



A Long Walk in Spring

**Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
The droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed every veyne in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
Whan Zepherus eek with his sweete breeth
Inspired hath in every holt and heeth
The tendre croppes, and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne,
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open ye
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages),
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages¹**

The medieval obsession with pilgrimage, immortalised and used as the basis of Chaucer's great work, *The Canterbury Tales*, was a firm feature of medieval life. As Chaucer indicates, once Spring settled over the land, and the people were freed from the hardships of a rigorous Winter, folk of all types planned and set out on a pilgrimage. Pilgrimage, then as now, meant a journey with a spiritual objective to a religiously-significant destination.

In the Middle Ages, pilgrimages ranged from small journeys to the shrines of local saints, to more arduous and lengthy journeys to religious centres with soaring Gothic cathedrals, right up to the most demanding travel of all: the prized destinations of Rome, Compostela and the Holy City of Jerusalem.

Along the pilgrim routes which criss-crossed Europe, centres of economic prosperity arose in the service of catering to the pilgrims but, in reality, there was very little "vacation" to be found in these journeys. The pilgrim roads were fraught with dangers. It's no coincidence that Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims met at an appointed time at the Tabard Inn so that they could make their pilgrimage in the company of others. A pilgrimage was a dangerous undertaking and no-one in their right mind would travel between the medieval walled towns and cities alone, day or night. It was not only the wild animals en route that pilgrims feared; it was the desperate humans who lurked, ready to rob and injure unsuspecting travellers.

¹ Chaucer, Geoffrey. 'The Canterbury Tales', *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

While wealthy pilgrims travelled on horseback, all the others walked. Inns along the way provided accommodation but most of these were basic at best. "A bed for the night" rarely meant "a bed of one's own". The *Great Bed of Ware*, for example, was notable for its capacity to sleep fourteen people. The *Pilgrim's Guide* written in 1140s is one of several surviving medieval "travel guides" that offer helpful hints to travellers and it warns of the error of eating the heavily spiced meat served by some inn keepers; such spice, it explains, is used to disguise meat that is "off". The same guide also warns travellers to beware of paying for drinks served in very large tumblers since the quantity of liquid therein is often very small.

Such dangers and hardships were expected, accepted, and to an extent, embraced by the pilgrims because a pilgrimage was understood as a (living) metaphor of life's journey to God. Everything in the medieval world was rich with meaning; every physical undertaking could be seen as having a spiritual meaning. Life was a pilgrimage and the pilgrimage was life, with all its twists and turns, joys and disappointments, unexpected gains and losses, good company and bad, laughter and tears. In the material world the ultimate pilgrimage destination was Jerusalem because it represented the ultimate spiritual destination, the heavenly city of God.

To the present day we undertake tours and pilgrimages to the great holy places of the world. We, too, might stand in awe of the magnificence of a cathedral but, like the pilgrims of a millennium ago, we will also understand the deeper, spiritual significance of such an edifice. Today, too, modern pilgrims walk the five-hundred mile road to Compostela, sometimes in company, at other times alone. In the commitment to the walk, to getting up every day and walking as far as possible, in facing the unexpected experiences that each day on the road presents, the contemporary pilgrim, like his medieval counterpart, is representing in a concentrated form that which we all strive to do in our everyday lives: meet the challenges, enjoy the blessings and keep moving towards God. In this Lenten season which, in its own way is a pilgrimage with Jesus on his journey to Calvary, we have our eyes and hopes fixed on the destination that is the Resurrection. Let us make the most of the journey.

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