

An Advent Challenge: the mini-journal



Melrose Abbey

Melrose...start of St Cuthbert's Way, and the place where Cuthbert, after a vision from God, decided to become a monk. To get here I took a bus along the A7 from Carlisle station, through breathtaking countryside topped with a frosting of ice-crystals and lit up with the fireglow of a beautiful sunset. But not one of my companion passengers seemed to notice it. Strange, that.

Like the Celtic saints I've brought very little with me and am carrying it all on my back. But unlike them I do have the luxury of knowing that I've booked the Bed and Breakfast places and there will usually be somewhere to get a meal. I also want to get closer to God, to experience His grace and the gift of salvation, so that they mean more to me, and so that I can return with a freshness that will inspire and enthuse others. I want to pray for the people I work with and have trained over the last few years. So to sleep on my first night.

Day 1: Melrose to Ancrum.

Wow, what a start. Crisp crunchy snow-covered paths trodden only by early morning animals; Fantastic views from the Eildon hills then a visit to Bowden church where Grisell Baillie was ordained the first woman deacon in the Church of Scotland; A sunny morning to enjoy Newtown, St Boswell's and Maxton.

The River Tweed was amazing. But then a very long and desolate hike in the afternoon along Roman Dere Street, through driving sleet and mud over old battlegrounds to Ancrum... (the call to live Kingdom life is like that at times). It was dark by the time I got to the village and the landlord was on his way out to find me. There really wasn't anywhere in between to stay, so maybe I should have taken an extra night at St Boswell's and started a bit more slowly.



One thing about walking solo is that you can pray aloud as much as you want and sing, and at times it feels just as if Christ Himself is walking with you.

Day 2:. Ancrum to Morebattle

Was surprised how well I felt this morning after yesterday's gruelling afternoon. I met a somewhat elusive housemate, an accountant who loves fishing and lives in Chalfont St Giles. A strange situation really...the Dutch owner of the house lived 2 miles away, came back to make the breakfast and was wanting to sell the place so you got the feeling he wasn't really very enthusiastic. Today's walking was completely isolated...I didn't see a soul. No villages, shops, or café's till Morebattle. Which despite its name is the most quaint and welcoming place. Fighting for its post office and its life. The B&B here (the Temple Hall Hotel) is a cosy pub next to a closed up church. Its a real treat, lovely meal, very comfortable warm bedoom, but no-one to talk to much. Today was a trek through 12 miles of hailstorms interspersed with sunshine and cold winds. Sheltered in a forest underneath my Kagul and ate my sandwiches while the ice balls fell around me. Quite cosy really! Loads of mud again, very slippery, so lots of concentration needed. In between that I prayed for people.



Day 3: Morebattle to Hethpool, over the Cheviots.

A really big climb in thankfully, bright sunshine. Cold though, with snow laying at the top of Widopen hill. Marvellous views...could see for miles, even due west to the white-topped Galloway mountains in the South West of Scotland. Then down to Kirk Yetholm again, not a soul around, and then up and over the English/Scottish Border. Saw one or two dog walkers in the distance and the odd farmer but that was all. Got rather tired towards the end and arrived at my destination B&B in Hethpool to find a huge old house with cannons outside and two dogs but no people. After a while a girl with two dogs went towards one of the few nearby cottages and I asked if I was in the right place. Oh yes she said, they'll be out hunting. Anyway she took pity on me and invited me in for a cup of tea. Her partner, Dean was a composer and together they ran a small music business from this remote place. Eventually the owners turned up and a somewhat grumpy gentleman showed me my room. No heat, no towels, no sign of a meal, that was until his delightful wife turned up.

She showed me a living room with a fire a cooked a meal while her daughter had found a towel so that I could take a much needed bath. A real country family...Stuffed animals, old furniture and ancient hunting pictures everywhere. Didn't see the rather grumpy husband again but met two other rich American guests who were here for the hunting. What a completely different culture.



Day 4: Hethpool to Hetton Hall:

Bright sun but strong cold winds on the tops. And masses of mud again, making the path almost impassable at times. I got a little lost at first since the signposts weren't what they should have been beyond Hethpool and the horses had messed up the paths. Saw plenty of grouse and evidence of shooting but no people. Great to reach the lovely little town on Wooller but had to get on quickly in order to arrive at Hetton Hall (Northumbria Community) before dark. 16 miles today. Just made it. Had a wonderful welcome and what a contrast to the previous night. We had a Eucharistic supper followed by good conversation around the fire then Compline, a beautiful way to end the day.



