

What do we see as we journey through life? What do we notice? Do we dare to walk in unfamiliar places, or through habit or even necessity do we walk the same paths each day?

On Friday night at the opening Helen's Pilgrimage exhibit I had a wonderful conversation with a woman who has lived in Queens Park for over 40 years. The conversation began because she came to compliment me, on your behalf, for how beautiful the church is – and what a peaceful view of the cemetery it has. I think sometimes we take for granted how lovely it is. In the 40 years she had lived here, she had never entered this building (or its predecessor) – nor realised the cemetery was behind despite the fact she walks down Salusbury Road at least once each day. It led on to a conversation about what we see. So often, because of our routine, we walk the same path, visit the same places, look at the same signs – and soon we don't notice when there are slight changes because our brain tells us what is there from memory.

Of course there are places we don't walk – places we may be fearful of – places which are unknown – so in those places we do not see anything first hand – though we may rely on the images others give us to see that place.

For the next month we will be worshiping and sharing coffee in the light of some wonderful paintings which tell the story of one person's journey on the El Camino Way – as well as a few other local walks. The paintings which Helen is sharing with us are her images and interpretations of walking this ancient pilgrim's route. Some of you have also walked this way – and so the paintings will resonate with some of your experience of that journey – for others of us they remind us of landscapes we have experienced on our own visits to that place or even other places. I was surprised that Helen's Gorge paintings reminded me of a place I visited in central Australia – and a great number of memories from that experience came flooding back.

The point of pilgrimage is that it is a journey to a sacred place – but in reality it is the journey itself which has the invites us to explore our spiritual disciples and come to terms with ourselves. As with so much of life – it is not the arriving or succeeding which are vital – but rather the journey and process of getting to the end point.

The essence of pilgrimage is that it is a significant and even spiritual journey which takes us into places which we have not been – and at its best - gets us to look at things in new ways – or to see things we haven't. Even when we go on a pilgrimage to an unfamiliar place it is often the familiar things from our life which come into clarity – the patterns of our daily life which are most challenged when we journey into a new and unfamiliar landscape. Hopefully as we explore these paintings in the coming weeks we will allow them to confront us, and our seeing in this way.

Our Gospel reading today is one that is difficult to hear and even more difficult to imagine within its context – though sadly we have all probably encountered similar situations even if they would not be recorded in these words of terms.

The first thing to notice in our gospel story is where Jesus is – Jesus leaves the comfortable, predominantly Jewish area of Galilee and crosses the sea to the land of the Gerasenes. This is Gentile territory, not a place a Jewish rabbi would normally venture<sup>1</sup>.

As soon as Jesus arrives in this unfamiliar place he encounters this man who is described as being possessed by *unclean spirits*. That's an interesting description, reminding us that there are a variety of spirits, some life giving, some not<sup>2</sup>. This one is not. The man is so disturbed he no longer lives in the local town, but amongst the tombs. All of which means that Jesus, proclaiming the coming kingdom of God - goes to an unclean land to meet a man possessed by an unclean spirit living in an unclean place.

This is, in short, the very last place Jesus should be.

Which, when you think about it, is where God usually shows up. At our moments of profound doubt, grief, loss, and defeat. In our journey – in the places of life – God has a habit of turning up in the most unlikely places – and in the midst of the most painful and tragic events.

I have had a number of conversations with people this week about the state of the world – the pain which is so evident with communities – the unnecessary violence which has taken place in this week alone on every continent of earth – and even here on our small island. Where is God in this journey – how can God allow such pain to happen in our midst – how can we dare to look and see such violence?

Well as theologian David Lose pointed out this week – what we get from this week's gospel is the reminder that *there is no place on earth that is God-forsaken. Moreover, and more importantly, there is no person that is God-forsaken. Unclean. Outcast. Abandoned. Unpopular. Incarcerated. Unbeliever. No one is left out*<sup>3</sup>.

It also means God is with us in this pain; and we are asked not to despair. For many the act of despair is to turn our back on God. It was once defined as a sin, because we had lost sight of God. But thankfully in the midst of situations of despair God has not lost sight of us. The point of today's Gospel – is that God is with us in the forsaken places – in the parts of the journey when we might want to close our eyes and scream out 'where is God?' Despite our human condition to doubt the fact is that God is always with those in greatest pain

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/06/pentecost-5-c-god-in-the-shadow-lands/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/06/pentecost-5-c-god-in-the-shadow-lands/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/06/pentecost-5-c-god-in-the-shadow-lands/>

There are no conditions to be met to receive God's love. You don't have to be wealthy...or poor. You don't have to be from one ethnic group...or another. You don't have to have believed your whole life, or come to faith only recently, or have any faith at all. Jesus seeks out everyone, even this unclean man possessed by an unclean spirit living in an unclean place.

The challenge for us of course, as Paul points out in the letter to the Galatians, is that this is not just about where God is, but it is also where we are called to be. We are called to a pilgrimage – and life pilgrimage – which draws our eye away from the familiar and safe into the 'God forsaken places' and circumstances. God calls us too to have the courage to walk in places that may make us feel unclean, or speak with those who cause us to feel uncomfortable – knowing of course that we are not alone – and knowing that we are examples of God's love on this journey.

This does not mean of course that we are called to be unsafe – to put ourselves in places where we might be abused – rather, that like Jesus, we are willing to journey with our companions into the places that others have deemed unworthy or unclean. To walk into the shadowlands so to speak. To name the injustice and allow change to take place.

The media this week will try to draw us into an unhealthy dialogue about the state of the world and who should be blamed. The call of our pilgrimage – is not to blame the shadows but rather to work for justice and to share God's love; as Jesus did.

Over the coming weeks as we reflect on the images in our midst and on our own journey's to which God calls us – we are invited to consider this journey of Jesus gospel – as he crosses the sea to the shadowland – and crosses back in the midst of a storm. In all these places – God is present – and God invites us to share in this journey so that we too may transform the world.

There is a wonderful poet and artist who works in Melbourne Australia. His art and poetry always make a social comment – and his faith also informs this. He has a wonderful poem about journey which I think sums up the essence of our need to be on constant pilgrimage – but also to recognise that God was in the shadowland before us – who calls us to bring Justice.

*The path to your door*

*Is the path within,*

*Is made by animals,*

*Is lined by thorns,*

*Is stained with wine,*

*Is lit by the lamp of sorrowful dreams,*

4<sup>th</sup> after Trinity – 19<sup>th</sup> June 2016  
1 Kings 19: 1-4, 8- 15a; Galatians 3:23-29 and Luke 8: 26-39

*Is washed with joy,  
Is swept by grief,  
Is blessed by the lonely traffic of art,  
Is known by heart,  
Is known by prayer,  
Is lost and found,  
Is always strange,  
The path to your door<sup>4</sup>.*

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.leunig.com.au/works/poems?showall=&start=1>