



## Sermon at the Cathedral Eucharist

Eighth Sunday After Trinity

readings: [Genesis 15.1-6](#), [Hebrews 11.1-3, 8-16](#), [Luke 12.32-40](#)

7 August 2022

‘Are we nearly there yet?’ Many of you who have taken your children on holiday may be familiar with this question that emerges from the backseat of the car on regular intervals throughout the journey. I’m sure it’s a question that I repeatedly asked of my own parents, who had to find ways of convincing me that there was only a bit further to go, even if miles lay ahead.

I hope that many of us will get, or have already had, an opportunity to make journeys on holiday over this summer period; valuable time away serving to offer some rest, refreshment, and recreation, so that by the time we return, we will be feeling in a different place, preferably a better one.

And, of course, the word ‘holiday’ has its origins in the term holy day, traditionally a day of celebration in which we would nurture and restore ourselves, in body, mind and spirit, but as that question from backseat voices reminds us, our holiday journeys are seldom straightforward. They can often be full of frustrations that little or no progress is being made at all, and leave us wondering whether it’s worth all of the effort; no doubt those thoughts must pass through the minds of people stuck in airports or at ferry terminals, and that’s without us even beginning to consider the much more serious challenges of very different sorts of journeys that refugees take in trying to find a safe haven that will restore their bodies, minds and spirits.

Journeys, then, wherever our destination, inevitably confront us with a whole gamut of human emotions, and it is, of course, the very reason why the journey image has been mined by writers throughout human history. There is the classic journey of Odysseus in Greek mythology, and Dante’s ‘Divine Comedy’, to name but two. Great themes of living and dying are explored as the protagonists undergo a whole range of experiences, en route to their final destination.

Significantly, in both of these cases, the chief character ends their journey back where they started, but now able to see their own lives and the place that they had left, in a new light and with greater depth. In Odysseus’ case, he finally returns to Ithaca after many years of journeying, whilst for Dante, his journey to *paradiso*, via the *inferno* and *purgatorio*, finally brings him back to Beatrice and his love for her. Of course, these are epic tales, but whether or not we have the appetite for them or the opportunity of making great physical excursions ourselves, these outer journeys mirror the more important inner journeys we all have the possibility of making. And today’s readings remind us of that call.

In the epistle to the Hebrews, we are told that Abraham set out on his journey, in faith, not knowing where he was going; it’s a direct reference to a passage in Genesis 12, set a few chapters earlier than today’s Old Testament reading, but forming part of the ongoing journey on which he embarks. Interestingly, both in this passage and in today’s Old Testament reading, it seems that Abraham is finding it very difficult to trust where God is leading him. In the earlier instance, having been promised by God, the land of Canaan, he promptly leaves it for Egypt when a famine looms;

whilst in today's section, he appears to have adopted one of his slaves to be his heir, in spite of the fact that Divine assurance told him he would be the father of many nations.

Both suggest that Abraham's journey in faith involved detours; but, with the benefit of hindsight, the writer is able to say that, nevertheless, here was a person whose faith enabled him to re-find his way. In fact, as the epistle reading continues, the writer seems to be wanting to say that Abraham, along with the other patriarchal figures, Isaac and Jacob, though struggling with the uncertainties of their journeying and of taking several wrong turnings, had enough faith in the clues they were given along the way to enable them to travel on. And to do so, in the growing realisation that their true home, the true end of their seeking, lay in a kingdom yet to be realised in full.

Then in today's Gospel, again written retrospectively, within the light of Christ's resurrection, we have Luke continuing his account of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. It is, in a sense, a journey of return for him, as it leads him, through death and resurrection, back home to his Father's side. As the disciples travel with him though, they are having to constantly re-visit where he is leading them as the journey unfolds. One which started well amidst much enthusiasm, becomes more involved as they go a bit further, and they often find themselves straying down cul-de-sacs from which Jesus has to draw them back. As they journey together, he teaches them that the road towards God's kingdom often requires a letting go; in his case ultimately, a letting go of his own life, but in theirs too, on this occasion, a letting go of the things that moth can destroy and thief can come near; in other words, an acknowledgement and a giving up of the false destinations that are sought, so that their hearts may instead be set on the treasures of the kingdom, their true end.

He offers a short parable to stress the importance of staying alert so that the true treasure, the true end is carefully protected. But, of course, for the disciples, the learning and accepting of what that treasure was, is still very much a work in progress.

And so what of us and our own journeying? Are we nearly there yet? Like those first disciples, we too are people of the way and on the way, learning and growing as we endeavour to travel with Christ to where real treasure is to be found, but as is the case in the epistle and gospels, where some things only became clear through looking back and re-visiting the experiences of journeying in faith, so for us, it is often with hindsight that we see for the first time real treasures that we hadn't previously recognised or acknowledged, and with it gain a greater sense of where our true home, our true end lies.

A few weeks ago, I was involved in leading a poetry retreat for some of our students. As part of the experience, we called into the village church of East Coker in Somerset, where the ashes of T.S.Eliot are buried. An Anglican by conversion, perhaps the crowning glory of Eliot's poetry are his *Four Quartets*, a collection in which the place of faith is close at hand, as he explores the relationship between the present and the past, of beginnings and returnings, and, in the process, of understanding ourselves afresh.

On the memorial plaque to him in the church are the opening and closing words of one of the quartets, called *East Coker*, which run very simply, '*In my beginning is my end*'...and then...'*In my end is my beginning*'. Eliot's ancestors had lived in this village in the seventeenth century before migrating to America and there is a sense in which the burial of ashes in that place mark a physical returning to where his journey had started, but it is perhaps in the closing words of his final quartet, *Little Gidding*, where Eliot especially articulates the inner journey, that ties in most closely with our theme today.

He writes,

*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.*

For him, as a Christian writer, all of our journeys are long Odysseys which are geared to gradually but eventually bring us home; but perhaps similarly for us too. Christ calls us to journey with him, back to our real home as children of God, to a place where we discover the treasure of truly knowing ourselves, as human beings fully & eternally loved.