

Reflection for Sunday 23 May (Pentecost)

This weekend the 'Way of Light' pilgrimage route from Hexham to Durham Cathedral has been inaugurated and well-blessed by the Bishops of Newcastle and Durham who have trudged all 45 miles through some of the most glorious scenery in the North of England. The route runs directly through our Group of Parishes, first to Blanchland, then to Edmundbyers and on to Muggleswick and we're greatly looking forward to welcoming, we hope, thousands of pilgrims in the years to come.

We know too that less than a third of them are likely to call themselves Christian believers, rather more will claim to be 'spiritual but not religious', whilst others will profess other faiths and still more, no faith at all. But they will all encounter places that mean much to us, not just churches, but landscapes and villages that speak to us both of a grandeur and intangible sense of otherness but also of community and belonging. All such places are 'holy' to us, because they speak to us both of the mystery of God and of wonderful ways in which God comes to us in the intimacy of familiar people and places.

We hope too that the pilgrimage route will prove holy in other ways – bringing a sense of healing and wholeness to those who follow its path, or even just because it will afford them a chance to reflect, breathe more deeply and help them to regain a sense of perspective on their lives and the world.

Pilgrimages have long been important to people for such reasons. They're important too because regular participation in pilgrimage can be a way of marking the passing of the year and may give us, even for a short while, a real sense of common purpose.

It is significant that the birthday of the church also took place on a day of pilgrimage, the Feast of Pentecost, an agricultural festival that later became associated with the giving of the law and the celebration of the Covenant – God's special relationship with Israel, both events that would resonate strongly within church itself.

Every pilgrimage, even in the dampest days on the windswept Durham Moors, can generate a sense of excitement and hope, even if it is just in the expectation of a pint and roaring fire in Blanchland or a welcome cup of tea as the roofs of civilisation are first glimpsed in far Castleside.

The first Pentecost did more. It was a deeply significant religious experience, as St Luke relates it, in which that excitement was almost inebriating and everyone who was caught up in it felt that they were understood and accepted. Language differences were swept aside just they are for the 350,000 people who normally walk together on the Camino de Santiago and the other great pilgrim routes, or for those who listen together to a concert of great music. Some things matter more – and unite us more strongly.

The truly remarkable thing about that first Pentecost is the sensation of a wind of change and hope that swept through those who gathered in Jerusalem didn't just blow itself out when the initial excitement was over. The powerful feeling that God was with them in a new way burnt within the early church and has sparked into life many times since then.

In between those times, there have been longer periods, of course, when the wind has dropped and the fire has all but gone out. It is exhausting to try to live in a perpetual state of excitement. The potential is still there, but those special times of renewal and hope are only special because they do not happen every day, and yet the holy places remain - still there to sustain us and fill us with hope when we need them most, right in our midst.

I would love to think that the wind will blow and the flame re-ignite in our day. We have waited long and come close at times to despair as our numbers have fallen and sea of faith has seemed to ebb away. Blanchland has been reduced before to sad ruins, Edmundbyers church once fell into decay, and the beautiful old Grange at Muggleswick is just still a broken fragment of its former glory, that once bustled with life.

I don't know if The Way of Light will prove a catalyst for change. We shall see, but I urge you to hope and pray that it might be so.

As Peter was to point out in his sermon, God's Spirit when it comes is transformational. Even old men (and women) will dream dreams of what God can do. And because another very remarkable truth about the coming of God's Spirit is that it always sets us free to dream in ways we could not have previously imagined, all we have to do first, is to be as willing as we are able to be open to where it might lead, saved from the burden of our own limited grasp of what God is capable of doing.

Another reason why our new pilgrimage route has been called the 'Way of Light' is because of an old story that when Saint Wilfrid of Hexham was imprisoned God is said to have sent an angel to comfort him, an angel bathed so strongly with light that it could be seen flooding from his cell.

The organisers of the new route offer this encouragement to all those who set out on it. It is an old Celtic blessing: 'May the blessing of light be on you - light without and light within.' I hope that blessing may be ours too, those of us who stay and abide in this place and seek to find the holy no less truly and fully in the daily round of our ordinary lives.