



Pilgrim Paths

**A 'virtual' pilgrimage from St Mary's, Chipping Norton
to the site of Cold Norton Priory**

We are going to make a 'virtual' pilgrimage together. A pilgrimage is a spiritual journey to a sacred place. To help focus our thoughts, we shall be using Psalms 84, 85 & 86 to inspire short reflections and prayers, often touching on aspects of the current Coronavirus emergency.

This pilgrimage begins and ends at the parish church of St Mary the Virgin, one of the great 'wool churches' of the Cotswolds. We can't go inside at the present time because all churches are closed to the public, but we can enjoy this glorious building from the outside, looking at its best in the sunshine of a blustery Spring afternoon, with the churchyard full of cheerful, waving daffodils.

Take some moments to recollect God's presence as you read the first verses from this psalm:

Psalm 84.

¹ *How lovely is your dwelling-place,
LORD Almighty!*

² *My soul yearns, even faints,
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.*

³ *Even the sparrow has found a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may have her young –
a place near your altar,
LORD Almighty, my King and my God.*

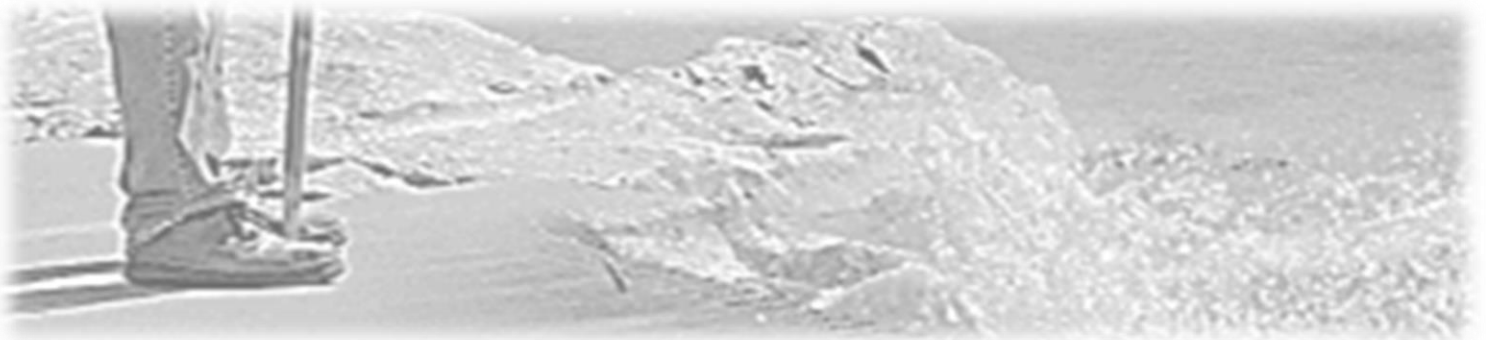


This church building is a place we love and yet, for good reasons, we are unable to meet together and use it in the way we are accustomed to. We feel bereft, but we all have that loss in common. Are there, perhaps, other areas of your own life that seem 'out of kilter' or not as you would have them be?

Like the Psalmist, we acknowledge our 'displacement'...
.... where we are not in the place we should be.
.... where we are not where we yearn to be.
.... we are like birds searching for their nesting places.

- ⁴ Blessed are those who dwell in your house; they are ever praising you.*
- ⁵ Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.*
- ⁶ As they pass through the Valley of Baka, they make it a place of springs; the autumn rains also cover it with pools.*
- ⁷ They go from strength to strength, till each appears before God in Zion.*

We are blessed.
Our hearts are set on pilgrimage.
Our God is with us!
As we start our 'walk', we recollect Jesus' words;
"Surely I am with you always."



