

## Travelling Light 13<sup>th</sup> October 2024, St Leonard's Denmark Alison Kershaw

Sunday after Pentecost between 9 and 15 October [28] B

*Amos 5.6-7, 10-15; Psalm 90.12-17; Hebrews 4.12-16; Mark 10.17-31*

*Through the written word and the spoken word may we know your Living Word, Jesus Christ our Saviour, Amen*

A couple of months ago we were joined at our morning service and evening prayer by Henry, a young American backpacker in the final stages of walking the Bibbulmun Track. Early Monday morning I gave him a lift from his motel to Ocean Beach lookout. We walked down the shady path, admiring brightly coloured fungi on the way, to the flight of wooden steps where I took a photo of him on his phone then wished him blessings for safe travels. It was a glorious morning – crisp air, clouds of all shades scudding across a deep sky and sea spray hanging in the air along the foot of the Nullaki. I walked back to the lookout and watched his backpacked figure grower smaller and smaller on the wide sands and thought how brave he was to come half-way around the planet and undertake such a long and remote journey by himself.

Whether or not we call such journeys a pilgrimage, many people find the experience of a long walk to be transformative or at least grounding. Having to survive with only as many possessions and supplies as can be carried, along with wayside stops for replenishments and the occasional support of strangers, has a way of focusing the mind on essentials, and gives the heart time to breathe and reflect. Pilgrimage can be a time for discernment and self-understanding – and a time to connect with the world, with the earth, and to widen our perspective.

Pilgrimage can also be of a less literal kind – in fact our lives as a whole might be said to be a pilgrimage – a journey in search of truth, meaning, wisdom, and love. Pilgrims of all kinds are wanting to experience life to the full – to awaken and feel its pulse – to *be* and *do* and not just observe. The first words of our first reading this morning are from Amos - writing in a deeply troubled time and convey the urgency of our search - *Seek the Lord and live*. Psalm 90 begins *Teach us so to number our days: that we may apply our hearts to wisdom*. And in a searing passage from the Letter to the Hebrews that leaves us no room for pretence in our seeking of wisdom and the self-examination that our pilgrimage exacts:

*Indeed, the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.*

To cut through our own complacency and undertake this great journey and search with any kind of verve, we need to become spiritual backpackers, and we need to travel light. We need to unburden ourselves as far as we are able. There are times, especially after intense and hard times, that we need to empty ourselves out and leave room for our thoughts and hearts to roam more freely, and to be filled again with good things – with love and compassion for others and the earth, and the wisdom of God. A beautiful part of our tradition concerns the self-emptying nature of Christ – poured out in the creation, poured out in the new creation of each moment, poured out in human form as a self-giving act of love for all. The Eastern Orthodox tradition see this emptying or *Kenosis* as a mystery and paradox – as we empty ourselves of self-centred worldly concerns we are being filled with divine grace and grow into closer and closer union with God. The process of emptying for us may be both a clearing of negative things and once filled with the grace, a pouring out of the generosity and love we have received.

Jesus travelled light because his nature was not to hoard but to give, and be ready to go wherever he was needed. He and the 12 disciples and the women who provided for them out of their resources were constantly on the move – called away from families and professions, sent out on journeys with nothing “except a staff—no bread, no bag, no money in their belts” wearing only sandals and a single tunic. (Mark 6:8–9) Jesus journeys throughout the gospel – by foot, by boat, by donkey, along shores, through deserts, resting by wells, teaching in fields and atop mounts. And people likewise travelled from far and wide to listen and be healed.

And so, we come to Mark's gospel story where Jesus is setting out on yet another such journey. A man runs up, kneels before him, and asks with great reverence, what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus first responds with the intriguing question “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.” There are many nuances to this and much speculation – one view is that Jesus, is prompting the man to reflect – are you saying I am God, do you recognise me? – and if so, will you love God with all you have and follow me? Jesus then challenges the man by saying ‘You know the commandments’ to which he responds with some satisfaction “I have kept all these since my youth.” But this is just preliminary. Jesus looks at the man – which I think means he *sees into* the man – he perceives his limitations but also his desire and longing and want – and he looks with love – He perceives what the man lacks and what he is burdened by.

*Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*

There will be times we fail, like the rich man, to let go and follow the Christ way – times when we may grieve for our own shortcomings, our own stuckness, stubbornness and paralysing fear – times when we walk heavily away from new possibilities. Even so, even when we are, as the Letter to the Hebrews describes, *naked and laid bare* in these failings we are still looked upon with love, and should therefore look upon one another in our failings with love. For, as the letter continues, *we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.* Love waits for us, and we may yet *approach the throne of grace with boldness.*

In the meantime, the rich man is devastated – it is not simply a matter of keeping the commandments and keeping within the lines – it is not enough to just tick ten or more boxes. We need, as Amos says, to also *seek good.* This may involve looking behind and beyond the commandments – at what underpins all such teaching, which Jesus affirms is love for God and love for neighbour as for self. This is what is lacking in a life simply lived by the rules, and why it is so life denying to move from foundational principles to codifying, regulating every aspect of behaviour, backing people into corners with no leeways or exceptions, pouncing upon every perceived departure. Jesus revered the law, but was not averse to stepping outside of it – breaking the Sabbath, for example, when love required it, and certainly not averse to brushing aside other taboos against associating with women, outcasts and foreigners. Moving beyond the letter of the law demands something of us personally – it demands that we live generously and bravely. As Bill Loader points out “Sadly, it is possible to go through life never doing anything wrong – and never doing anything good or generous. Following Jesus means engaging the tradition and engaging life in a way that makes a difference.”<sup>i</sup>

Jesus is speaking directly about hoarding material wealth – we can't hide from the fact that Jesus literally means us to give it all away – hence the man's grief. We can't get around that – we might moderate the rhetoric a little or apply it to other types of generosity such as giving our time and compassion - but not try diminish the strength of the message. Jesus calls us to live not only in a way that does no harm to others but in a purposeful way that upends the world order – so that the first will be last and the last first. (10:31) As Peter points out the disciples have left other things behind – their livelihoods and families. Again we might moderate the rhetoric without weakening the call – which is not a call to abandon tender personal relationships – after all Jesus has listed the command to honour our fathers and mothers, and asks us to care for little children – but it is a call to expand our sense of family embracing others as our children, brothers and sisters – and though this expansive unorthodox life might involve sacrifice – even persecution - it is, Jesus promises, the way to eternal life in the age to come.

Here we could dwell on ideas of heaven and an afterlife – but there is room to expand our thinking here too – eternal life and the age to come may not only refer to an afterlife – but also to the kingdom bought near, the kingdom on earth – the resurrected Christ at work through us as we work to bring a better world out of the 'evil times' described by Amos – where truth is abhorred, bribery is rife, the poor trampled, and the needy pushed aside. In our time we might say those who have been marginalised, displaced, or disadvantaged in some way by dysfunctional structures. As Bill Loader continues, we are being asked to consider “how life looks when we have eternal life ... and what devotion to Jesus means. .... He did not call all who joined his movement to join him on the road ... But for all ... with or without possessions, when people who want to revere Jesus are not good news for the poor, one thing is missing, one very big thing.”<sup>ii</sup> So big an omission that it is more possible, as the saying goes, for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a hoarder of riches to enter the kingdom of God.

I also want to further expand this question of what does life and the world look like when we have eternal life – what does the future look like for our grandchildren and theirs in the age to come. We are living at a most crucial time in the life of our planet. What humanity does in the next few years will have far reaching and extremely serious impacts. We need to think and act collectively to let go of our greedy dependence on destructive fuels and lifestyles. We also face enormous societal challenges that require us to let go of unthinking allegiances, to stand back from and resist the misinformation and polarization that is tearing communities and nations apart.

The world needs generous spirits and brave pilgrims. Even when our hearts are heavy, we are called to travel light and follow the Christ way to make a difference – we are called to unburden ourselves of prejudice and self-interest, to empty our pockets and open our hearts in whatever way is possible for us, so we, our children, all members of our communities, and our very planet might know eternal life in the age to come, and so we may be filled with the riches that only love and grace can bestow. Amen

---

<sup>i</sup> William Loader, First Thoughts on Year B Gospel Passages in the Lectionary, Pentecost 21: 13 October 2024 Mark 10.17-31 <https://billloader.com/MkPentecost21Ord28.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.