

Chapter 1

NEW HORIZONS

Stranger than fiction, perhaps, but having at the time served in the Christian Ministry for close on forty-five years it was a self-confessed atheist – someone who does not believe in God – who opened up a new and exciting area of ministry and pilgrimage for me. It was one that would bring many new challenges, not least the fact that I was ill-equipped to consider it, for I was experiencing increasing difficulty in walking for more than a few hundred yards without considerable pain.

For some years I had enjoyed reading some of Ken Follett's novels. Then about six months before my retirement from full-time ministry, I came across his book 'The Pillars of the Earth'. It was the story of the building of a large imaginary Gothic Cathedral somewhere in South West England in about the 12th Century.

Ken Follett had shown an extraordinary interest in the architectural history and development of Gothic Cathedrals. Such was his interest that, as a result of all his research in this field, he started to write "The Pillars of the Earth". His publishers showed little interest in this new work, believing that the subject matter was too far removed from what his reading public expected of him. It was only some years later that a German Publisher agreed to publish this work and it was an instant success – so much so that sales of this book have now outstripped that of most, if not all, of his other novels.

I, too, probably because I was brought up in the heart of Africa for most of my life, have had a great fascination for these wonderful Gothic Cathedrals built around England and Western Europe nearly a thousand years ago. What extraordinary feats of engineering they are! If you are an admirer of these amazing architectural feats of engineering; if you are fascinated by what life must have been like in those far off days; if you are curious as to how they built these vast edifices without the technology, cranes and scaffolding we use today, then this book is for you because it is so informative.

But I also learnt something else – and that was about Christian pilgrim routes that were well used and to be found at that time throughout Britain and Europe. In the second half of the novel "The Pillars of the Earth", Jack - the step son of Master Builder Tom of the imaginary Cathedral - followed the Pilgrim Route from Paris right down to the South of France, over the Pyrenees, and right across Northern Spain from East to West to Santiago - 'Sant Iago' meaning 'St. James' in Spanish - the place where St. James the Apostle was buried.

Unknown to Jack when he left Kingsbridge, he had fathered a child 'out of wedlock'. Even more amazing, sometime later his 'girl friend' and baby set out to find him. First she travelled to Paris, then all the way to Santiago – only to discover that he had already left for Toledo. Again she follows, only to find that he had left Toledo and was now headed back to Paris. So nothing daunted, she heads off back to Paris. Some distance – even on horseback! And with a baby! Well, it was only a novel!

But the idea of pilgrimage fired something up inside me. Having led a very full life in ministry, the idea of having time to be away from everything that ties one down and keeps one so frenetically busy seemed too good to be true. Just imagining oneself far removed from one's place of work, with real prime time to reflect, and pray. And the icing on the cake, if you like, was the opportunity to meet with people from many parts of the world who have similar aims of discerning God's will and purpose for one's life. And to be able to do this over a period of perhaps a couple of weeks or more - on a journey - seemed to be just what was needed for real renewal and refreshing. In the real world it is hard to find such uninterrupted time to draw close to God.

As I continued to ask around about this pilgrim route, John and Susan Guy – parishioners of mine at Litchborough - told me that they had walked a part of one of the pilgrim routes, and were able to give me a route map of that section.

But clearly any thought of undertaking some form of pilgrimage would have to remain the pipe dream it had to be. Only the previous January, when we were visiting our daughters in Zimbabwe, we had gone out to one of their farms for a picnic. When we could no longer drive, we had to get out and walk. First we climbed a small rocky outcrop. My daughter (all 4ft. 11 inches) and a grandchild had to help me – and even then, by the time I struggled to the top - I was puffing and blowing to such a degree that I was finding it difficult to catch my breath at all. I was spared having to carry anything. By the time we reached this wonderful picnic spot, I really wondered if I would ever make it back to the cars again. I was so unfit I would clearly never cope with the mountains in Spain, let alone long distance walking and climbing – and carrying everything on my back as well!

But I continued to dream on. About a year later I paid one of my rather regular trips to my Chiropractor. From my late thirties I have spent a lot of time and money on Chiropractors and Physiotherapists – all because I have had such on-going problems with my back. On this particular visit, my appointment was running late. As I talked to the Receptionist I noticed they had a new 'line' for

sale. I was immediately interested because I had read an article about these MBT's a year or two back. MBT stands for 'Masai Barefoot Technology'.

They are specialist shoes. The person who dreamt them up had real problems walking. It appears that on a visit to Kenya he was struck by the way the Masai warriors walk. They are a very tall nation, and yet appear to have no back problems. Unlike most of us, who walk with our feet at the 'ten to two' position, their feet are kept absolutely straight. When they walk they land on their heels and then roll forward on to the ball of the feet. And because they generally walk along narrow paths, each footfall is directly in line with the previous one.

This man then designed his MBT shoes with rounded soles and a large spring in the heel. Because the sole is rounded, whenever one is standing still in one place one tends to roll back and forth – so exercising the foot. The spring, when walking, helps to lift one forward on to the front of the foot and gives a real spring to one's step.

Finally I was able to see my chiropractor. While he was treating me, I mentioned the MBT's and asked whether he thought they would make it any easier for me to walk. He believed it would be well worth the try. Basically there are three types of MBT's - Shoes, Sandals and Trainers. All are built on the same principles.

