ANGLICAN-LUTHERAN SOCIETY

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SESSION TWO 'Pilgrimage: 'Walking in the footsteps of Chad'

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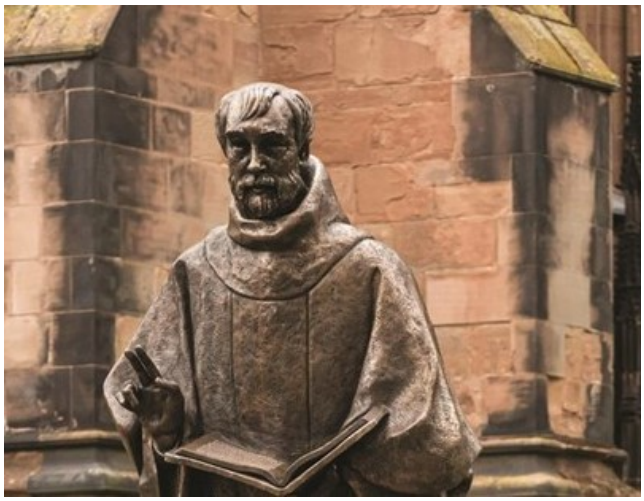

I want to speak about pilgrimage and St Chad of Lichfield. Chad, who died in 672, thirteen and a half centuries ago this year. He was the first Bishop of Lichfield; I am the ninety-ninth, and so my successor will be the hundredth. In his lifetime, after his death, and with renewed emphasis today, Chad is associated with pilgrimage, and in the Diocese of Lichfield which he established we are discovering ever new depths in what it means to be a pilgrim people. So in these brief remarks I want to address three topics: first, Chad's own life as a pilgrim; second, the historic pilgrimage to Chad's shrine; and third, Chad's pilgrimage today. As I talk to each of those, I want to say something about the spiritual values that I see in pilgrimage.

1 Chad's pilgrim life

Chad lived in a time of division and conflict. Following the end of Roman rule in Britain, the Anglo-Saxons had established a number of kingdoms, which were often at war with one another. There were also tensions within the Church in England, between those who followed the Roman customs introduced by Augustine through the Canterbury mission, and those shaped by the traditions of Irish monastic Christianity. Chad in his life crossed many of those divides. He was born in Northumbria, the northernmost of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, but he became a bishop for the people of Mercia, in the English Midlands. Northumbria and Mercia were bitterly opposed to one another in the struggle for dominance in England; less than thirty years before Chad became Bishop of Lichfield, the Northumbrian king Oswald had invaded

Mercia, and was defeated, killed and dismembered in a battle probably fought at Oswestry ['Oswald's tree'] in our diocese. Chad came from Northumbria to Mercia armed with no weapons except for the gospel of peace. Crossing boundaries in an undefended way is a mark of authentic pilgrimage, being a pilgrim puts us in a place of **vulnerability**.

Chad also crossed boundaries within the Church. He was formed by Irish traditions – first from his mentor Aidan, the saintly Bishop of Northumbria, and then in a time of monastic formation in Ireland itself, spending several years in the monastery of *Rath Meilsige*, near Carlow. However, when the Church in England conclusively decided to follow Roman rather than Irish ways – at the Synod of Whitby in 664 – Chad willingly accepted the Roman way of doing things. This ready acceptance was just one example of the humility for which he was renowned; and **humility** is a mark of pilgrimage, at least as Chad practised it.

When he came to Mercia, Chad spent the three brief years of his episcopal ministry in walking around the villages, farms and settlements of his vast diocese. He covered huge distances – we know that from the number of places in the West Midlands and beyond that take their name from him on one way or another – but he would only ever cover those distances walking on foot. He refused to ride a horse, despite the pressure exerted on him by the Archbishop of Canterbury among others, and that meant that those he met on his lengthy walking visits were physically on the same level as him; he was not looking down on them from the height of a horse. So pilgrimage as Chad practised it was a simple expression of humility – keeping close to the ground, Chad throughout his lifetime refused to lift himself up, choosing to walk everywhere so that he could more easily and more authentically meet and greet his people everywhere.

