

The Church in the Modern World: Global Travel, Leisure & Pilgrimage– ‘See Naples and Die’

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Genesis 3: 8–24 Acts 8: 26–40

Introduction

The aircraft you’re travelling in is on its final approach, and the tail lights of vehicles on the motorways and streets below appear as arteries pumping lifeblood around the city you’re about to arrive at. Where are they all going, to no apparent purpose (except to demonstrate that we are alive and active – and busy)? Why do human beings travel so much – and what is it we hope to achieve?



Departures: Genesis 3: 8–24

Movement and travel are key themes in Scripture. Genesis is all about movement: from before even the creative ordinance *Fiat Lux*, ‘Let there be light’, the Spirit of God was moving – upon the face of the waters – to its final chapter and the death of Joseph with the promise (pointing to the forthcoming sequel in Exodus) that ‘God will surely bring you out of this land unto the land which he swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob ... and ye shall carry up my bones from hence’.

So tonight’s first lesson, we could say, is about deportation; about exclusion and control of borders: ‘therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden...’ ‘He drove out the man; and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning – to guard the way to the tree of life’.



Encounters away from home: Acts 8: 26–40

If our first reading sets the scene for why the world is as it is – why childbirth is painful and dangerous, why work often seems unproductive and unsatisfying, and why conflict seems to be an intrinsic part of our relationship with the natural world – then our second reading, with its encounter between Philip and the Ethiopian, tells a story of the world as it might be in Christ: strangers brought together not by a common ethnicity, culture or belief-system, but a series of questions: Do you understand what you are reading? How can I, unless someone guides me? Who is the prophet talking about? What is to prevent me from being baptized?

I've taken only one baptism in five years at the airport. I was called to the airport's Short-term Immigration Removal Centre to visit an Afghan detainee who, staff feared, was potentially suicidal. His family had all been killed by the Taliban and he had travelled to the UK to start a new life. His application had failed and he was being taken to Heathrow the next day for a flight to Kabul. He told me that he was resigned to die, but wanted to die a Christian, and asked if I would baptise him. He had worshipped in a church in the North East for almost a year and had asked about baptism, but his parish priest wanted him to be certain about the seriousness of the step he was taking.

And so Mohammed Hussein (let's say) and I stood in the windowless recreation room, and I baptised him, with a cereal bowl of water in one hand, and a paper towel in the other. As we stood facing each other, I asked if he wanted to take a new name: a Christian name; a Saint's name. As I started to give examples of famous saints he could choose from, he said, "...Geoff." "I suppose there's a saint Geoffrey – 12th century Norman, maybe?" But he didn't mean Geoffrey, he meant Geoff. So Mohammed *Geoff* Hussein was baptised, taking the name of the saint who had welcomed him to church, listened to him and made him feel *at home*. Mohammed Geoff Hussein had found his home.



Arrival home

As an airport chaplain, those kinds of encounters are surprisingly common. Our task is often to see people off, or welcome them home; to see them safely across the threshold, and to connect them with those who might continue to walk with them.

A key question that arises day after day is: When does a passenger become a homeless person? The truth is that, from the moment we shut our front door behind us, we are homeless until we arrive; for some arrival may be an expression of liberation, for others an acknowledgement of failure, dislocation or bereavement, or a consequence of criminality, exploitation, trafficking.

So *why* do we travel?

Since early humans first climbed down from the trees, we have been on a migration – to avoid conflict; to seek prosperity or safety. Developments in communication over the last five hundred years have made people ever more aware of the alternatives to an existence from which previously they could never have conceived of escaping. In the 21st century, we face the tragic possibility that the efforts of Salafi jihadists of Da'esh or ISIS and this possibility of migration, compounded by ignorant Western foreign policies, will destroy the complex diversity, particularly of much of the Middle East and Africa.

For many, travel is simply their job – or a necessary part of it. International Travel is an inevitable consequence of global trade – as much a curse as a blessing for many – especially so-called extreme commuters. But from the dawn of humanity, when we haven't been fighting each other, human beings have been trading with one another – and trade routes, over land, sea, and now by air, bring with them exchanges of culture, faith and philosophy. So ...

Travel promotes contact and interaction – and dispels myths. 'Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts,' said Mark Twain, 'Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired

by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime.¹ And not just at an individual level. Travel promotes inter-dependence at a community and national level. The total contribution of travel and tourism to the global economy rose in 2016 to a total of \$7.61 trillion USD – 10% of world GDP – keeping 292 million people in employment – that's 1 in 10 jobs on the planet.² Which is why the attacks by ISIS, for example, in Tunisia in 2015 were so effective – destroying the economy of whole communities so as to give a foothold for extremism, and the re-establishment of fear, separation and ignorance.

But travel is also, importantly, an expression of leisure. Sometimes we need to travel simply to take time out; get away from the noise. Leisure is an expression of the ancient concept of Shabbat – a day not primarily for religious worship but for refraining from work. Leisure is not a recent concept. Jesus knew the value of space and solitude – of coming out from the everyday and regularly went off to the mountain or wilderness to pray and *be still*. Paul Heintzman translates Psalm 46: 10 as 'Have leisure and know that I am God'.³ Medieval monastics advocated a middle way of *otium* (leisure) between the twin dangers of *otiositas* (idleness) and *negotium* (business). Leisure is crucial for spiritual growth and development. The *wide open space* and *salvation* are interchangeable concepts throughout Scripture and especially the Psalms.⁴

