

Pilgrimage

25 August 2024

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

Who likes travelling to new places?

Going on a holiday or a trip to a new place or even a favourite old place?

People going on journeys like this are usually **tourists**.

Usually the journey lasts a **few days** or perhaps a **few weeks**.

Tourists are looking for a change in scenery or a different perspective on normal life, at least for a short time.

They are generally not trying to find a new way of life.

Today we're talking about **pilgrimage**, which is different to being a tourist.

A pilgrim adopts a **new place** and **new identity** by learning a **new language, rhythms and practices**. Pilgrimage is not a temporary **escape** from life but an embrace of a **deeper life**, being transformed as a person.

Being a pilgrim means becoming someone new.

Pilgrimages lead somewhere – hopefully to a changed or transformed life. ... That transformation is often communal.

The transformation also empowers pilgrims to change the world.

BIBLE READING

Your word, O Lord, is a lamp to our feet
and a light to our path.

[Genesis 12:1-9](#)

The Lord had said to Abram, 'Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;

and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.'

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all

the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

Abram travelled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. ... From there he went on towards the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord. Then Abram set out and continued towards the Negev.

[John 14:1-6](#)

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.'

Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we don't know where you are going, so how can we know the way?' Jesus answered, 'I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.'

Hebrews 11 (selected verses)

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. ...

By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ...

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one.

Lord, may your word live in us
and bear much fruit to your glory.

MESSAGE Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is an intentional or purposeful journey to a place that is considered special. So the Saturday morning trip to the local Bunnings or a favourite café is a type of pilgrimage.



Other significant pilgrimages that involve more people and a different type of commitment are the trek to the MCG to watch your team play football or travelling to Gallipoli for the dawn service on ANZAC Day.

These last two examples – the MCG and Gallipoli – could be said to have a spiritual dimension. Football fans flock to the ‘home’ of football, the MCG, the huge ‘cathedral’ where pilgrims come to worship their team and follow certain rituals and practices like wearing their team’s scarf and singing the team song.

Religious people have often included pilgrimage in their practice of faith, whether Christians journeying to the Holy Land during the Middle Ages, or Muslims undertaking a Hajj to Mecca, Hindus visiting a sacred place, often a river, or Buddhists visiting places connected with the life of Buddha.



More generally, religious pilgrimage can be considered an outward journey that matches an inner journey of faith. For Christians, this inner journey is to encounter God in Jesus Christ and to know God more deeply. The ultimate goal or destination of the journey is our promised home in heaven where we will finally meet God face to

face and be fully known.

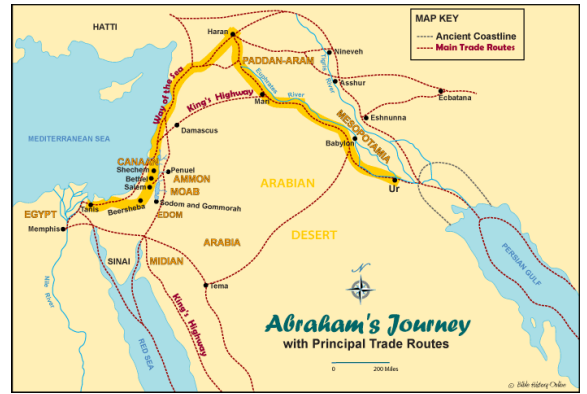
At a local level, I suggest that the members of this congregation are soon to embark on a pilgrimage that will take you from this spiritual home at Croydon North to a new spiritual home at Croydon Uniting Church or perhaps some other destination. What will help this outward journey is to reflect on what is happening in our inward journey.

Something else that will help is the company of others on the journey.

The first and ground-breaking pilgrimage story in the Bible is that of Abraham and Sarah who travel from Ur in modern day Iraq to Haran (in modern day Syria) and then down through Canaan (modern day Israel) and as far as Egypt. The directions given to Abraham are both stark and challenging:

leave your home country and your people and go to where I will show you.

God provides no map or GPS directions, but only the promise to bless Abraham and his offspring.

