



**2000 Fursey Pilgrimage
Saturday 7th October 2000
Sermon by The Rt Revd Graham James,
Bishop of Norwich**

Pilgrimage as Adventure

Sometimes I feel a bit of a fraud as a pilgrim. I'm keen on holy places, shrines, cathedrals, religious communities. I enjoy travelling to them. Nothing new in that. After all, Chaucer illustrated in his *Canterbury Tales* that the pilgrim's journey was an adventure in itself. But I sometimes feel a bit of a fraud because it is so easy – easy to drive comfortably for a few miles to honour St Fursey who knew nothing of quick and comfortable travel in his own day.

No wonder we've lost the sense of pilgrimage as penance. Despite the best efforts of air traffic controllers or Virgin Trains, travel isn't a penance nowadays.

Our problem is that we've often lost a sense of adventure as well. When Fursey set out from Ireland as 'a pilgrim for Christ' he took big risks. He was uncertain of his precise destination. Burgh Castle would have been unknown to him. The journey itself was slow and risky. You had to find shelter and food on the way. The journey was a sign of your trust in God. That's why you were a pilgrim for Christ.

We cannot quite reconstruct the same riskiness of travel in our own day. Yes, of course, there are pilgrims to Lourdes or Santiago de Compostela who walk barefoot and do not take two tunics and all the rest. But Fursey travelled just as others did in his own day. It was naturally risky, as it was for St Paul. To create risk or impose privations upon ourselves is a different matter. This, I suppose, is why the modern Western world creates sporting activities of high risk, why people climb rock faces or go pot-holing or love the scariest roller-coasters at theme parks. Where life is naturally risky in this world, you do not find these sports or these scary rides. Life is adventure enough as it is.

Yet adventure is to do with more than risk. Remember the root of the word – advent – coming. Pilgrimage as adventure is about God's coming kingdom and our travelling to search it out and welcome it. That's the spirit of pilgrimage – "seek ye first the Kingdom of God." Pilgrimage is part of our response to the coming Kingdom and our movement towards it.

Coming from Cornwall, Fursey and his like are a familiar breed. I'm so glad Fursey came from Ireland via East Anglia rather than Cornwall on his way to France. Clearly he wasn't too hot on reading road maps since he chose a circuitous route. But in Cornwall's land of saints, there are a host of Irish and Welsh monks who arrive, settle for a time, and then find their way to Brittany. What staggers me is that in a time when travel was so slow and so risky, Fursey and his companions were so European in outlook, so inclusive in their capacity to make their home anywhere. They lived in a large world – God's world. There was no narrow parochialism in them.

But notice this. Celtic monks often make for the most barren places, the remotest of island homes. The strange thing about these great missionaries was that even in their own day they rarely set up their monasteries in centres of population.

Furseley himself moved from periods of solitary withdrawal into busy missionary activity and then back again. After a decade of preaching in Ireland we believe he lived in solitariness on a tiny island before making his way to evangelize East Anglia. Once he got to France he became a solitary again.

There's a lesson here. The adventure of Christian faith is about both engagement and withdrawal. Think how often Jesus withdraws to pray alone.

“In the morning, while it was still very dark, Jesus got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed. And Simon and his companions hunted for him. When they found him, they said to him ‘everyone is searching for you.’ He answered ‘let us go on to the neighbouring towns’” (Mark 1.35)

There's the pattern of pilgrimage as adventure. Engagement with the world is informed by withdrawal from it. Yes, it is God's world but the frenetic activity of living within it can blunt our capacity for adoration, can blunt our ability to be refreshed simply by God's presence. Pilgrims of St Fursey should follow his pattern of being immersed in the world and finding God there, and also withdrawing from it. Finding God in those desert places. For St Fursey's way is none other than the way of Jesus Christ himself, the Saviour, our Blessed Lord. May your pilgrimage to his heaven kingdom be the best adventure of all.