Day 5: Hetton Hall to Fenwick:

A little less rushed today as I only had 6 miles to do, and knew that I couldn't progress to Holy Island until the early morning tides. Stayed with the community for "Morning office" sung unaccompanied rather than said, and whilst very moving, I got a slight feeling that perhaps the community were becoming a little too defined by their tradition...I sincerely hope that will not become the case, since what emanates from here very strongly is love and gentleness, a real challenge to the battle history of this area, and a much needed contribution to our world.

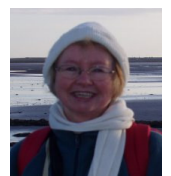


It rained, almost as soon as I left, but I reached St Cuthbert's cave and sheltered there, wondering who else over the ages had done the very same thing....St Cuthbert himself perhaps as well as those who later escaped the Vikings and carried his body to Durham. I met the only other two walkers on the whole trip, going the other way for a day's walk.

Then on through the mud to Fenwick on the A1 and the most wonderful B&B I have ever seen... Arrived early so took a very cold trip into Berwick by bus and found a warm Italian café and a steaming lasagne. Back to Fenwick for a good sleep in the "primrose" room and then home made jam, scrambled eggs and smoked salmon for breakfast!

Day 6: Holy Island! Arrived at the causeway at 10 am having crossed the A1 and the main North East railway line....you have to phone the signalman to ask if its ok to cross because the trains go so fast. The paths again were almost impassably muddy due to tractors and animals.

The tide was turning and so I followed the road rather than the sand path; It seemed to go on for ages, but the sun on the sand was glorious and there were birds I had never seen or heard before. I picked up shells to take back to the folk who had sponsored me and sang on my way over. I met a friendly photographer who agreed to take a proof shot and I didn't care what I looked like! I had made it. All 63 miles of it, and a bit more!



Opengate is the base of the community of St Hilda and St Aidan. Another Celtic prayer organisation led by a very kindly author on these matters, Ray Simpson. Again a really warm welcome and I was just in time for midday prayers. A comfortable room where, as was my custom by now, I showered, and changed into my spare set of clothes, washed the days walking attire, laid it on the radiators (It's amazing how little I can survive with for a week) and then went out to explore. Most shops and cafes were closed, a shame really because several folk were around looking for somewhere to shelter from the cold wind.

Rob, with whom I had been in regular contact by text for most of the adventure, was due to come up and join me that night but couldn't get over the causeway until the evening tide. So he arrived around 7.15 pm and we shared a meal with the community.

Elated, triumphant, very grateful for God's protection, and delighted to see Rob, we stayed the night in the place from which Cuthbert the missional bishop had worked in God's Kingdom.



The next day we travelled down to Durham Cathedral where I knelt in the sanctuary where Cuthbert is buried and prayed his prayer:

Almighty God, who didst call Thy servant Cuthbert from keeping sheep to follow Thy Son and to be a shepherd of Thy people, mercifully grant that I, following his example and caring for those who are lost, may bring them home to thy fold, through thy son Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

So what did I glean from this challenge apart from being much fitter and more confident by the end of it? I received some healing of a weak right knee...and it was a great start to a Sabbatical month.

I'm deeply grateful to all those who have donated towards Parish Nursing by sponsoring me on this challenge, and I look forward to seeing that sponsorship take us on to the next stage of its development.

And I've experienced all kinds of hospitality. It's become quite a theme for me. There was **empty** hospitality at Ancrum, done with duty but without enthusiasm; **excellent** hospitality at Morebattle, good but somewhat anonymous; **exceptional** hospitality with Dean and Josie who stopped their work for an hour to entertain me; **exclusive** hospitality at Hethpool where I really didn't feel part of the in-crowd; **eucharistic** hospitality at Hetton Hall where communion and supper were celebrated together, the bread before the meal and the cup after; **extravagant** hospitality at Fenwick where attention to every little detail had been given, and **easy** hospitality at Opengate, where you could walk in and put your slippers on, as if you were truly at home.

How does this compare with what is on offer at our churches? Like these B&B's, they all would want to describe themselves as warm and welcoming. But there were very obvious differences. And one of my tasks in the new chapter may be to develop this theme and help our churches to become more inclusive, more eucharistic, more extravagant, and more at home to all who walk or drive past their doors. Maybe it's a theme for our family and home life too.

Helen Wordsworth, December 2008