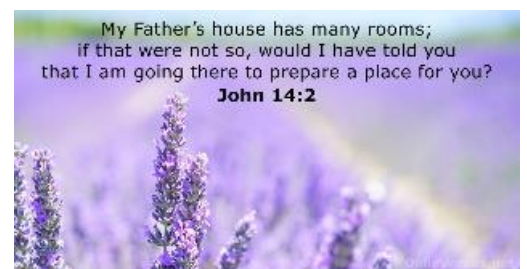


Abraham is rightly known as the father of faith in the Bible as he accepts the somewhat cryptic promise of God and sets off into the unknown, aged 75.

When he gets to Shechem, which is today part of the so-called Occupied West Bank in Israel, the journey isn't over. Abraham and Sarah and their growing clan remain pilgrims for their entire lives, always looking for home.

The reading from Hebrews suggests that Abraham remained a sojourner throughout his life, a temporary resident and nomad who never had a permanent home anywhere on earth. Instead, his spiritual home was *in heaven, in the city whose architect and builder is God.*

Jesus hints at the same thing in the reading from John's Gospel, a reading that is often chosen for funerals, as it gives us comfort that the person who has died has now gone to their permanent home in heaven, prepared for us by Jesus himself.



The Basis of Union, the founding theological document of the Uniting Church, puts it this way, speaking of the whole church:

The Church is a pilgrim people, always on the way towards a promised goal; here the Church does not have a continuing city but seeks one to come. On the way Christ feeds the Church with Word and Sacraments, and it has the gift of the Spirit in order that it may not lose the way. (UCA Basis of Union paragraph 3)

When thinking about pilgrimage and our journey of faith, then, one of the questions that we need to ask ourselves is where is our spiritual home?

Is it a physical building, the church upon the highway?

Or is it being part of a community of God's faithful people?

Or is our spiritual home ultimately with God, living in God's presence, which we only glimpse now and then, through our times of worship and prayer and contemplation?

If our ultimate home is to be with God, then Jesus plays a critical role in our pilgrimage. As the reading from John suggests, Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. He is the way to know God,

he is the one who reveals the truth about God

and he is the one who opens the door to this heavenly life with God.

Jesus of course also knew about pilgrimage as he journeyed from Galilee to Jerusalem and his death on the cross, and then after his rising to new life, to heaven.

Another way of thinking about pilgrimage focuses more on the journey of here and now, recognising pilgrimage as a helpful way of thinking about our journey of faith.

What are some of the characteristics of this journey that will help us travel it well?



- First is that **there is a purpose to the journey.**

It's not random or meaningless.

The purpose is **to become more like Jesus** – more loving and compassionate, more kind, more joyful, more patient – all the character traits that Paul calls the fruit of the Spirit.

- As we journey, **our lives are slowly transformed.**

Yes, we will hopefully grow in the fruit of the Spirit, but our life will grow deeper and richer as we **become more of the person God created us to be.**

- For this to happen, **our outward journey is matched by the often unseen inward journey.** As we allow time and space in our life for prayer and reflection, and for worship, our rhythms and practices slowly change.

Some of these we've been reflecting on for the past few weeks – hospitality, cultivating friendship, seeking justice, learning to live generous lives.

- Of course each person's journey is individual and unique.

But **we don't travel alone.**

We travel with other pilgrims, other followers of Jesus.

As we sang earlier: we are pilgrims on a journey,

we are companions on the road,

we are here to help each other,

we are here to help carry each other's burdens

and to calm each other's fears.

We're also here to provide wisdom and encouragement when the journey takes us in unexpected directions or to unexpected places.

Another way of thinking about our faith journey is that it's life-long and life-changing. Hopefully, if we take some time, we can see where we have grown and where our faith has deepened.



Perhaps we can see the transformation in some of these ways ...

- we have moved from being wanderers to more intentional disciples
- we have moved from doing certain religious actions – behaving in certain ways – to knowing God better – and becoming more like Jesus
- we have become less focused on ourselves and more focused on the community of faith
- we have moved from being busy Christians to those who are more assured of their identity and vocation

During the next few months, even as we face uncertainties or worries about the future of Croydon North and how our ministries will continue, may we be aware of and be guided by God's empowering and peace-filled presence, knowing that we do not journey alone, but with God and with one another.