And yet I regularly meet those who have travelled to 'get away' – 'to get head-space' and realise the one thing they can't escape is themselves. Jimmy was referred to us by the British Legion – a Veteran of Iraq and Afghanistan, diagnosed with PTSD. He had travelled to Nepal, to find peace, but, finding he had just brought all his problems with him, ended up destitute and needed to be brought home. Ralph Waldo Emerson observed sadly, 'Travelling is a fool's paradise ... I pack my trunk, embrace my friends, embark on the sea and at last wake up in Naples, and there besides me is the stern fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical, that I fled from'.⁵

Travel as Pilgrimage – Sacred and Secular

Many religions have a concept of pilgrimage as an act of faith or spiritual discipline. For almost all, the journey is as important as the destination. In our supposedly more secular age, holidays still offer a glimpse of heaven – a new mode of existence (even if only temporary) – a release from the unproductive or unsatisfying, or just boring workaday life – *back to Eden* – and to our original happy state of innocence.

Finally, to travel is to embrace the unfamiliar. 'What gives value to travel,' said Camus, 'is fear.'⁶ 'Travel,' says Frederick Ruf, 'finds us ... voluntarily trading in the security [we]

¹ Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad / Roughing It*.

² Information Copyright © World Travel & Tourism Council 2017.

³ Paul Heintzman, *Leisure and Spirituality Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Perspectives*, 2015.

⁴ Psalm 18: 19: 'He led me into a broad place [to a place of safety]; he rescued me because he delights in me'.

⁵ Travelling is a fool's paradise. Our first journeys discover to us the indifference of places. At home I dream that at Naples, at Rome, I can be intoxicated with beauty, and lose my sadness. I pack my trunk, embrace my friends, embark on the sea, and at last wake up in Naples, and there beside me is the stern fact, the sad self, unrelenting, identical, that I fled from. I seek the Vatican, and the palaces. I affect to be intoxicated with sights and suggestions, but I am not intoxicated. My giant goes with me wherever I go.' Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Essays: First Series* (1847 edition), II: Self-Reliance.

⁶ 'What gives value to travel is fear. It is the fact that, at a certain moment, when we are so far from our own country ... we are seized by a vague fear, and an instinctive desire to go back to the protection of old habits ... this is why we should not say that we travel for pleasure. There is no pleasure in traveling,

feel at home for unpredictability and confusion.⁷ 'This confusion', he suggests, is 'not merely a necessary evil' but 'the very thing we are seeking when we leave home'. As Henry David Thoreau wrote, 'Not until we are lost do we begin to understand ourselves'.⁸

Why do we travel? Well, God says 'Go' The God who speaks to us in Scripture says consistently 'Do not be afraid' – but the context of that injunction is often in telling God's people to 'Go', to 'Go out', to 'Go to the land (the people) to which I am sending you'. In the gospels, Jesus is no less assertively directive, saying 'Follow me' no fewer than twenty-three times. It is Jesus' final instruction to Peter in John's Gospel,⁹ and at the very end Matthew and Mark: 'Go', 'Go and make disciples of all nations', 'Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation'.¹⁰ And while, at the end of Luke, Jesus tell his followers to '*stay*', it is only to wait for God's power until the command to 'Go' in Luke's sequel, the Acts of the Apostles.¹¹

Following Jesus is never a static activity. The God of Abraham, the God of Israel is a God of movement, calling us, sending us, casting us out, drawing us in. Henry Miller said, 'One's destination is never a place, but rather a new way of looking at things'.¹²

Ruf suggests our thirst for the *bewilderment* of travel 'allows us to point our craft into the wind and sail headlong into the storm rather than flee from it'; challenging the assumption that the purpose of religious belief and practice is to protect and shield us against the world's chaos. In Luke 5, Jesus sees fishermen washing their nets by Lake of Gennesaret. He climbs into Simon Peter's boat and asks him to put out just a short distance from shore so he can teach people from the boat. Having finished, Jesus tells Simon, 'Put out into deep water and lower your nets for a catch'. Bewildered and afraid, yet open to Jesus' instruction, they obey, and find their lives changed forever.

Duc in Altum – 'Put out into deep water,' says Jesus. *Get out of your depth!*

It is often while travelling that we have our most important conversations. The road to Emmaus and the road to Damascus offer two very different models of the risen Christ engaging with his followers (or persecutors). Our quest for enlightenment may take us around the globe or bring us back to the place where we began. Purposeful, rather than aimless, travel is always ultimately, a journey home.

As Augustine of Hippo confessed: 'Thou hast made us for thyself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it finds its rest in thee'.¹³

and I look upon it more as an occasion for spiritual testing ... Pleasure takes us away from ourselves in the same way as distraction, in Pascal's use of the word, takes us away from God. Travel, which is like a greater and a graver science, brings us back to ourselves.' Albert Camus, *Notebooks*, 1935–1951.

⁷ Frederick J. Ruf, *Bewildered Travel: The Sacred Quest for Confusion*, (Studies in Religion & Culture) 2007

⁸ 'Not till we are lost, in other words not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves.' Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*, Chapter 8: The Village.

⁹ John 21: 22.

¹⁰ Mark 16: 15 – though some manuscripts have the following ending between verses 8 and 9, and one manuscript has it after verse 8 (omitting vv. 9–20): 'Then they quickly reported all these instructions to those around Peter. After this, Jesus himself also sent out through them from east to west the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation. Amen.' – and Matthew 28: 19.

¹¹ Luke 24: 49.

¹² From Henry Miller, *Big Sur and the Oranges of Hieronymus Bosch* (1957).

¹³ *The Confessions*, Book I, Chapter 1.