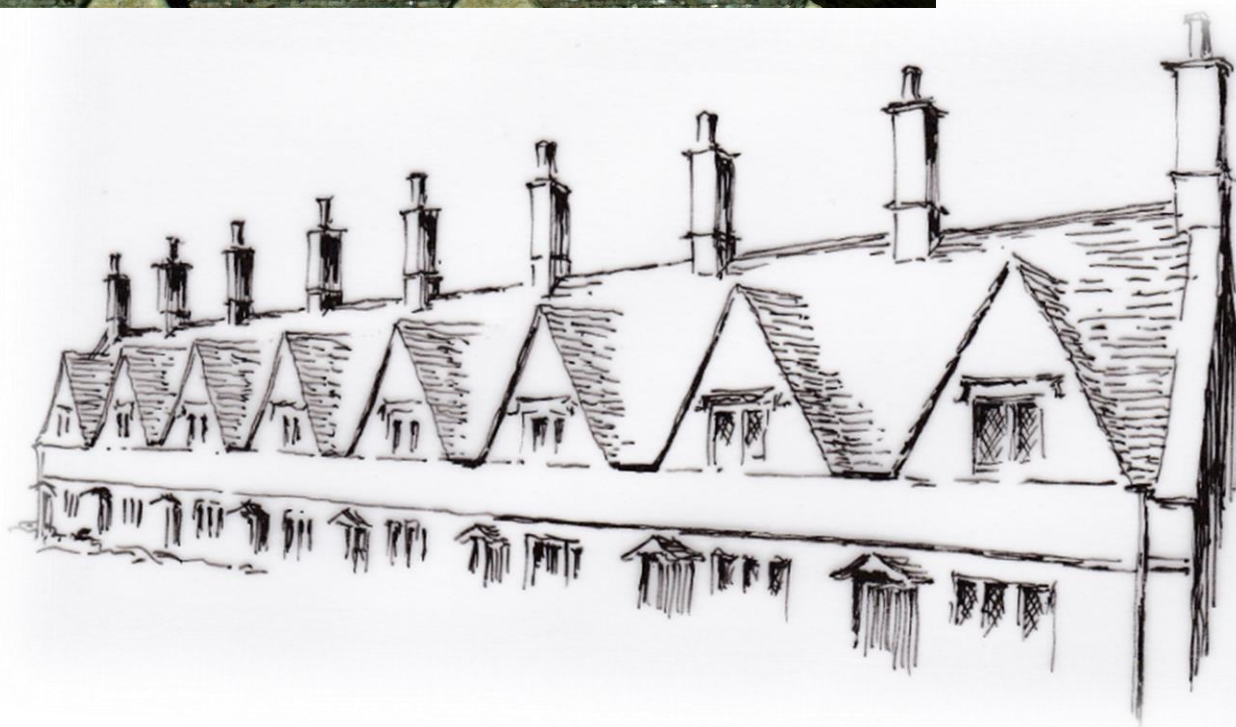
The "Valley of Baka" is a name for any difficult and painful place in life, where everything seems hopeless and you feel helpless.

But even though we go through the valley we don't expect to remain there.

The solution for Abraham and Isaac was to dig a well in the desert while, for Samuel and Elijah, it was to pray down the rain.

It's wonderful to receive a blessing, but it's even greater to be a blessing and transform a desert into a garden. True pilgrims "go from strength to strength" and trust God to enable them to walk a step at a time and work a day at a time. They are people of prayer who keep in communion with the Lord, no matter what their circumstances may be. "Blessed are those whose strength is in you." (v.5)

Proceeding up Church Street toward the town centre, we pass on our left the picturesque eight-gabled (but nine-chimneyed!) row of almshouses, presented to the town in 1640 by Henry Cornish to house eight poor widows “of honest and godly life and conversation”. The memory of this great benefactor is preserved in the name of the Henry Cornish Care Home on London Road, but his charge to “Remember the Poor” has remained over the gateway to his almshouses for the last 380 years and is certainly no less relevant at this time of unexpected financial hardship for so many in and around the town.



The Almshouses remind us of the protection and shelter that God offers us on our life pilgrimage.

The Psalmist recognizes that God provides our shield. For Christians, it is Jesus, who is God's anointed one. He shelters us as we look for help and in order to be a blessing to others.

