

**Sermon preached by the Bishop of Thetford, the Rt. Revd Alan Winton,
in the church of St Peter & St Paul, Burgh Castle
at the 2012 Fursey Pilgrimage**

- Mark 1, 35-39**
- 35** In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.
 - 36** And Simon and his companions hunted for him.
 - 37** When they found him, they said to him, 'Everyone is searching for you.'
 - 38** He answered, 'Let us go on to the neighbouring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do'
 - 39** And he went throughout Galilee, proclaiming the message in their synagogues and casting out demons.

My household includes a big fan of the long-running television series, Dr. Who, that time-travelling hero who has reinvented himself from the black and white days of the early 1960s when I used to hide behind the sofa to watch his latest adventures with a mixture of fascination and terror. Nowadays it's a much more slick production and not quite as scary for me, and another series has just come to an end. I can't help thinking about the attractions of time-travel on an occasion like this when a group of 21st century Christians meet to remember and seek inspiration from a 7th century saint. It would be fascinating, wouldn't it, to see a few episodes of Dr. Who written by a proper church historian: and as we gather today it makes me wonder what we might wish to do with the Dr's help?

We might wish to travel back to 7th century Burgh Castle to experience the reality of a way of life we have to try to reconstruct and re-imagine from sources that, if we're honest, don't quite answer all our questions but offer tantalising hints of a fascinating story. What was life really like for the ten years or so that Fursey spent in this part of the world?

Alternatively, we might wish to bring Fursey forward into the 21st century to hear how he would view our world and begin to tackle its particular challenges. What would an inspirational figure like Fursey make of the modern world and indeed the 21st century church in England?

Our task today is, in a sense, to attempt a little of the latter, to take one or two themes from Fursey's life and reflect on how they might inspire and guide us today. That inspiration and guidance is both in terms of our personal journey of faith and for the churches we represent. It may not be quite as good as having the man here to speak for himself, but we can try to draw inspiration and guidance from what we know of his life and his faith.

In thinking about this task, Mark's brief account of a snapshot of Jesus' ministry offers a fascinating parallel to some of the themes of Fursey's life.

Jesus struggled, on this occasion and on many others, to find time for solitude and contemplation, and that was a recurring challenge for Fursey who mixed periods of activity with times of retreat and withdrawal from the active life. On several occasions, Fursey sought to escape his own success, and in Michelle Brown's words felt compelled to relinquish worldly concerns in favour of his spiritual journey.

Jesus also sought to proclaim the Kingdom in word and deed: he taught and entered into dialogue with people, and he healed and undertook practical acts of love. And Fursey is remembered in Bede as one who inspired others by his goodness as well as by his teaching.

And finally, a recurrent theme in Jesus' story is the refrain 'Let us go on'. Jesus ministry was one of journeying, and we know that Fursey was also a traveller, a pilgrim.

There are two aspects of this theme of journey and pilgrimage that we find in Fursey's life that I want to focus on for a moment or two.

First, Fursey's travelling was in part about mission: he came to bring the Gospel of Christ and to minister to the people of East Anglia. He founded a monastery from which he and others went out in mission to bring God's love to communities that had mostly never heard that message.

The churches today speak a great deal about mission, but the mission challenge for us is, I think, very different to the challenge Fursey faced. In many ways, he was bringing a new and fresh faith to people whose lives were shaped around older religious ideas and superstitions. The mission challenge today is to bring renewal to a faith that has permeated our culture over many centuries. It's a faith the symbols of which are all around us in East Anglia where we have one of the largest concentrations of medieval churches in the world. Our challenge is much more about enlivening a tradition that is already deeply embedded in the fabric of our society, often unrecognised and unappreciated; it is about presenting afresh something that is dimly remembered.

And the context in which we have to address this task is a challenging one. We live in a culture that is deeply suspicious of truth claims; a culture that has become cynical about the language of faith and quick to challenge the integrity of those who try to speak of God. We are in a culture where the power of the spoken word is diminished.

Perhaps we need to draw on that description of Fursey in Bede's account of his life which speaks of the way that people were inspired by the example of his goodness, or to echo words attributed to another great saint, Francis of Assisi, we need to preach the Gospel and only use words if we have to.

We share with Fursey the challenge of mission: for him it was about travelling to strange lands and new communities and bringing a message that was fresh and largely unknown. Our mission challenge is very different: it is about staying where we are and digging deep to uncover a treasure that has largely been misunderstood or forgotten.

The other aspect of journey in Fursey's life is what scholars call 'peregrinatio', a self-imposed exile and wandering for the love of God. This is about journeying with a much more existential purpose; it was part of what brought Fursey to this corner of God's world and part of what led him to move on.

If it finds an echo in the teaching of Jesus it is perhaps in Jesus' repeated call to those who would be his disciples to take up their cross to follow him. Few of us will respond literally in the way that Jesus' disciples did, by leaving their homes to become itinerant students of the Christ. And few of us will literally follow Fursey's path in physically moving onto new lands and new communities. For us, this journey must be a more inward one: but how will that inward journey be reflected in the shape and pattern of our lives?

The metaphor that best sums up for me what our pilgrimage entails is to see our lives as a journey towards God, a journey into God – it is about drawing closer and going deeper. It is about our preparation for eternity.

The marks of this, which are seen in the life of Fursey and all the great saints, are simplicity of life and prayerfulness.

Simplicity of life is possible without going anywhere: in fact, as a former parish priest I often wished it might start with a resolve not to travel, when retired members of my congregation took four, five or six holidays each year and made being part of a worshipping, serving community very difficult. If we are to draw on Fursey's example, there has to be a commitment to a sacrificial way of living; learning counter-cultural contentment in an acquisitive society; desiring less; travelling more lightly; deliberately putting aside all that holds us back; responding to the implicit challenge in those awesome words, "we brought nothing into the world and it is certain we will take nothing out".

And alongside that simplicity of life must go the desire to cultivate a life of prayerfulness. If simplicity of life is counter-cultural, then there are hints in a number of movements around in our society that prayerfulness is less against the grain. The therapeutic world talks today of the importance of mindfulness which seems to draw on practices that have been known for centuries among those who wish to spend time each day in patient attentiveness to God. And it is fascinating to hear people speak of the establishing of prayer spaces in some of our schools, and the response to these among pupils and staff who have previously shown no interest in religion. Perhaps for some prayer can be the way to faith and not necessarily the result of faith.

The call to practice the presence of God is central to any attempt to draw inspiration from the life of Fursey, and is central also to those who wish to see their life as a journey deeper into God.

As Fursey Pilgrims, committed to drawing inspiration and guidance from this man who was among those who brought the first embers of faith into our part of the world, we do need to reflect on his life of self-imposed exile, wandering for the love of God. As one required to live in a more sedentary way, the task is to see my life as a journey towards God, a journey into God. And crucial to that journey is the resolve to live with a growing simplicity and a deeper prayerfulness: may God bless us as we journey on, as we give thanks for the life of Saint Fursey and seek to draw inspiration from his example.

Amen

6th October 2012