After my appointment, he suggested I try the sandals. After helping me to put them on and adjust them, he took me outside, and for the best part of half an hour he had me walking up and down until I was fully aware of keeping my feet absolutely straight, and each footfall directly in line with the last one. He warned me that I might only be able to wear them for an hour or two a day for several months.

I took to them like a 'duck to water'. The only negative aspect for me for the first few months was the considerable discomfort in my hips – because this way of walking slowly re-aligns the hips correctly with the spine. Five years after starting to use this type of footwear, I have had no further problems with my back, and I no longer attend a chiropractor for that problem! Praise the Lord for that wonderful bit of healing!

After several months of wearing my MBT sandals, I was so impressed with the results that I stopped wearing all the shoes I had previously used, and bought a pair of MBT shoes for what I laughingly label my 'Preaching' or 'Sunday best' shoes, and a pair of MBT trainers for whenever I went on my walks. For five years now I have worn nothing else.

I had continued to pursue my dream, in that I asked everyone I could for information about the pilgrim route in Spain, and whether it was still in use. Eventually I heard that a priest in our Diocese, Ian Holdsworth, had just completed a number of pilgrimages on his own. The Peterborough Diocese agreed that he should take on an extra portfolio of encouraging “pilgrimage”. He was now at the point of planning to take his first group on pilgrimage in May 2007 from Leon to Santiago – a distance of two hundred miles! Wow! That was an awesome distance.

By now I had been walking two to three days a week along parts of the Oxford Canal and was thrilled when I found I could manage to walk anything up to three or four miles on some outings.

So I telephoned Ian and asked if there was any chance that I might be included on that first pilgrimage? I was surprised when he said yes! He then invited me to come to a ‘Pilgrim Tea Party’ where we would learn what would be required of us.

At the tea party, we were given basic information that we needed to know. What to take, and what not to take in our bags. Graphic stories were given of people who took too much, and then abandoned stuff all along the route because the weight was too much! Part of the programme of preparing ourselves would require us to attend four preliminary walks; the first of five miles, then a month later a ten mile walk, and a fifteen mile walk a further month on, and finally a twenty mile walk with full gear a couple of weeks before we flew off to Spain.

Ian had done a lot of meticulous preparation for this first gathering. Amongst other people to give advice to us was a lady who gave us an overview of how to become physically fit – using the same basic training techniques used by people preparing for a marathon. Particular emphasis was given on how to build up the mileage walked from one week to the next.

Finally we asked how far we would be walking in Spain, and the length of time needed to cover the distance from Leon to Santiago. We were told that we would be expected to walk anything up to twenty miles a day carrying a bag that would weigh about 10 kg. At the half way mark we would have a ‘rest’ day, when we would only be required to do about ten miles! And we would be planning to complete the two hundred miles in twelve days, followed by two days in Santiago! In the course of that journey we would climb over two mountain ranges! I had scarcely survived climbing a relatively small rocky outcrop in Zimbabwe carrying literally nothing! That gave me a great deal to think about. Was I mad, so unfit was I, to even begin to consider undertaking such a project?

So training began in earnest. I used the Oxford canal, which is virtually on the level, to build up my stamina – intent on reducing the time it took me to cover a particular distance each time I went out. And then I chose a number of very hilly walks to build up my strength and breath control in climbing steep inclines. It was often all too painful, but I slowly began to note improvements in this area too. Two days before the first five-mile ‘test’, I walked five miles along the canals and believed I would be able to meet that test.

Saturday came. There had been very, very heavy rain the day before. The route we took was through fields thick with mud – we had to stop frequently to scrape inches of mud off our boots - plus covering fairly hilly terrain. I nearly didn’t make it back to Ian’s vicarage. I told Ian that it seemed we had done a great deal more than five miles – in fact it seemed at least double the distance I had done only two days before. But Ian assured me it was only five miles! I think he noticed how distressed I was physically by this one event!

A few days later he came to visit me in Brackley.

He pointed out that I was years older than anyone else in the group – about thirty years older than the average age of the group. He encouraged me not to be down-hearted, and suggested that when we got to Spain, I could be put on a bus that would get me well ahead of the group, and give me a shorter distance to travel over the same period. It was a kind thought. But the Knight family don’t like to be defeated by a challenge.

So the training regime now really got under way with every spare moment pounding the paths along the canals, or climbing all the hills I could find. As a result, I managed the 10, 15 and 20- mile walks when we came to do them – just! And all too soon the day of our departure for Spain arrived. The final hurdle was the thought of doing anything up to twenty miles a day for twelve consecutive days!

For our pilgrimage, each person was provided with a Pilgrim Guide designed by Ian himself. This was a wire-bound A5 book, which contained all manner of useful information. Every day had two pages devoted to providing a Scripture reading and pointers for prayer. The following two pages would provide the detailed route map for the day, with the facing page detailing all the facilities and important features for the day’s walk. And so on for the whole twelve-day walk. There were also items such as a brief service to be used for Communion (blessing of the bread and wine) at the beginning of the evening meal together.

It was a really wonderful and thoughtful guide that must have taken an immense amount of time and thought to devise and put together. Ian arranged the flights, and taxi’s to and from airports. Everything meticulously planned. He gave us

details of a wide variety of accommodation that we might wish to use for our two-night stay in Santiago and how to go about booking ourselves in.

All that was required of us was to follow like sheep - grateful for the shepherd's leading who had done it all before.