Blessed to be a blessing

Blessed to live your love

*Blessed to share with others every
blessing from above*

Blessed to walk in mercy

Blessed to light the way

Oh, blessed to be a blessing every day

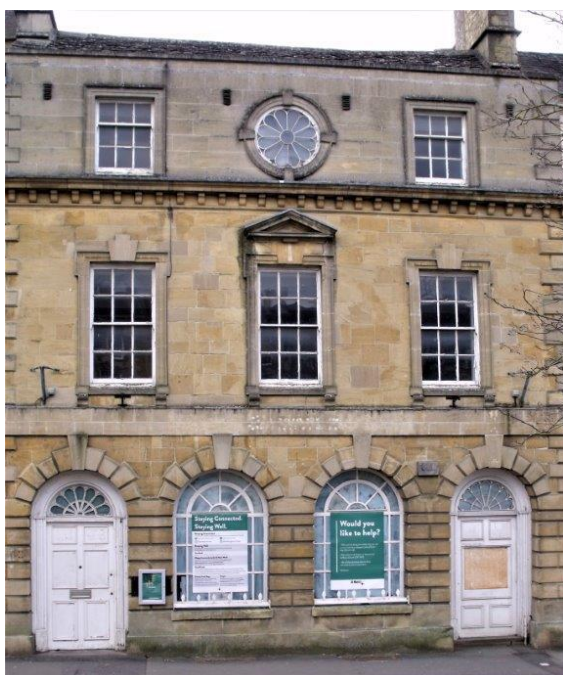
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*⁸ Hear my prayer, LORD God
Almighty;*

listen to me, God of Jacob.

*⁹ Look on our shield, O God;
look with favour on your
anointed one.*

We turn right at the top of Church Street and walk along Market Street to the Market Place. There the splendid prospect of 'Topside' unfolds: this row of grand 18th-century merchants' houses, some of which are in our local version of the Baroque style. But on the lower side of the marketplace is our own



former NatWest bank building, "The Branch". It has suddenly become a critically important storage depot and location for the distribution of food parcels, and the focus of our outreach to those currently finding themselves in difficulties.

PRAYER:

Father, thank you for the resources, abilities and opportunities you have given us. Help us to live in humility, do our best and serve our community, especially at this time of need. May all we do reflect your Father-love to those whom we seek to serve. Amen

As we walk through the town, past the now-silent shops and businesses, we can recollect with the psalmist that he was happy to be just a doorkeeper in God's presence, rather than to be something more important but without integrity.

How far do you think it is true to say "it isn't what you do but how you do it that matters"?

The first part of verse 10 is quite a statement! Did the Psalmist really mean that he would exchange one day of praise and worship in God's presence for a thousand others?

Was he exaggerating for effect?

Maybe, but don't shrug off his point: his pleasure in enjoying God in the company of God's people was greater than anything that the world has to offer. If we can't join him in these feelings, perhaps we could ponder why.

*¹⁰ Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere;
I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked.*



At the corner of New Street, we cross over to the fine 1842 Neo-Classical town hall, but continue straight on past The Fox into West Street and then left, around The Kings Arms, into Burford Road. We go past the roundabout and fork right, up the hill. The semi-detached houses on our right were formerly known as Brasenose Villas, and are a reminder that nearby Cold Norton Priory and its estates, having been acquired by the Bishop of Lincoln, were presented by him in 1513 to his newly-founded Brasenose College in Oxford.



On reaching the coach park in front of Chipping Norton School, we bear left on the path beside the school's dry-stone wall that goes straight on toward Glyme Lane. The school's origins on this site date from the construction of a grammar school for around 40 pupils in 1928, though it is now a large, modern academy with a highly successful sixth form. However, the town's original grammar school was linked to the foundation of the Holy Trinity Guild in 1450 by prosperous wool merchants.



