

Pilgrimage Through the Year

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Introduction

Pilgrimages have been a significant form of Christian devotion since the fourth century. Once the Roman Empire became predominantly Christian and it was clear the government would no longer persecute the adherents of this religion, it was also obvious there would be no new martyrs. Thereafter, the feast days of local martyrs—that is, the anniversary of their death—became major occasions for processions and pilgrimages to their burial sites. It was a reminder of the cost of discipleship and the needed readiness for sacrifice, even though the current situation did not demand it.

Even before Constantine and a few centuries thereafter, there had been some interest in pilgrimages to the Holy Land and the places connected with Jesus. However, the turmoil of the Arab invasions had stemmed that interest in western Europe through much of the Middle Ages. Instead, pilgrimages to Santiago of Compostela—where St. James was believed to be buried—were very popular, as were more local pilgrimages.

The Crusades of the later Middle Ages interested western Christians once again in the places connected with the life of Jesus, and pilgrimages there became more common. For those who could not make such journeys, a very local form of devotion that simulated a pilgrimage developed in the stations of the cross. The devotional form of the labyrinth gave time for meditation in an inner pilgrimage. The labyrinth was depicted on a stone floor or in a garden, often in a monastic establishment. It permitted the individual to walk slowly through its turns and twists in a meditative fashion.

Protestants rejected the notion of pilgrimages because in the late Middle Ages it was tied to the whole concept of indulgences, purgatory, and salvation by works. More recently, however, Protestants have developed their own forms, whether to the Holy Land, or to the places of Protestant beginnings. So Lutherans head to Germany, Presbyterians to Scotland, and Methodists to England. Often this has the same effect as the ancient pilgrimages to the shrines of martyrs: it reminds us of the high cost of discipleship for those who began religious renewal, sometimes causing the faithful to choose exile rather than compromise.

A great deal of religious literature centers on pilgrimages. Whether it is Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* that uses a pilgrimage as a setting or the more metaphorical pilgrimage of the Christian from repentance through conversion and salvation in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, the image is embedded in our piety. Teresa of Avila writes of a pilgrimage through the rooms of the "Interior Castle" of the soul; Ignatius Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* puts the person on retreat through a four-week pilgrimage to vocational and spiritual decision-making.

There is much to be said in favor of the idea of pilgrimage. It puts us in touch with the historical reality in which our faith is embedded. It is no accident that much of the medieval recapturing of the real humanity of Jesus was a result of the Crusades. The earthly Jerusalem was dusty and hot, without the gold-paved streets that European piety had been able to imagine. To see Bethlehem and Nazareth, shepherds on the hills, and carpenter shops, was to give reality to the childhood and earthly life of a redeemer

who might otherwise seem totally otherworldly. For a faith that centers on God's actions in history, visiting the actual scenes of that history can make that history come alive.

Pilgrimages, however brief, also give us time to focus on our own spiritual life, in a world that generally programs us to avoid such thoughts. All pilgrimages, even the very brief forms of the labyrinth or the stations of the cross, use the body as well as the mind. They involve movement and action. They stimulate the imagination and allow us to put ourselves in the midst of the history of God's actions for our salvation.

With this as a background, let us look at the church year from the point of view of pilgrimage, for it is indeed intended to be the church's annual pilgrimage through the significant events in the story of our redemption.

The Church Year

Before the church had a liturgical year, it had a liturgical week. Very early, probably by the second century, Christians remembered the death of Jesus every Friday and his resurrection every Sunday. The connection of Easter and Passover gave historical rationale for the dating of the whole Easter cycle in the spring, augmented by an increasing Lenten period before it, and stretching into Ascension and Pentecost after it. Christmas was later added, with no thought at all that anyone knew the time of the year that Jesus was born. However, with various docetic heresies abounding, it seemed wise to add the celebration of his real, human birth and his development through childhood. His baptism was already celebrated on January 6, and Advent could readily be added to parallel Lent, so that both the Christmas and the Easter cycles had significant periods of preparation before them.