The readiness simply to set off walking in obedience to Christ – which is essentially what Chad did during his three years as Bishop of Lichfield – marked Chad out as one who was a *peregrinus*, as so many monks were in the Irish tradition. The Latin word, which is the root from which the English 'pilgrim' derives, is also the name of a bird, which swoops up and down on the currents of the wind as the human *peregrinus* did on the currents of the Spirit. It is very fitting that there are peregrines nesting in the towers of Lichfield Cathedral today. Like the peregrines, the Irish monks would simply set out to travel – walking on roads across Europe, embarking in fragile coracles on the wild Atlantic, venturing deep into thick forests and impenetrable marshlands. They did so with an absolute trust in the direction of the Spirit to take them wherever the way of Christ led them. That characteristic of **trust** seems to me a really important marker of the pilgrim life; and it is one that Chad, a genuine *peregrinus*, showed throughout his short life. After only three years as Bishop of Lichfield, he died, still in his thirties, in 672, of the plague – what a contemporary resonance that has! The great church historian Bede writes that a few days before his death, his brother monks

heard heavenly music coming from his cell, and realised that Chad was being visited by angels, ready to lead him on his final journey in the Spirit. Lichfield Cathedral today is full of carvings and images of angels, Chad's trusted spiritual companions on his pilgrimage home.

2 The historic pilgrimage to Chad's shrine

From the beginning, people came to visit Chad's grave in Lichfield in large numbers. The man who had walked as a pilgrim throughout his earthly life became himself the object of pilgrimage after his death. Lichfield became the centre of a network of pilgrimage routes, and the place names of Staffordshire, Cheshire and other parts of the ancient kingdom of Mercia provide evidence of the widespread diffusion of Chad's cult across the region. The story of this holy man gave inspiration and hope to the people of medieval England, and they walked long distances to celebrate his memory. Keeping alive and renewing a **memory** of holiness is one of the key purposes of a pilgrim, and when they arrived at Lichfield they encountered the most tangible sign of that living memory: the bodily relics of Chad himself, preserved in a magnificent shrine at the heart of the great Cathedral. In the later medieval period, the cult of the relics developed in some spectacular ways. For example, at some point Chad's skull was separated from the rest of his body and encased in its own reliquary. After pilgrims had visited the main shrine, a priest standing in a gallery high above them would wave a final blessing over them using this head relic. The first-floor Chapel of St Chad's Head still survives, but we no longer use it for this purpose.

The pilgrimage to Chad's shrine was not only a celebration of holiness in the past; it was also a quest for **healing** in the present. About fifty years after Chad's death, Bede writes this:

> *As a testimony of his [Chad's] virtue, frequent miracles of healing are wont to be wrought [at Lichfield]. And of late, a certain man that had a frenzy, wandering about everywhere, arrived there in the evening, unperceived or disregarded by the keepers of the place, and having rested there the whole of the night, came forth in his right mind the next morning, to the surprise and joy of all, and told what a cure had been wrought on him through the goodness of God. The place of the sepulchre is a wooden monument, made like a little house, covered, having a hole in the wall, through which those that go thither for devotion are wont to put in their hand and take out some of the dust. This they put into water and give to sick cattle or men to drink, whereupon they are presently eased of their infirmity, and restored to their desired health*.

Throughout the medieval period, there was a powerful sense that visiting the shrine in expectant faith could bring restoration of body, soul and spirit to the afflicted, and this was a major motivation for pilgrimage.

As a place where people sought healing, Lichfield became one of the first pilgrimage Cathedrals in England, and it is likely that that in turn led to another key feature of the site: its **accessibility**. Unlike most medieval English cathedrals, Lichfield is entirely built on one level, with no steps or changes in flooring to impede the progress of people with a disability. The stress on accessibility and welcome reached out also to its surroundings: the Cathedral is built on a low ridge above a marshy pool; over the centuries, hostels were built to accommodate pilgrims, ferries provided to carry them over the water, and then a bridge built, by my predecessor Water de Langton in the fourteenth century. The principle that pilgrimage sites and routes should be accessible to all seems centrally important to me.

3 Renewing Chad's pilgrimage today

At the Reformation, the shrine of St Chad was dismantled, the relics dispersed, and open celebration of the pilgrimage stopped, though it is likely that some people continued to observe it privately, and Lichfield retained its status as a cathedral and a place of holiness – despite becoming a repeated battlefield during the English Civil War of the 1640s, when the fabric of the building was badly damaged. Remarkably, it later transpired that the bones of St Chad were not entirely lost. A small collection of the relics were secretly kept by one of the priests of the cathedral, passed on through generations of his family and others who secretly kept the old faith, found their way to France where they were kept for several years in the Jesuit college in St Omer, and then returned to the West Midlands in the nineteenth century. In 1841, the relics were solemnly enshrined in the newly built Roman Catholic Cathedral of St Chad in Birmingham. Their remarkable story demonstrates the extraordinary tenacity of the memory which underlies Chad's pilgrimage.