All schools are 'closed' for the foreseeable future but, like the Church, they are not just buildings and remain in operation for the benefit of their pupils. Staff here are continuing to set and mark five lessons a day online, which the students complete at home. This is challenging for teachers, children and parents, and many will be struggling to come to terms with this unfamiliar situation.

PRAYER:

Loving Father, watch over all the school-children of the town and surrounding villages at this time. Keep them safe and well and help them to adjust to new circumstances and rise to the challenges facing them over the coming weeks and months. Bless the teachers as they strive to do their best for their pupils at the same time as coping with their own home situations. Amen

*11 For the LORD God is a sun
and shield;
the LORD bestows favour
and honour;
no good thing does he
withhold from those whose
way of life is blameless.*

*12 LORD Almighty, blessed is
the one who trusts in you.*

The metaphor of the sun is used here in the context of travellers.

There were no lighted streets or cars with headlights.

When you were travelling in the wilderness and it got dark, you had to stop. It got cold when the sun went down. Wolves howled in the darkness. So the travellers huddled together, waiting for the dawn. The rising sun meant that you could see your way again.



We follow the straight track of Glyme Lane past the allotments and into open countryside, passing through an area of relatively new woodland. Here are the beginnings of new leaf growth, particularly the brilliant green ‘posies’ of hawthorn leaves, known locally as “bread-and-cheese”. They are a reminder of killing time at the bus-stop after school, and it is still tempting to pick and eat a few!

After three-quarters of a mile we reach Glyme Farm, a handsome group of stone buildings, behind which is a pond reckoned to be the source of the River Glyme. Entering the meadow on our right through the kissing gate, we continue diagonally across it through two further gates until we reach the footbridge over the stream. The Glyme, though never large, and destined to be absorbed less than a dozen miles away in the waters of the Evenlode, yet has the honour of filling Capability Brown’s lake in front of Blenheim Palace and flowing under Vanbrugh’s noble bridge.



In this next Psalm we can join with the Psalmist as he remembers God's mercy through past generations, although he is clearly living in a time of darkness. He says it feels as if God is punishing his people.

How does this resonate with us?

These first verses are all about God's grace. He restores, forgives, covers, sets aside and turns from his fierce [the word suggests 'burning'] anger.

Verses 4 – 7 are a prayer for revival and restoration.

As we watch the tumbling stream, we may choose to think of the power of water to quench fire, to revive and bring new life.

Ezekiel's vision of water flowing from God's presence (ch.47) may well have been known by the Psalmist.

Fire and water; powerful pictures of God's nature!

We may use the words of these verses for our own prayers.

Psalm 85

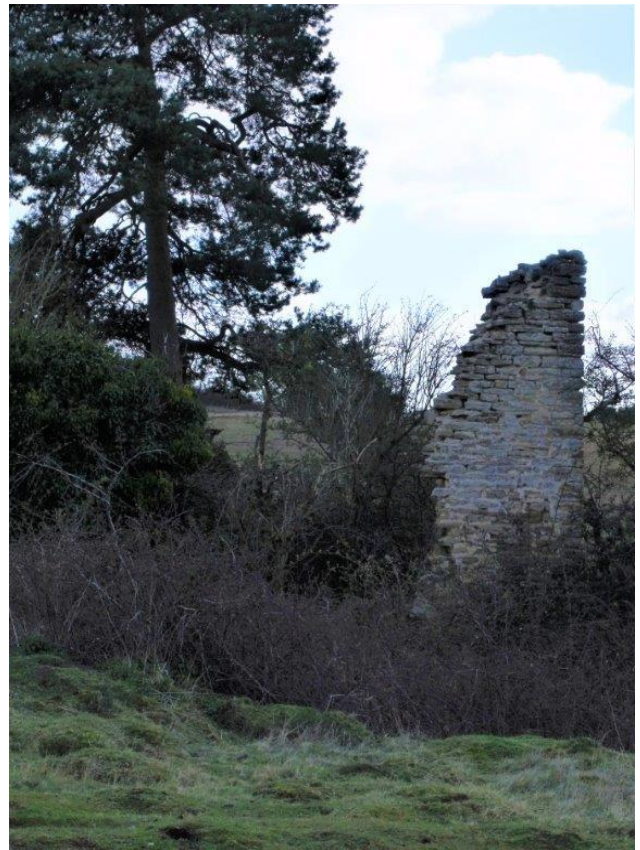
- ¹ You, LORD, showed favour to your land; you restored the fortunes of Jacob.*
- ² You forgave the iniquity of your people and covered all their sins.*
- ³ You set aside all your wrath and turned from your fierce anger.*
- ⁴ Restore us again, God our Saviour, and put away your displeasure towards us.*
- ⁵ Will you be angry with us for ever? Will you prolong your anger through all generations?*
- ⁶ Will you not revive us again, that your people may rejoice in you?*
- ⁷ Show us your unfailing love, LORD, and grant us your salvation.*

