



A Pilgrimage to our Anglican Roots
Exploring our Spiritual Family Tree
by John Kater

St John's Cathedral Pilgrims outside King's College Cambridge

In May, thirty current and former members of St John's Cathedral spent a week on pilgrimage to our spiritual roots in the Church of England. It was my privilege to guide our reflections on pilgrimage.

People of faith have always been drawn to pilgrimages to places that are special because they are holy, or because they are associated with holy people or events. (Think of the boy Jesus and his family making their way to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover.) Down through the centuries, Christians have made their way to the Holy Land in order to walk where Jesus walked. In the Middle Ages, they began going to shrines associated with outstanding people of faith. In the late 1300s, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote the Canterbury Tales about a group of pilgrims on their way from Southwark to the great shrine of Thomas à Becket in Canterbury. Our pilgrimage was both similar and different; we certainly intended to visit holy places, but with a special purpose in mind: exploring our spiritual roots, which is like nothing so much as discovering our spiritual family tree. Our family tree helps to shape us and make us who we are. We are not our grandparents, but our lives surely reflect them, their experiences and their values. As Anglicans, our spiritual ancestry lies in the Church of England. And so we went.

We discovered that those roots are remarkably complex. England's original Celtic tribes were joined two thousand years ago by Roman invaders, and then by Angles and Saxons from Germany, later by Viking marauders from Scandinavia, and finally the French invaders who conquered England in 1066. The result was a hybrid people whose religious history is inevitably hybrid as well.

Perhaps it is those earliest members of our spiritual family the Celts who gave us what turned out to be an especially helpful concept on our pilgrimage, that of "thin places" where the distance between God and us is found to be narrower than we usually realise. Many of the places we visited were "thin places" for our 21st century pilgrims; whether moved by the splendor of great Cathedrals soaring into the sky or the intimacy of private conversations about our own spiritual journey, or perhaps the English church music at Evensong, surely one of the greatest gifts our ancestors gave us, we found

that God was no stranger but our constant companion.

Our spiritual ancestors had a complicated and sometimes troubled history! At Canterbury, we reflected on the conflict between Church and State that led to the murder of Thomas à Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury nearly a thousand years ago. In Oxford, we explored the University Church, where Henry VIII's Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer, who gave us the Book of Common Prayer and engineered the Reformation that created the Anglicanism we know today, gave his last testimony in 1556 before being burned at the stake by "Bloody Mary." From the same pulpit nearly three hundred years later, John Keble began the "Oxford Movement" that restored many elements of medieval Christianity that the Reformers had eliminated.

Our stop in Oxford also included a visit to Ripon College Cuddesdon, whose Principal, Martyn Percy, is well known at St John's and who welcomed us to explore the oldest of England's seminaries with a stunning new chapel, an example of how our

"spiritual cousins" today continue to express their faith with the best of contemporary architecture.

In York and Durham, we remembered our ancestors whose faith sustained them in the face of the terror of Viking raids and whose Cathedrals hold the memories of leaders from centuries past -- and also of modern Christians such as William Temple, Archbishop of York and later of Canterbury. Temple saw the suffering of the poor in England's north, supported them through devastating strikes and called the Church of England to speak and work for a society in which all people are respected and have access to a life worthy of human beings created in God's image.

Lincoln Cathedral gave us the opportunity to understand how our ancestors' faith expressed itself in the very architecture of their churches: as you enter the Cathedral through the



Interior of the Harry Bell Tower, Canterbury Cathedral

great West Doors, your eye is drawn upward and beyond itself towards the God who is always in some sense beyond us, yet at the same time forward to the altar, where God comes to meet us in the Eucharist.

The last stop on our pilgrimage was King's College in Cambridge, which has preserved the heritage of worship through music which is one of the contributions of our spiritual ancestors not only to us but to the whole world-wide church in every time.

In our reflections on the last night of the pilgrimage, we thought about the surprises we had encountered as we explored our spiritual family tree, the times and places where our ancestors had seemed far away and also the settings when we could almost feel their presence with us. And of course we thought about our own "thin places" where God had seemed to come especially close to us.



King's College Chapel

And we remembered our glimpses of the Church of England as it is today: congregations far smaller than we are used to but full of people whose warm welcomes eased our way as we shared their prayer and worship, and also their countryside, their meals and their celebrations. We were struck again by how important is hospitality to the life and witness of the Christian community.

We also thought about the many conflicts that had troubled English Christians down through the centuries: conflicts of power, between Church and State; conflicts between the original Celtic Christians and the Roman missionaries sent by the Pope to impose a Roman way of being the church; conflicts between Catholics and Reformers, and between Anglicans who emphasised their Catholic heritage and those who embraced a Protestant identity. And we were struck by how, through time, our ancestors learned to build a church that was big enough to hold differences of opinion because they came to understand that the faith we share in common is far greater than the differences of opinion or practice that divide us.

But we also thought together about what it all meant for us. We are not our grandparents, even though they helped make us who we are. Simply trying to copy them would be wrong; our task is to discover how to live the lives God wants us to live in our own place and time just as our ancestors did in theirs. Exploring our spiritual roots in the Church of England doesn't make us more English; far from it! Rather, it leads us to ask ourselves how we - who live in settings like Hong Kong in 2014 - can express and live our faith in our context as our spiritual ancestors did in theirs. Like them, whether we are from Hong Kong or Britain or the USA, we are hybrid people, with customs and values drawn from many cultures.

