



16 February 2014
Septuagesima
Choral Evensong
Psalm 23
Revelation 21 vv. 1–7

Travelling and Journeying

Arriving at the beginning: behold I make all things new

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May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable unto you oh Lord. Amen

Song: *They say I'm fat, they call my name in vain,
But I know that, I wouldn't want to be the same,
As all those people, out for what they can get,
Learning things to early that they later may regret,
Because I'm me, and I'm not apologising,
I'll be better off than them with all their criticising,
Beauty is skin deep, why can't they see inside of me?*

Does that make you see me differently? Starting my sermon with a song? Why is she singing some of you are asking? Those embarrassed amongst you (which let's face it may be most of you who are British in the chapel) were probably not even listening to the lyrics but shuffling uncomfortably in your seats and those who (not being British or so easily embarrassed) were listening are thinking...but she isn't fat? At least I hope that's what you're thinking! But at the end of the tune, there is that plaintive line...beauty is skin deep, why can't they see inside of me?

Spiritual journeying is in fact in a way like that, learning to see in that deeper way, old things with new eyes, familiar things in a fresh way, with a soft heart.

It is to see beauty where others have missed it, in a voice, in a sound, in a place such as home, which may or may not be beautiful to anyone but you. At it's profoundest level spiritual journeying helps us discover **who** we truly are and **what** we have truly been made to do; and this in turn will affect how we **see** and judge everything around us. As the reading in Revelation today says 'Behold I make all things new... ALL THINGS that means it includes that which already is, that which has already existed, therefore the old is also made new, along with the new, ALL things.

What are you becoming? When you look inside what do you see? Are you happy with the way you are? We probably all have things we'd like to change in some way, but part of pilgrimage is knowing what we **want** to change, what we are **able** to change and what is **good** for us to change and using some form of spiritual map as a judgement and help on how to get there, rather than just wandering aimlessly in the hills hoping to find happiness or heaven.

In some ways this is easier in a University setting such as this one, because the old here are revered and not just brushed under the table, and the new are embraced. Because dreams are allowed to be explored and experiments made and life's trials and endeavours celebrated and new things encouraged and old things honed to be the best they can be. Here in Cambridge and dare I say it in Oxford too I'm sure, it is the quality of a **mind** that commands respect and what people have **achieved** with that mind, be it a new discovery or research on an ancient theme.

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At this time of year half way through February – Valentines now over, for some a relief for some a sadness – In one sense it feels as if we have all been here before, treading the same familiar seasonal path.

For when a pilgrim sets out on a journey it is not just to get to where they are planning to go, but the wise pilgrim knows that even the journey along the way will change them because it too is part of that process, aiming for something beyond oneself looking for fulfilment somehow in it, something to bring back home, to where we first set out.

This summer saw me go on, in one sense on my own pilgrimage.

As I hope you all now realise I used to sing for a living and have sung since I was a little girl, so one city I had longed to visit was Nashville, Tennessee, the home and heart for songwriters everywhere, country fans in particular..

Although I admit I am not a hugely big fan of the modern country music - I do and have always been a lover of the old fashioned blue grass tunes and the songs of the slaves, often recorded in Nashville and so movingly portrayed in the recent film 'Twelve years a slave' as they picked the cotton.

And yet, if I had expected to have a musical enlightenment whilst I was there what had a real and lasting impact on me were the people I met through working with the Anglican Chaplaincy at Vanderbilt Campus. The inspiring chaplain, Becca Stevens, has created an incredible community made up of originally very vulnerable women called *Magdalene Thistle Farm* where they make healing potions and beautiful balms out of thistle and other plant extracts. She set up this rehabilitation programme for women who has been trafficked or abused and had been living on the streets. Becca is a determined women who herself was abused as a child - this project has continued to grow and now as well as the farm and factory boasts its own cafe, *The Thistle Stop Cafe* – whose slogan 'love heals everything' really does speak in action for the women who live under that banner day by day.

I had thought that going to Nashville I would write a few tunes, preach a few sermons, help a few needy people and then pop on a plane to the UK, and carry on with my life as normal. In fact I met a generous openhearted community who taught me so much about their lives and their own recovery stories through the power of Jesus to love, to heal and to save. My journey there left me humbled by the grace and compassion which these women showed to me and everyone else who visited them and what hope and love can do, in a desperate situation, what the free gift of God's grace can bring to change and to heal. 'Behold I make all things new'.

Having been through so much these women hold on tightly to this hope and this love which they have discovered; and more than that their rebuilt lives have an enviable quality about them because as I was shown around the factory I could see the enjoyment that every new day now brought to them, the freedom they had from addictions, the freedom from fear of what others think or what the future held, how they seemed to savour their time and appreciate everything around them. 'Behold I make all things new'.