Climbing the further side of the little valley, we proceed through three more kissing gates as we walk through two more areas of maturing woodland. As we emerge from the final wood, we stop and enjoy the view towards the ruin.

Make this spot your own look-out post..... Listen!

“Look out to see what He will say.” (Habbakuk 2.1)

Be still.... Hear... Be silent ...
Receive....



*⁸ I will listen to what God
the LORD says;
he promises peace to his
people, his faithful
servants –
but let them not turn to
folly.*

We continue across pasture to a gate near the Glyme’s exit from the field. Here we turn left into a pretty green lane that forms part of one of the ancient salt ways that ran towards London from the salt mines near Droitwich. We climb up this lane for a little over a quarter of a mile, enjoying the sight of clumps of violets bringing welcome Spring colour to the ground cover.

At the top of the lane, we pause at a gate leading into a large field grazed by horses, admiring the handsome stone farmhouse of New Chalford Farm built by our good friend Glyn Pearman, former St Mary's churchwarden.



⁹ Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.

¹⁰ Love and faithfulness meet together; righteousness and peace kiss each other.

¹¹ Faithfulness springs forth from the earth, and righteousness looks down from heaven.

¹² The Lord will indeed give what is good, and our land will yield its harvest.

¹³ Righteousness goes before him and prepares the way for his steps.

“If my people who are called by my Name, humble themselves and pray and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land.”

2Chronicles 7.14

Glyn wrote the prayer below which we pray with him.

Dear Lord. Please recognize my need to farm as you wish.
Help me to judge what I may take from this land,
that it will be no more or less than you think right.
Thank you for the seasons, for darkness and light.
Thank you for the wildlife that shares everything with me.
Accept my love and appreciation as I serve and worship you. Amen

We cross the paddock, heading for the field gate to the right of the farmhouse. Once through the gravelled yard, we follow the long, straight drive to its exit on the London Road. Across the road, the track continues as another green lane – “Swing-swang” to locals – but we take the footpath signed to the right, crossing the huge arable field to a hedge gap on the Oxford-Stratford road. At the moment, the surface of this field is like a vast nut-brown carpet with little apparent sign of the path. However, closer inspection shows that the tractor driver has taken a final run on the correct line. How often we only need to stop and look (or listen) to learn the right way to go!



On reaching the main road, we turn right on the roadside path, looking for a stile on the opposite side of the road, leading into the garden of the first house.

Keeping close to the wall on our left, and crossing another stile as we go from the orchard and through the vegetable garden, we are led from a stone-walled track into an arable field.



As we proceed into the horse-grazed field beyond, the ground falls away towards a peaceful valley that suddenly seems remote from the town. Where the stone wall that we have been following comes to an end, the path

forks to left and right. We bear left, down to a stile near the opposite corner of the field, drawn by the sizzling yellow of the gorse in the far hedge.



