

Pilgrimage to Denmark

In mid-September I was fortunate enough to go to Denmark for 4 days to take part in a joint pilgrimage with fellow Priests from Guildford Diocese along with Lutheran Priests from Viborg Diocese.

A pilgrimage is a journey that has a religious or spiritual significance and is usually taken to an important religious place. In our case we walked from Jelling to Viborg Cathedral, a journey of around 60 km, staying in basic hostels along the way. Unlike true pilgrims we had the bonus of having a 'bilgrim' who took our luggage from hostel to hostel which meant we only had to carry water, our packed lunch and spare socks.

After a very early start we arrived in Billund to be met by our Danish companions. We visited some local sights, including a very impressive Viking Museum. We were then taken to our hostel, fed some kebab and lettuce pizza— who knew that was even a thing— then had Evensong in the church next door and then to bed. It's a long time since I've slept in a bunk bed and the first time in a hostel so despite being very tired, I can't say I got much sleep!



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The next morning started early again — the first person in my room was awake and up by 6 am — then breakfast at 7 followed by making our packed lunches, morning prayer and we then started walking at 8.30. We enjoyed about 2 hours walking in the dry before the rain started.

Fortunately, we had plenty of stops, some short, some longer. At each stop Christian, our aptly named pilgrim leader, would give us some direction as to what to think about or talk about on the next section.

Sometimes we were talking, other times we were in silence. We walked a mixture of terrains, sometimes on the road, sometimes through woodland and sometimes through fields.

It was a long day, especially as it was so wet, but the next hostel was more modern and warmer and after cooking dinner and evensong in the church next door my bed was very welcoming.



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Wednesday saw brighter weather and although the shoes were still a little damp it was a much more pleasant walk.

By this point we had all had time to get to know each other much better and conversations were getting deeper and more personal. The end of the walk saw us come out above a beautiful lake, although the steep climb up to it after 23 km was a bit of a challenge.



We had a talk about a new Pilgrimage venture in the area followed by Evensong outside and then the additional challenge of a mixed dorm. Let's just say the all-female one's were quieter!



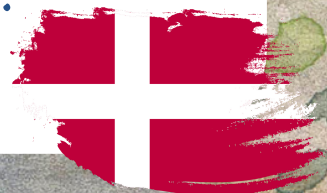
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Then the final push to Viborg Cathedral on Thursday morning and an easy 10 km walk. The final part saw us walking through the centre of Viborg which suddenly seemed very busy, although quiet compared to Guildford, and a moving communion service in the crypt of the cathedral.

We said farewell to our Danish colleagues and then 4 of us were taken by one of the Priests on a tour of his amazing modern church.

Peter then took us for a meal at his home before taking us to the airport for a late flight home. I have to say, getting into my bed at 2am on the Friday morning was a very great blessing!

Would I do it again, absolutely, no hesitation at all. I gained so much from the whole experience.



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Firstly, I wasn't in charge of anything or anyone other than myself. We cooked and tidied up communally but that was a pleasure. While we were walking I didn't need to worry about the route. Christian led the way and we all followed, with a fellow leader at the back ensuring that no-one got left behind.

That freedom meant that I had the time to focus on my surroundings, to enjoy the beauty of the scenery, to take time to spot the small things, including a tiny little frog that crossed my path.

While chatting we could concentrate on listening to each other, no urgency to speak quickly, there was plenty of time, and we covered lots of different subjects from family to churches, frustrations, joys, sadness, and celebration.



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The times of silent walking allowed God time to seep into our hearts and to speak to each one of us.

One of the things Christian told us which I think was attributed to Rumi was 'Silence is God's primary language, everything else is poor translation'.



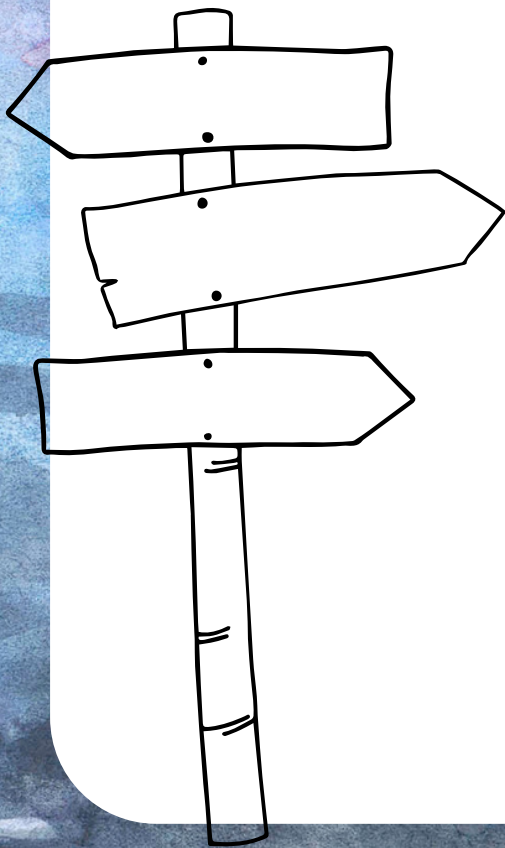
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The theme of the pilgrimage was "Vocation, congregation and clergy identity in 2023" and whilst walking I realised that the physical journey I was on was a metaphor for my vocational journey.

Some of the time there were wide paths, clearly marked and easy to walk on. Other times there were crossroads where we stopped to work out which way we were going.

At points the path became rocky and uncomfortable to walk on for quite a prolonged period, whilst occasionally in a smooth patch a small stoney patch could easily trip you up.

Sometimes there was plenty of space to be together and to be supported. Other times it was narrow, and we needed to walk in single file, quiet, on our own with just our thoughts.



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Having that time and space for silence was the greatest gift and allowed me time to pray for the congregation at All Saints and for the various needs of the church and the village, and for the wider world. I didn't have any great revelation, but I did get a renewed sense that I am where I am supposed to be and that we at All Saints are entering an exciting new phase. The Pet Service on the Sunday I returned being the icing on the cake.

I know it isn't possible for everyone to go on a pilgrimage, but if you have the opportunity, then I would wholeheartedly recommend it, regardless of whether you have a faith or not.

The gift of walking with others is a blessing in itself.

