

# 4.12 Going on Pilgrimage or Mission

*They are mobile like the wind,  
they belong to the nations.  
They need no passport.  
People write their addresses in pencil  
and wonder at their strange existence.*

**THE VISION – PETE GREIG**

*Earth's crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God:  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes ...*

**from Aurora Leigh by Elizabeth Barrett Browning**

During the Season of Preparation all candidates should undertake a pilgrimage or mission.

Mission is a term that we focus on considerably in our Biblical studies, and our experiential learning during the time of our preparation (4.4 VOW – Gospel to the Nations; 4.9 Practice – Mission). It's fair to say that mission will be a term that becomes very familiar to candidates of the OMS, and forms part of the bedrock of a member's ongoing life practices. We'll add very little further detail regarding mission below.

Pilgrimage, on the other hand, may be a more unfamiliar term. It might not be entirely clear why a pilgrimage would help during the time of preparation. You may simply be wondering how to prepare and plan. The few paragraphs below will address exactly these points and will hopefully inspire you to consider going on a pilgrimage during this season - a successful God-encounter that will help to inform your discernment.

Whilst the detail below focuses mostly on pilgrimage, you may find that the eight principles of pilgrimage would also benefit a missions trip, or even a time of retreat.

## What is Pilgrimage all about?

The term “pilgrim” and the idea of “pilgrimage” are words that have changed their meaning dramatically over time.

In medieval times you might have received a sentence from the legal system of the day, to undergo the punishment and penance of a pilgrimage!

At Thanksgiving in the USA, you’d still remember the “Pilgrim” fathers who set out to cross the Atlantic as spiritual refugees who had experienced persecution for their beliefs, in search of a new land and a new life.

The leading Reformer, Martin Luther, declared in 1520 that “all pilgrimages should be stopped” and that “these pilgrimages give countless occasions to commit sin”. So the protestant tradition in many countries has been impacted for centuries by concern that pilgrimages focus too heavily on ‘holy places’, shrines, veneration of saints, prayer to Mary and the saints, and the earning of merit.

Most major world religions would encourage pilgrimage for their followers.

- The fifth pillar of Islam requires all Muslims to join the annual pilgrimage to Mecca – the Hajj – at least once in their lifetimes if they are able. 2.5m Muslims travelled to Mecca in 2019.
- The 55-day Kumbh Mela takes place every 12 years at the union of the rivers Ganges, Yamuna and the Saraswati. In 2013, 120 million Hindu pilgrims attended the Kumbh Mela.
- The Buddha told his disciples about four locations “that a pious person should visit and look upon with feelings of reverence.” Many buddhist pilgrims have since made the journeys to Lumbini; Bodhgaya, Sarnath and Kushinagar.

- Jews still plan pilgrimages to the Western Wall in Jerusalem.
- Even secular pilgrimages occur to visit the Declaration of Independence in the National Archives in Washington DC; the Eiffel Tower in Paris, or the pyramids of Giza, etc.

So, what's it all about? And why would the OMS consider a pilgrimage to be helpful to a candidate?

Setting aside any preconceived ideas we might have about pilgrimage, let's spend a little time re-considering the heart of the subject; how it features in the Biblical narrative; and why, today, it's an important activity within the life of the OMS.

Fairly close to the beginning of the God story in the Bible, God calls Abram to *"Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you."* (Genesis 12:1). When this story is referred to in the New Testament, we see that *"Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God".* (Hebrews 11:8-10)

There are some key principles of pilgrimage that we learn from Abram (whose name was changed to Abraham during his pilgrimage). We'll pick these principles up shortly. First, we'll reference a few other Bible stories where other key principles can also be gleaned.

When God rescued the children of Israel from Egypt, they could have arrived in the promised land of Canaan within a couple of weeks if they'd taken a direct route. They ended up spending 40 years in the wilderness, on a very long 'pilgrimage'! God needed plenty of time with them in order to establish a new and strong nation. He was working with a group of people who had previously only known enslavement for about 400 years. During their 40-year pilgrimage in the desert, God taught them exactly how to live. He provided civil laws that governed them as a people; health

laws to ensure that they were physically strong (and alive!); ceremonial laws that laid out exactly how they should go about their worship; and moral laws that would become an example to the rest of the world.

It's often been said that it took just one night to get the children of Israel out of Egypt – then it took another 40 years to get Egypt out of them!

Once established in the land of Canaan, the children of Israel would aim to travel up to Jerusalem for at least one of the three pilgrim festivals each year - Sukkot, Pesach and Shavuot.