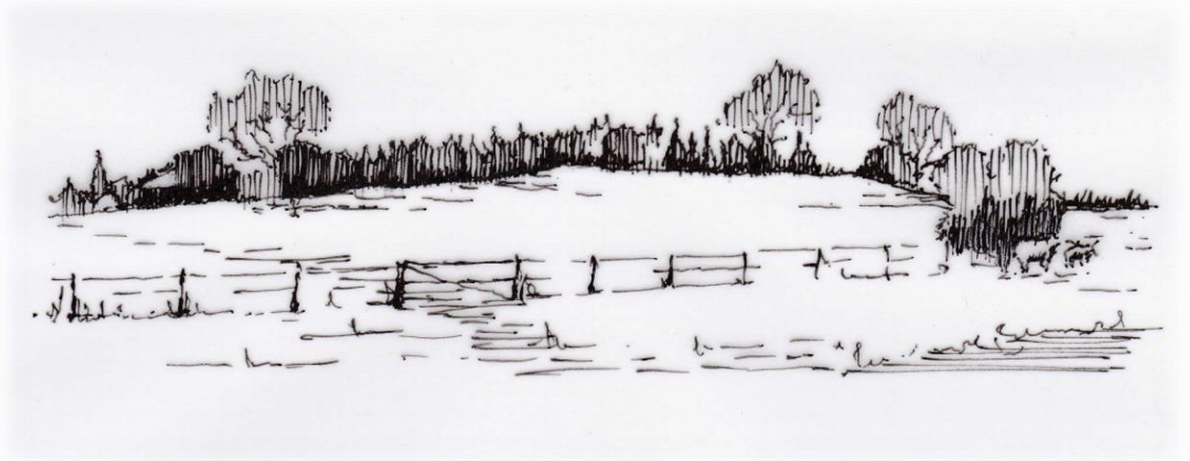
We climb over the stile and drop steeply down to the valley bottom, passing blackthorns, resplendent with sparkling white blossom contrasting with their naked branches. We can now hear the noisy stream – another branch of the River Glyme.



At the bottom we turn left on a track leading through a narrow tree belt and passing between the banks of what appears to be a medieval, monastic dam crossing the valley. The stream cuts through in a much deeper channel.



We continue along the valley bottom, with the stream now on our left, to another field gate from which we can see Priory Farm on top of the rising ground ahead.



This spur of land was the site of Cold Norton Priory, founded and endowed in about 1150 as a house of Augustinian canons dedicated to St John the Evangelist by Avelina, “Lady of Norton”. Although some ruins appear in an engraving of 1729 by Buck, nothing remained by the time Beesley, the Banbury historian, wrote a letter on the subject to *The Gentleman’s Magazine* in 1845.



Unlike monks, who live a cloistered, contemplative life, canons were committed to engage in a ministry of public worship and outreach. We pause for a moment to think about those known to us who serve in this way and who are under so much pressure at the present time.

PRAYER:

Gracious Father, uphold and strengthen our Staff Team and all in ministry in the Deanery and beyond. Give them wisdom, vision and energy to steer in uncharted waters, and let them know your great love and peace in everything they do. Amen

We continue up the rise to an ancient walled spring, close to the priory site.



We take a moment as we look back down the way we have come and, following the example of the psalmist, think about ourselves. What needs do we want to lay before God?

"We cannot by searching find out God, but we can by trusting."

G. Brooks

As we continue our 'walk', we can take the opportunity to apply these first verses from Psalm 86 to ourselves and our needs.

These words are from Philippians 4:6 in the New Living Translation;

'Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus'.

Psalm 86

- 1 Hear me Lord, and answer me,
for I am poor and needy.*
- 2 Guard my life, for I am faithful to
you; save your servant who
trusts in you.*
- 3 You are my God; have mercy on
me, Lord, for I call to you all
day long.*
- 4 Bring joy to your servant, Lord,
for I put my trust in you*
- 5 You, Lord, are forgiving and
good, abounding in love to all
who call to you.*
- 6 Hear my prayer, Lord;
listen to my cry for mercy.*
- 7 When I am in distress, I call to
you, because you answer me.*

We head for a field gate to the left of the buildings, pausing to look at the lovely pond before we turn right and climb up the centre of the next field, following the low point. We are aiming for a dry-stone wall at the top with a pedestrian gate near the left end. On the way we encounter a flock of geese, but it could easily have been the peacocks instead! Before leaving the field, a scatter of fine pinecones reminds us that new life can spring out of what appears dry and dead.



