes a spiritual experience, and the sense of being with Christ anywhere and everywhere comes to matter more than when or even whether they arrive.)

Quality of Christian life is what Paul is after, and the quality of it is what he wants to share with other people. But God doesn't come to people via imperial edicts or army orders. God comes by people opening their hearts to Christ and to each other, and that is always a very intimate, small-scale thing. So even in the face of this incredible urgency to prepare for the Kingdom, Paul thinks small. Small towns, small journeys, really, small people, small communities. It seems so little, and yet it's all there is.

And that brings us to the other thing that I think is interesting about Paul's journeys. He doesn't, in a way, do much himself. He goes where the spirit tells him. When he arrives in a new town, he usually goes to the synagogue, or wherever people meet to pray. But he always waits to be asked to preach. He only heals people who have faith, and he only baptizes people who ask him. It happens in today's reading, when Lydia the purple cloth dealer has her heart opened by God to what Paul is saying, and then gets herself baptized and invites Paul to stay in her home. Living in Christ and sharing life in the Spirit are a co-operative enterprise. You can't make them happen; you can only make yourself available when God makes them happen.

So Paul's journeys are in a way not journeys at all. They're not trying to get somewhere and achieve anything that a human being can measure. They are exercises in being in Christ everywhere, and not caring where the Spirit moves him. It shows how absolutely he trusts in God - in the same way that Jesus trusted, that his short life in Israel could change all Israel and beyond. And like Jesus, Paul was justified: wherever he went, his faith was like a spark to the dry wood of other people's need for God, and in the end it transformed the world.

There's a well-known proverb that it's better to travel in hope than to arrive. Paul might have said, travel in faith, and you have already arrived, in the only place you need to be in this life. And you'll be surprised how many other people you find there.

Amen

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