- At Sukkot, or Tabernacles, the Jews would live in tents for 8 or 9 days, to remind themselves of their journeying in the desert for 40 years.
- Pesach, or Passover, was celebrated in the spring, reminding Jews that God is both good and powerful, and that at this time of year he freed the people of Israel and established them as a nation.
- Shavuot, or Weeks, or Pentecost, celebrates the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai. Jews believe that the giving of the Torah was the greatest moment of Jewish history.

On the journey up to Jerusalem, Psalms 120-134 would be used – these are specifically written as songs of ascent to be used on pilgrimage.

It may be interesting to note that Jesus would have completed the pilgrimage to Jerusalem at least 33 times in his life. (Luke 2:41-43)

The Bible refers to our whole lives as “the years of our pilgrimage”, suggesting that we're constantly journeying to another destination (Psalm 119:54, Genesis 47:9, 1 Peter 1:17).

Followers of Jesus are referenced in the New Testament as sojourners, aliens, strangers and pilgrims who don't belong to the influences and culture of this world, and have our hearts set on something greater. (1 Peter 2:11, Hebrews 11:13)

*Blessed are those whose strength is in you,  
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.  
As they pass through the Valley of Baka,*

*they make it a place of springs;  
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.*

*They go from strength to strength,  
till each appears before God in Zion. Psalm 84:5-7*

*“There is a particular blessing from God for those who set their heart on pilgrimage. Setting your heart on pilgrimage is about an outlook on life – that sees it as a journey with Christ and unto Christ.”*

**PETE GREIG**

## **8 Principles for Pilgrimage**

*“The idea of pilgrimage is one that we badly need to recover today ... We are often very reluctant to accept that faith is something that develops and grows gradually, and which involves taking risks and being prepared to follow detours and false trails as we seek out the right way”.*

**IAN BRADLEY**

*“We live in an era of entertainment and in a society saturated with instant gratification. Words like “patience”, “endurance”, and “commitment” sound strange to us. Slow modems are exchanged for high speed Internet access; fast food is not fast enough; and sermons are not short enough. The push of a button cooks our dinner, and the twist of a knob dries our clothes. In a society that struggles to discipline itself, the discipline of pilgrimage reminds us to slow down and take life one step at a time. It reminds us that life is an emotional, physical, and spiritual journey that requires upward and inward conditioning. It moves us from certainty to dependency, from confidence to brokenness, from assurance in ourselves to faith in God. It exposes us to different traditions that inform our thinking. Ours becomes a kaleidoscopic Christianity, and we see reality through sacred lenses, lenses that put flesh on faith and bones on Bibles.”*

**CHRISTAN T. GEORGE**

A pilgrimage completed during the Season of Preparation can provide the environment that allows for an excellent God-encounter, especially if the following eight principles are followed. The time spent on pilgrimage can

be long or short, and the journey can be near or far – simply set your heart on a journey with God, and be ready for a great adventure with him, as you leave behind the familiar and comfortable, and set out to discover new things (often within ourselves). There are usually surprises along the way - this is the great joy of pilgrimage!

## **1. Leave stuff behind**

Just as Abram left the many things that were precious to him, we choose to turn our back, for a time, on the soft comforts of home. We switch off the demands of our everyday lives for a time and carve out space and time just for us and God. It may be good to purposely leave behind electronic devices - maybe our greatest source of distraction in the modern age.

## **2. Travel light**

Many of the Bible stories of pilgrimage involved living in tents and being quick to move everything that you owned when the pillar of cloud or fire was on the move. Simplicity is a spiritual discipline that is required of us as we set off on pilgrimage. Only take what you need.

## **3. Choose a significant destination**

The Jews would travel up to the temple in Jerusalem. Many would argue that the journey is more important than the destination, though it's also good to set your sights on a specific final location, and on the journey to consider the significance of what had previously happened at that site. For example, you may choose to visit Herrnhut in Germany, and on the journey, you might think about the fact that God had stirred 100 years of non-stop prayer at that site – how might this impact you today?

## **4. Pay attention to God's direction**

When we set off with intentionality on a journey like this, God always meets with us, though he rarely has the same agenda that we have, so we need to pay attention to his movements and direction. We need to be ready to move, wherever we see the pillar of fire or cloud move. We do well to remember that *“it is not we, ultimately, who are on a journey for God in the face of Jesus. It is God who is on a journey looking for us”*.

## **5. Learn as you go**

The Israelites needed to get Egypt out of their thought life, their actions and perceptions – and we, too, need to get free from the mould that this world has tried to squeeze us into.