A congregation that stresses the church year therefore emphasizes the human birth of Jesus, with time beforehand to place his birth in the context of Israel's history and expectations. It is no accident that the year begins with Advent, even though the whole Christmas cycle appeared much later in the history of the church than the Easter cycle. The year parallels the life of Jesus, beginning with his birth and going through the events of his death, resurrection, ascension, and the sending of the Holy Spirit. That is the basic structure of the year. It is an annual pilgrimage through the life of Jesus made liturgical. It forces the preacher and therefore the congregation to deal with all of the aspects of the church's confession about Jesus, and not just the favorites. For instance, some pastors assume that the death of Jesus is the whole gospel, based on the substitutionary atonement understanding of his death. For them, being forced to deal with Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost as well as Good Friday expands the meaning of Jesus's life and ministry. On the other hand, for those pastors and congregations for whom the work of the Holy Spirit is uncomfortable, Pentecost comes in as a reminder that it cannot be ignored. The year includes much of the ancient credal statements, especially the elements dealing with the second and third persons of the Trinity. The use of the church year therefore helps to balance the preaching to include these elements.

Seeing the church year as a pilgrimage depends upon the structural clarity of the year itself. That is to say, if the year shows no coherence; if the congregation cannot see where they are in the year, where they have been and where they are going; if special days constantly interrupt the flow of the year; then little or no sense of pilgrimage will be present. It is instructive that the Roman Catholic Church has altered

the medieval form of the year in recent decades precisely in order to eliminate those days that are not part of this flow from the celebration of the birth of Jesus to Pentecost. Meanwhile, many Protestant churches that earlier had grave questions about any holy days other than the Lord's Day have been adding days that reflect the life and ministry of Jesus. The result is convergence toward a common calendar. This, combined with the common lectionary, makes the church year a major ecumenical resource.

Developing the Church Year as Pilgrimage

The use of the church year as a form of pilgrimage for the congregation can only be done if several factors are taken into account.

First, the outline of the birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, as well as the consequent gift of the Spirit must be emphasized. The year is of one piece, in spite of the fact that it really consists of two separate cycles—Christmas and Easter—that developed separately and have different ways of dating. That is, Christmas is fixed, whereas Easter is variable according to the relationship of the full moon, the vernal equinox, and Sunday. Therefore, in any given year, the time between Christmas and Easter varies considerably, as well as the time between Easter and the following Christmas. The use of the term “ordinary time” for the Sundays not part of either cycle is useful in some respects, but it can heighten the separation between the two cycles rather than their unity. In the life of a congregation, the unity of the whole year from Advent through Pentecost needs to be stressed so that the flow continues across the time between the cycles.

Second, the congregation needs to make Advent very important as the beginning of the church year. We have so many “beginnings of the year.” January 1st starts the civil year, late August or early September is the psychological beginning for those who have children in school or are themselves connected with educational institutions. Spring is the beginning of the agricultural new year. But Advent needs to be seen as the start of the year as far as the life of the church is concerned. This means that part of the work of the Advent Season is the sense of a new beginning, a new chance to make the pilgrimage of the life of Jesus in order to renew our own life of faith. In this sense, Advent is not only the preparation for Christmas, but it is also the preparation for the beginning of the church year itself. Cycles of Sunday School classes often begin at Advent, and these new classes could stress the start of a new year. Those that emphasize our own spiritual life and growth in discipleship, our becoming more Christ-like as we follow the life of Christ, would be particularly appropriate.

Third, especially in the time between Epiphany and Holy Week, the sense of movement in the ministry of Jesus needs to be clear. The lectionary uses a single gospel relatively continuously through this period, and that is helpful. Even without assuming that all sermons will be based on the gospel lection, a congregation could find ways to dramatize where we are on the road from the birth of Jesus to Pentecost. Posters, bulletin inserts or covers, dramas at weekly suppers, newsletters, all are ways in which this movement can be shown. The liturgy can do this, even if the sermon focuses on something other than the gospel narrative. This has to be a consistent, planned emphasis, however. It does little good to mention it one week and forget it the next two. If a worship committee planned out the specific year from Epiphany to Pentecost or Trinity Sunday, looked at how many Sundays were involved this year, and then looked the gospel lessons for those Sundays in order to design an outline of the life of Jesus

as presented in the specific gospel for the year, it could then determine how best to communicate this movement to the congregation. Within the gospels themselves, the journey of Jesus from Galilee to Jerusalem marks a movement toward the cross. Christians very early placed the preparation for baptism in the days before Easter, with baptism on Easter Eve so that the candidate would follow that journey toward death and resurrection which baptism signifies. Every year those already baptized were therefore given an opportunity to renew the understanding of their own baptism as they prepared these new converts. Our life of discipleship is intimately tied to our joining in the journey of Jesus to the cross and the risen life.