However, the pilgrimage of Chad and the pilgrim life of Chad are not restricted to Roman Catholics alone. In recent years, there has been a wide growth of interest among Christians of many different traditions, and beyond that in society at large. In 2012, a 92-mile walking route between the two medieval cities of Chester and Lichfield was inaugurated, called the Two Saints Way after St Chad and St Werburgh, a female Anglo-Saxon abbess and saint. Last year, a much longer route of more than five hundred miles linking Lindisfarne in Northumberland to Lichfield was walked for the first

time to mark Chad's journey from Northumbria to Mercia – it has been given the name of the Two Kingdoms Way. Several shorter routes around the West Midlands are also being established as local initiatives from parishes and communities which want to recover the history of their connection to Lichfield. We can see here clearly a retrieval of the memory of holiness which underlies pilgrimage as a spiritual foundation. But in the way in which these pilgrimages are developing and being used, I think we can also see evidence of the importance of the other values which I mentioned: humility, vulnerability, trust, accessibility, and the quest for healing.

Humility in its root meaning is about keeping close to the ground, and that is literally true on a walking pilgrimage. As your feet make contact with grass, stones, gravel, mud, and even tarmac, you become aware of your connection with the natural world, and your eyes, ears and sense of smell are absorbed in the natural world around you. That itself gives you a humbling sense of your own smallness in the midst of creation; but in an age of ecological crisis it also arouses a sense of penitential humility for the damage that we have caused and continue to cause to our fragile world. Pilgrimage is an exercise in ecological humility.

Alongside that proper humility, there is the recognition of vulnerability. That can be present in different physical forms – there are still dangers in walking even through contemporary Staffordshire: mad cattle in the fields, mad drivers on the road – and it can also be quite challenging to walk in undefended company and conversation along fellow pilgrims. But also, pilgrimage is more than just walking: it is an act of faith in Jesus Christ, and a witness to him. When Chad went walking through seventh-century Mercia, he would greet anybody he met and talk with them about Jesus Christ. Doing that in secular Britain today puts you in a place of vulnerability, but that is where we should be as we follow our vulnerable Lord.

Setting out to walk on pilgrimage requires a strong sense of trust – maybe trust in the person who is leading you if you are part of a group, or trust in the people who have put up the waymarking signs or drawn the maps if you are navigating yourself, but underlying that trust in a God who guides us on our way and accompanies us on the journey. One of the outstanding qualities of Chad's own life was the radical trust that he placed in divine providence – Bede tells us that this was particularly obvious in thunderstorms, which he would rejoice in as signs of hope of the second coming. Walking the pilgrim way, particularly when the weather is hostile as it can sometimes be in Staffordshire, does in some deep way strengthen the sense of trust and faith as we journey through life together.

That experience of trustful journeying is accessible to all, whatever their background or belief. One of the remarkable things about modern pilgrimage is the sheer variety of people

who want to join in – from all different Christian backgrounds, but also people of different faiths, and those who are just searching for meaning and purpose in their lives. There seems to be something about the act of walking that opens people up to new levels of spirituality, and that is itself open to all. And in the last two years, as the pandemic has led us further into the possibilities of online experience, virtual pilgrimage has become a real possibility for those unable to walk physically. This is an area where the Chad pilgrimage websites are working hard to open up cyberkinetic possibilities in the home. In doing that, they are continuing the principle of accessibility which goes back to Chad's first shrine.

I have spoken of the way in which interest in Chad and his pilgrimage has spread beyond Roman Catholics to embrace Christian of many other traditions. In September 2017, that movement took a decisive step forward when more than five hundred people joined in an ecumenical pilgrimage from St Chad's Roman Catholic Cathedral in Birmingham to Lichfield (Anglican) Cathedral, to mark the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Methodists, Reformed, Baptists, Salvationists, Orthodox and others walked together with a priest who carried a small relic of Chad himself. At Lichfield, for the first time since the Reformation part of Chad's body lay for a few hours at the site of his tomb.

But that is not the end of the story: through the gracious kindness of Archbishop Bernard Longley, the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Birmingham, that same relic of St Chad will in November be returned permanently to Lichfield, entrusted to us in the Church of England to keep in a restored shrine in our Cathedral at the point shown here. We hope, pray and expect that this will help people of all Christian backgrounds to recover a sense of the unity that we have lost through our divisions. Chad was a saint of the Undivided Church, before even the great split between East and West dramatically fractured the universal fellowship of Christians. In honouring him we long for the healing of the bitterness, violence and division which have scarred the Body of Christ, so that a restored Church can be a sign of healing for a divided world.