*Don't let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God re-mould your minds from within, so that you may prove in practice that the plan of God for you is good, meets all his demands and moves towards the goal of true maturity. (Romans 12:1-2 J.B. Phillips).*

## **6. Ensure the journey is God-focused**

On the way up to Jerusalem, the Psalms of Ascent would be sung or recited. In order to maintain a healthy focus on the spiritual nature of your pilgrimage, decide which spiritual practices you'll use each day.

For example, you might choose to follow a certain liturgy, or simply stop for quiet, etc at different times during the day. You might choose to connect with the scenery and objects around you in an intentional way – maybe picking up a stone, and popping it into your backpack, as you consider the unnecessary burden you're carrying in life. At some appropriate point later, the stone can be discarded during a moment of prayer. There are so many simple ways that a walk in the countryside, can be turned into an intentional spiritual pilgrimage, or time of encounter with God.

## **7. Properly value fellow-pilgrims**

It's far too easy for us to make a pilgrimage an individual practice. Often the lessons learned on pilgrimage are learned in community. The insights we achieve about ourselves, are sometimes easiest to notice in the way that we interact with others. Don't rush too quickly to be alone on pilgrimage. Take the time to *"look for Christ in others, serve Christ in others, and show Christ to others"*, and also to listen to the voice of Christ as he speaks through others.

*I rejoiced with those who said to me,  
'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'  
Our feet are standing  
in your gates, Jerusalem.* **Psalm 122:1-2 – a song of ascent**

## **8. Do it regularly**

It may not be possible (or sensible!) to complete the entire Camino de Santiago each year, and for some, it's not even a consideration to complete this, or any other long pilgrimage, once in a lifetime. As with most spiritual disciplines, or any physical exercise for that matter, it's very healthy to complete smaller ventures, and to complete them regularly.

Maybe you already have healthy habits to avoid burnout – pilgrimage could easily be woven into a weekly Sabbath practice.

*"To avoid burnout: divert daily (whatever relaxes), withdraw weekly (a Sabbath), and abandon annually (disconnect completely)".*

**RICK WARREN**

These 8 principles can just as easily be applied to a micro-pilgrimage, which sets off from your home, and follows a short, familiar path to a nearby destination. This kind of micro-pilgrimage could then become a regular rhythm in your life.

## **Practical Planning**

Here are some practical considerations to help with your planning:

### **Where will you go?**

One of the first steps of planning, is to choose a destination that will inspire you, and help with the core intention of your pilgrimage.

### **What route will you take?**

This is a little harder and depends very much on the time you have available, together with your physical capabilities, and your mode of



transport. If you're walking, a gentle pilgrimage might cover 8 miles or 13 km in a day. If your route is going to require more than 12 miles or 20 km in a day, then take care - it can start to feel more like a physical challenge, than a spiritual encounter.

## **What's the intention of your pilgrimage?**

Set your intention for the journey at the beginning – this can be a question you want help with, something to bring into your life, or maybe something to let go of. It's sometimes useful to carry a physical representation of your intention – a stone, a flower, water that gets poured out, a symbol, etc – something that you can touch, and that will remind you of your intention as you journey along the road.

Some people don't know what intention to choose. In that case, simply be open to whatever the pilgrimage brings you, and be willing and open to be changed by it.

## **Create a suitable breath prayer**

In line with your intention, it might be useful to create a very brief prayer – something of a few syllables that can be prayed as you take one breath in, and one breath out. You can use your breath prayer at various points of your pilgrimage / mission.

*E.g. Lord, I trust you  
Lead me into life*

## **Are you able to train?**

Ahead of the actual pilgrimage / mission, it would be good to test your ability to walk with any kit that you'll need to take with you. Most importantly, ensure your footwear is worn in before you set off for the real thing – blisters can bring an unwelcome early end to a pilgrimage.

## **Decide your spiritual practices ahead of time**

It's helpful to think through and plan how you would like to respond to certain significant milestones or landmarks along the way, or at the end.

You might like to meditate, pray, connect with nature, water, stones, trees, plants and animals, sing/chant or you might choose to simply be silent etc. Whatever you would like to do, ensure you are planned, and that you have any scripts or liturgy easily to hand if you need them.

## **Sense everything**

Allow all of your senses to come alive as you notice sights, sounds, textures, smells, and tastes in the world all around you. This will help your brain to function at a different level too, which in itself helps with problem-solving and spiritual encounter.

*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.*

**T.S. ELIOT**

*“May your journey be in peace and safety; may you have good company  
on the way and joy in your arriving.  
And don’t forget – the end is also a beginning!”*

**CANTERBURY CATHEDRAL**

### **Further reading:**

Traveling Well

<https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/270247.pdf>