Fourth, it would be helpful to include some form of movement or action, whether in the sanctuary or elsewhere, such as a hallway. A timeline with a moveable arrow showing where we are, on a wall by which most of the congregation passes on the way to the sanctuary is one possibility. A series of prints from famous paintings of different scenes in the life of Jesus that are appropriate for the Sundays could also be used. Members of the congregation could be urged to visit the hallway sometime during the week or the month and meditate on the events depicted. Tableaux of events, like the manger scene, could form a focus for a congregational procession at high points during the year. We are accustomed to processions with palms on Palm Sunday, but other days would lend themselves to processions as well. We are so accustomed to quietly sitting in the pew when the service begins, but there is no reason why the congregation could not gather in another room or outside and process by a representation of an event in the church year, and then take its place in the sanctuary. When baptisms occur, there can be a movement of the whole congregation around the font. For congregations accustomed to receiving communion while remaining in the pews, the change to getting up and moving, coming forward to receive, at least on occasion, can add a sense of bodily involvement that has been lacking.

Many Protestants, especially those influenced by the Reformed tradition, have been very suspicious of such visual aids to the life of devotion. In the Reformation period, when the gospel was obscured by a plethora of non-verbal stimuli, often with little explanation, such a reaction was needed. However, in our own day, when much of our worship life is limited to an intellectual approach, the appeal to the senses other than hearing and speaking is helpful. In a time when the senses are constantly assaulted by stimuli in the service of other values, it would be wise for the church to consider approaching the whole person and not only the mind. In addition, the preparation and use of such approaches can be very intergenerational, which also can build up the life of the congregation.

The ideas listed above are only suggestive. This does not mean that the sermons should be a series on the life of Jesus. That could prove deadly after one year. What it does mean is that, around the edges of the Sunday service, and encircling the whole life of the congregation, the church year can give a sense of coherence and movement.

Fifth, if the church year does provide the framework for the life of the congregation, then it becomes easier to find ways to parallel in the home the church year celebrated in the sanctuary. The advent wreath has become popular even in churches that historically are non-liturgical. Especially in families with children, an advent wreath on the dining room table is a way to develop—at least for a few weeks—the beginning of a family devotional life. We live in a time when many parents would like to develop such a pattern of family prayer and yet have no history or experience from

their own childhood as to how that might be accomplished. Activities at home that are based on the congregations' life provide ways of making that beginning. In addition, such symbolic elements as the advent wreath are easier for children to appropriate, and they are just as intergenerational in the home as they are in the church.

Sixth, there are two points in the church year that need some special consideration. They are at the beginning and end of ordinary time after Pentecost. The first is Trinity Sunday. The second is Christ the King Sunday. In one sense, they both interrupt the neat pattern of the church year, and both are later additions. Trinity Sunday comes the week after Pentecost. It provides a time for bringing together the work of the whole Trinity. With the lack of real understanding of the significance of the doctrine of the Trinity in many congregations, it is a useful addition. It is really part of ordinary time, and does not need to be lifted up as a special time, even if the need to deal with the meaning of the Trinity is recognized.

Christ the King is a different story. In one sense, it is part of the Jesus story. It stresses the present role of the risen Christ and emphasizes the expected return of Christ at the end of the age, a theme continued in the beginning of the Advent Season. This is a necessary point. The church year is not a cyclical view of history, that Christ is born every December, dies and rises every spring. We celebrate the church year while the whole of history is moving on. We know who stands at the end of history: Christ the King. Before we begin the new church year we need to be reminded of this fact. Furthermore, in some of our churches, this necessary part of the history of Jesus—the part that has not yet occurred—would never be dealt with if it were not part of the liturgical calendar.

Seventh, there needs to be serious consideration given to the period of ordinary time between Pentecost and Christ the King Sundays. Ending the sense of pilgrimage at this point would be helpful. It would mean that the beginning of the next year at Advent (with its precursor of Christ the King) would be much sharper. It would also mean that Pentecost gives a sense that the pilgrimage has reached its goal. Thereafter, for the summer and fall, we are called to live out our lives of renewed discipleship as the church, and be ready for a new start of the annual pilgrimage at the next Advent.

Conclusion

The ancient values of pilgrimage can be discovered in the midst of a congregation using the resources of the church year. The focus is to give the Body of Christ the opportunity to follow its Head, recollecting his life by following it through at least a portion of the church year. The hope is that this will lead to greater discipleship and a greater sense of what it means to be the church. It also allows an opportunity to develop an appeal to movement and vision, as well as imagination, in ways that much of our traditional worship does not. Such a project would require considerable planning and involvement by many parts of the congregation. It could, however, be well worth the effort.