We turn left onto Priory Road, the lane from Chapel House to Heythrop. The foundation of Cold Norton Priory included, in addition to the main house, a 'hospital' dedicated to St Giles that probably offered hospitality to pilgrims and wayfarers. All the books assume this was on the main site, but there is a good case for it to be identified with a building that once stood by the main road and was known in later centuries as Chapel-on-the-Heath. Another landmark, once known as St Giles's Well and last shown on a map in 1610, is now thought to have been on the site of a pond lying in trees behind the buildings of Harris Piece Stud, which you pass on your left before the sharp bend at the end of the lane. It lies not far from the site of Chapel-on-the-Heath.



The thought of hospitals reminds us of the extreme pressures currently faced by the National Health Service and all involved with caring for the sick and elderly in our communities.

PRAYER:

Merciful Father, we thank you so much for the doctors, nurses, carers and medical staff who are giving their utmost and working under such stressful conditions, fearful for what is yet to come. We implore you to have compassion on them and to grant them health, strength and peace of mind, now and in the weeks and months to follow. Amen



On crossing the main road and turning right, towards Stratford, we see handsome stone buildings on both sides which were once part of the large and prestigious coaching inn that superseded Chapel-on-the-Heath in the eighteenth century. The principal section, on the corner of Priory Road, is now known as Chapel House. In a very real way, the Shell filling station and Waitrose shop at Chapel House roundabout, which we now pass, continues the nearly 900-year-old tradition of serving travellers at this location.

We cross the Chipping Norton-Banbury road to a pedestrian gate in the wall of Over Norton Park estate and continue along this path, which eventually provides perhaps the finest view of the walk, with the village Over Norton lit by late-afternoon rays of sunshine. It is worth pausing here for a moment's reflection.



PRAYER:

Generous Father, we thank you for the beauty and bounty of creation. Help us to steward it well, and help us to prosper so that we may be exceptionally generous and bless others. Amen

You may wish to use this part of the 'virtual' pilgrimage to pray for God to bless the people you love and those whom you long to come to know Jesus.

*⁸ Among the gods there is none like you, Lord;
no deeds can compare with yours.*

*⁹ All the nations you have made
will come and worship before you, Lord;
they will bring glory to your name.*

*¹⁰ For you are great and do marvellous deeds;
you alone are God.*

The track becomes enclosed in trees and drops increasingly sharply towards the stream. From the gate at the bottom of the main track, we enter the park and climb up the field, heading for a gate slightly to the left. On our right we glimpse the mansion built for the Dawkins family in 1875, though the family have been lords of the manor of Over Norton since 1727 and remain so today. The present head of the family is Richard Dawkins, the eminent evolutionary biologist. From the gate we look back at the valley.



- 11 Teach me your way, Lord,
that I may rely on your
faithfulness;
give me an undivided heart,
that I may fear your name.*
- 12 I will praise you, Lord my God,
with all my heart;
I will glorify your name for
ever.*
- 13 For great is your love towards
me;
you have delivered me from
the depths, from the realm of
the dead.*
- 14 Arrogant foes are attacking
me, O God;
ruthless people are trying to
kill me – they have no regard
for you.*
- 15 But you, Lord, are a
compassionate and gracious
God, slow to anger,
abounding in love and
faithfulness.*

We encounter many people with very different attitudes and opinions from ours. How do we engage with them while at the same time remaining true to our faith?

The psalmist here reflects on this. He knows only too well how easy it is to be inconsistent; to make compromises in our daily living that are not honest. Or to respond with apathy, indecision and weariness.

The antidote is, having acknowledged our weakness, to desire a teachable will. This is what the psalmist is asking of God.