What enveloped me whilst I was with them was the real sense of empowerment and challenging grace that was not patronising nor fearful but enabling and invigorating.

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These women with their wide smiles and free laughter and love of life brought me further along on my own spiritual journeying challenging me to truly appreciate every small thing and to love and forgive those around me. The joy that I discovered whilst visiting them or even just sitting, sipping coffee at the cafe and listening to their stories was what left me really altered.

In a sense that is the purpose of a journey whether it is spatial or just in your mind, it is to take you somewhere else which then helps you to appreciate this present moment more deeply and more fully than ever before, to look on all things anew and with fresh hopeful eyes.

So firstly I wanted to say about journeying that we are all, whether we like it or not journeying, whether we fly to Nashville or stay in our studies and libraries here, inevitably we are moving towards fellowship and community life with others or away from it, allowing things to influence us, for good or for ill, but we are all on the move - even if don't perceive that we are.

We will at some point arrive once more where we first began, with fresh insight, whether negative or positive about our lives, we will have to enter that place of shadows, that valley of death where the shepherd holds out his rod and staff to comfort us. We are in one sense on that journey to death from the moment we are born.

Coming back from Nashville, like the start of a new term, I felt fresh, enabled to love those around me to new depths, not in my own strength but through the love of the one who first loved me. It is easy for me to slip back into old selfish habits and thoughts, but I just have to play the stories of those women in my head again and listen to their hope. The depths that those women had gone down to, as one lady we'll call Suzanne said to me, 'I was in a pit and God pulled me out and every day I am so grateful; I am free, who knew?'. I need only to remember her laughter, her humour, her forgiveness of her past enemies and her compassion, to be challenged and reminded that each free hour is precious and all too often I am too self absorbed in my own needs and my own desires to appreciate just being in such beautiful place like this, here and now.

I plan to go back and visit again whenever I can, not because I feel I have much to offer but because for the little I can give I receive so much.

So secondly, journeying with God is like that for all of us if we dare to do it, if we dare to hold up our small offering of ourselves like the small grains of flour and oil the poor widow of Zaraphath gave to Elijah our love is renewed day by day and never runs dry, or as we give our little fish and tiny loaves like the boy to Christ we are enabled to feed thousands of others.

So perhaps we should be asking ourselves what gifts am I not using? What talents am I afraid to show, even now and how can I give them away to those around me? What does just being my unique self bring to the world? How can I retrain my eyes to see 'all things as new'?

As an old choral scholar myself I come back to Cambridge and hear these old familiar tunes and liturgies and yet if I let myself I am enabled to see these too with new ears and eyes and grasp afresh their ancient beauty as I dare to let their heavenly sounds open me up to God's infinite and eternal love for me



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As T.S. Eliot so eloquently said:

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate
When the last of earth left to discover
Is that which was the beginning;

So my final and most crucial point about spiritual journeying is that it is **the heart** that needs to be melted, moulded and changed more and more into God's likeness and it is for this reason that we need to journey in the first place - whether from the comfort of our study chair or on a pilgrim's walk through tough terrain we have to transport ourselves to a place where we allow God **in**, where we allow ourselves to feel out of our depth and rely on something beyond ourselves to get through it. It is by allowing our hearts to become soft, and the dependence on God that a **pilgrimage** can bring, that we are enabled to look afresh at the world, as C.S. Lewis whilst here in Cambridge once reputedly said staring at the Cam and a swan gliding by, walking with a friend, the friend remarked "look thy last on all things lovely" quoting Walter de la Mare, Lewis Shouted out, "NO! No! Look thy FIRST, look thy first on all things lovely.

For if we, like Lewis, can be so adamant and dare to see now today with fresh eyes, each beautiful moment without in one sense journeying beyond the minds we inhabit, then through that pilgrimage we can begin to see the beauty of a created world where all things are being made new, new heavens and new earths perpetually, every day, every hour, every moment.

I used to be shy when I stood up and sang. That song I sung at the very beginning was the first song I sang in a serious public performance at the age of 16 at the Edinburgh Fringe. I was terrified but even back then as I began to perform and stepped out of my comfort zone, as Eric Liddell once famously said about his running, I began to 'feel God's pleasure' when I sang.

Are there some fears you need to overcome to reach your full potential, to feel God's pleasure?

For as John in Revelation says, we too are becoming new creations by 'overcoming all things' -this means we too can overcome our fears and doubts in our abilities or anything else as we step into the light of God's grace and help. We too can dare to journey and so in the end finally enter that place of no more tears, and no more sorrow and with Julian of Norwich be bold to say '*all shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well*'. And we shall arrive where we first began in the light of that loving embrace which is both Alpha and Omega and everlasting. AMEN.