How do we affirm our identity as Christians in our context? We know what a faithful church looked like in Canterbury a thousand years ago; but what does a faithful Church in Hong Kong look like in 2014? How can we bring our own concerns and hopes, our fears and doubts and pains, to God in our setting as our ancestors learned to do in theirs?

That is what I thought about as I made my way around the Church of England, and it is a question I ask myself now that I am at home again. It is not a question with an easy answer; but I am confident that just as God was with those spiritual



York Minster

ancestors of ours, and was with us every step of our pilgrimage, God continues to walk with us as we seek to be people of faith in our own place and time.

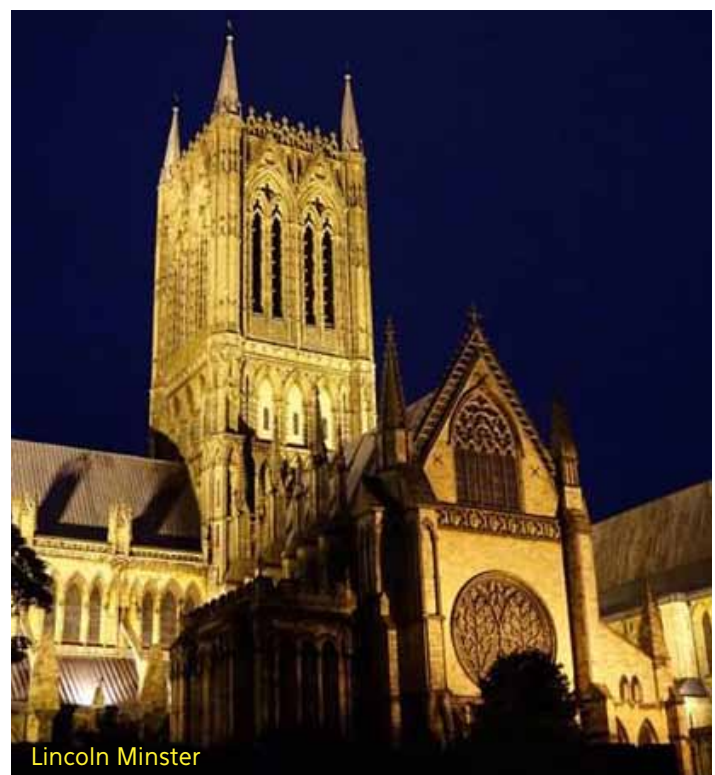
Editor's Note: the Revd Dr John Kater is a much-loved frequent visitor to Hong Kong. A native of Virginia, he served as rector at Christ Episcopal Church, Poughkeepsie, New York, and also taught for 10 years as a visiting professor at Vassar College.

From 1984 to 1990, John served as education officer for the Episcopal Diocese of Panama and priest-in-charge of Iglesia San Francisco de Asís in Panama City.

In 1990 he joined the faculty of Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, California. Since 'official' retirement in 2007, he teaches at CDSP and the School for Deacons in the autumn term, and at Ming Hua Theological College, Hong Kong in the spring.

Photos

*Group Photo: Tessa Walker
Lincoln, York and Canterbury: Louisa So
King's College Cambridge: Nigel Gibson*



Lincoln Minster

Pilgrim's Reflections

A visual feast and architectural marvels are what defined the Pilgrimage for me. How did they build such monuments to faith, that they still stand today for us to worship in? The beautiful glass, the soaring columns were just inspiring to see.

Tessa Walker

While the coach steered on along the winding and rugged landscapes of the Yorkshire Dales, I was mesmerised by the scenes outside the windows - vast and open green fields dotted with flocks of sheep either standing or lying in the rain, neither complaining nor fretting about the ill weather; their calm expressions and postures perhaps manifested their inner peace as well as their gratitude for the goodness that the rain had brought to the pasture they grazed upon.

David Chong

Much credit goes to Prof Kater for helping us understand the complicated crosscurrents of history that has shaped the Anglican Church to what it is today.

I feel I have gained spiritually in both heart and mind through the perspectives and insights he has shared generously with the pilgrims.

Ron Lye

For me, York Minster encapsulates what we are, a work in progress. It has seen its glory days, fought off enemies, absorbed and brought about changes, adjusting to modern times, and still stands proudly as a vibrant working church. The Dean is a woman, the Archbishop formerly from Uganda, and the Minster is throbbing with life!

Mary Szeto

John Kater's phrase, "a thin place", will remain with me always. A thin place is one where God feels incredibly and inexplicably near to us. I experienced many "thin" moments: glimpsing Canterbury Cathedral through the trees in the lingering dusk, entering solid, majestic and unadorned Durham Cathedral, and attending Choral Evensong in King's College Chapel, Cambridge where the choir transported me to the thinnest place of all with their sublime singing.

Ruth Phillipson

To me, Lincoln Cathedral would be called a thin place; I may not physically go there again, but I am sure I will return to it in my memory and in my imagination. I know when I am faced with small tedious details and endless tasks at work, I close my eyes and will return to Lincoln.

Louisa So