Jesus said, 'the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.' John 14.26

God knows us so well! He is our provision.

Rely on his faithfulness as you pray through these words of the psalm once again.

We take the short track to Over Norton village green. St James's Chapel lies along the village street to the right, but it too is closed at present. The 'chapel' – first a cottage, then a village school – lies on the outside of the sharp bend at the end of the village. Although it has long served as a chapel-of-ease to St Mary's, Chipping Norton, the building belongs to the Over Norton Park estate and is gratefully held at an annual peppercorn rent of 6d (though it is many years since this has been collected by the Dawkins family)! Instead, continuing from the village green with its splendidly restored memorial fountain, we turn left and follow the main street towards Chipping Norton. Before rounding another sharp bend at the opposite end of the village, we see a further display of daffodils, this time under a flowering magnolia tree.



The road drops steeply towards the bridge but, just before it, we cross from the footpath to a gate. This gives access to a path known as The Cleeves which once formed the ancient route from Chipping Norton to Over Norton. Passing through a grass field and over the stream, the path continues in woodland on the side of the valley.



At the far end we see some of the extensive earthworks of Chipping Norton's former castle. It probably had its origins as a motte-and-bailey castle erected

by Avelina's father Ernulf, from Hesdin in Picardy, who was given vast estates by William 1. However, Avelina's benevolence must have been learned from her mother, Emmeline, who in 1081 gave the patronage of the church to the Abbey of Gloucester. More than 900 years later the Dean and Chapter of Gloucester Cathedral remain the patrons of St Mary's Church. We continue past the brick cottage and re-enter St. Mary's churchyard through the black iron posts. There we find a spot to read to the end of Psalm 86 and reflect on our journey.



*16 Turn to me and have mercy
on me; show your strength
on behalf of your servant.*

*17 Give me a sign of your
goodness, that my enemies
may see it and be put to
shame, for you, Lord, have
helped me and comforted me.*

This is a prayer founded in
confidence in God.

The Psalmist goes on asking, like
the friend at midnight in Jesus'
parable (Lk.11.5)

God always answers in his will, in
his way and in his time.

It is in God's nature to help
It is in God's plan in salvation
It is in God's power.



The Psalmist wants his life to be a witness of God's goodness to him. It is his way of praying, "Hallowed be your Name"

When our prayer is in God's will and bringing glory to God we can be sure of his answer.

The parable of the friend at midnight is used by Jesus to illustrate the power of prayer, and Luke places it after Jesus teaches the Lord's Prayer.

Perhaps a sign of God's goodness, today, is the generosity of His people towards those presently in difficulty. The church building may be closed but the Church is fully open – believing more than ever in the power of prayer and the need for compassion leading to effective action. The freezer currently in the church porch to receive donations of frozen meals is a potent symbol of this commitment.



PRAYER:

God of all goodness, we lift to you all who are having to cope with the loss of jobs or income, or the potential collapse of businesses. We ask for your reassuring presence for the isolated and your strength and peace for those who are fearful. Heal the sick and comfort those who have lost loved ones. In Jesus' powerful name. Amen

As we finish our pilgrimage, we re-commit our lives in the words of The Lord's Prayer.

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin
against us.
Lead us not into temptation
but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power,
and the glory are yours
now and for ever.
Amen



Postscript:

This 'virtual' pilgrimage is based, with permission, on one of the thirty pilgrim path booklets currently being produced for Chipping Norton Deanery. It was designed as an online resource for the Chipping Norton benefice to be enjoyed remotely by those confined to their homes, but it could equally well be used as a guide on the ground, accessed through a hand-held device, for those able to walk the six-mile route. The original document can be found at <https://pilgrimpaths.info/> along with booklets for nine other routes. Other publications will be added to the website very soon. The thirty circular routes form a linked chain, visiting every church in the deanery. In more normal times members of the Pilgrim Path team lead pilgrimages on these walks twice a month throughout the Summer period. These are advertised in the churches and on the website.

Lent 2020