



Steve Brady

Towards Jerusalem

A pilgrim's regress and progress
to God's Holy City

BRF Lent Book

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to God's Holy City



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Dedicated to the memory of my parents, 'Our Jim' (1918–2003), an ex-PoW and Liverpool bus driver, and 'Big Ede' (1923–2017), a woman of immense vitality and industry, who sadly departed this life as this book was nearing completion. Two remarkable people, married for over 50 years, who were generous to a fault, and enriched many – especially their family – by their unconditional love.

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Introduction

I love the countryside. But by birth and temperament I'm a city dweller. This last century particularly has witnessed the astonishing growth of cities, in particular huge metropolises of millions of people, squeezed into ghettos, housing estates and high-rise apartments. One city, however, has a unique profile. From ancient times, Jerusalem, or Zion, has not only been a location on a map of the Middle East, but a well-worn metaphor for human aspiration and desire, of conflict and pain. Who is unaware that the present city of Jerusalem is the very centre of controversy for Jew and Arab, Israeli and Palestinian? Christian hymns may still fulminate about 'Jerusalem the golden' and 'Glorious things of thee are spoken, Zion city of our God', but the fact is that Jerusalem is to many people a synonym for pain, division and injustice – a veritable political and religious hot potato.

Whatever huge differences and difficulties exist between Jews, Christians and Muslims, all three share a common belief that Jerusalem, literally and metaphorically, is anything but a footnote on the page of world events; it is most definitely part of the main text of human history and destiny. Indeed, Jerusalem has a long and chequered history, both instructive and fascinating. But that cannot detain us here. For the intention of these meditations is not to address all the attendant questions that arise when Jerusalem is mentioned, but far more modestly to ask what has Jerusalem, and the metaphors and similes it suggests, alongside other cities we'll

mention these next few weeks, to do with the life of faith and the Lenten road to Easter.

Towards Jerusalem is the title of a book of devotional poems by Amy Carmichael, which I first encountered over 40 years ago.¹ Her insights into the spiritual life are so often profound and challenging, and have called me to *progress* when I was thinking of *regress*, hence the subtitle of this book, *A pilgrim's regress and progress to God's Holy City*. Paul McCartney, of the Beatles, sang about 'the long and winding road'. The journey on the road that leads to the city of God, as I hope we will discover as we walk with the Master these weeks, may also be experienced as a journey to freedom. How? Because on the pilgrim's way, we may be joined by the one who 'resolutely set out for Jerusalem' to redeem us (Luke 9:51). Jesus now invites us to walk with him, through cross and resurrection, to eternal life in the city of God. May we sense afresh that 'Jesus himself came up and walked along' with us (Luke 24:15).

Ash Wednesday

Temptations

Then Jesus was led by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. After fasting forty days and forty nights, he was hungry. The tempter came to him and said, 'If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.'

Jesus answered, 'It is written: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God."'

Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. 'If you are the Son of God,' he said, 'throw yourself down. For it is written:

"He will command his angels concerning you,
and they will lift you up in their hands,
so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'"

Jesus answered him, 'It is also written: "Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'"

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour. 'All this I will give you,' he said, 'if you will bow down and worship me.'

Jesus said to him, 'Away from me, Satan! For it is written: "Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'"

Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

MATTHEW 4:1-11

Traditionally, 1 March is a great day for the Welsh, being St David's Day, the day of their patron saint. In 2017, it coincided with Ash

Wednesday, which marks the beginning of Lent and is often overlooked by the media. However, the Scottish MP Carol Monaghan caused a media stir that day at a House of Commons select committee. A practising Catholic, she appeared with a cross etched in ash upon her forehead, a traditional symbol for Ash Wednesday. Although many people didn't know what it meant, one member of the committee asked her about it, as the session was going to be broadcast. 'I think they just thought I didn't want to be embarrassed – but I was not going to rub it off,' she said. It raises the interesting debate of visible religious symbols and devotional practices, whether Christian or other, in the public square, which won't detain us here. Not all Christians observe either Ash Wednesday or Lent. For example, the Eastern Orthodox Church observes Lent, but marks its beginning with Clean Monday. So why Ash Wednesday? Why not start Lent on, for example, a Thursday? The reason is that it is exactly forty days before Easter Sunday, not counting the intervening Sundays. Hence it is always a Wednesday.

More importantly, what is the significance and purpose of Lent? During Lent, the Anglican Church's calendar directs its readers to Christ's temptations, his 40 days of fasting and temptation in the desert. At one level, reading this account, we might conclude that the big lesson is that temptations and trials can come in a variety of ways, but Jesus overcame them and so may we, especially if we fast and pray. There is certainly some truth in that application. Indeed, one of my friends, facing massive problems with his daughter's drug abuse, embarked on a 40-day fast for her salvation and recovery. She is now happily married and walking with God.

But there's more in this narrative, of course. It tells us something about what has been called 'the fair face of evil'. For example, the devil's suggestion of a 'stones into bread' trick would certainly make Jesus a hit with the crowd, as it did in his subsequent ministry when, having fed the 5,000, they sought to make him king, although he deliberately withdrew from them (John 6:15). But if Jesus was diverted into delivering bread for this world, how could he deliver

‘the Bread of Life’ for the next? The second temptation calls for another display of power, and to become perhaps a celebrated ancient illusionist, equivalent to the likes of Harry Houdini or the more contemporary David Blaine or Dynamo. It’s always possible to draw a crowd by tricks, but keeping them for the more serious business of heaven is altogether different. The third temptation is the ultimate celebrity prize; it is what every strongman down the ages has craved – world domination! And how appealing to take the broad road to success and avoid the narrow road of pain, rejection, suffering and death on a cross. It is possible to ‘gain the whole world’ by illegitimate means and in the process forfeit one’s own soul (Mark 8:36). By the way, by what right did the devil offer ‘all the kingdoms of the world’ (v. 8), when ‘The earth is the Lord’s... the world, and all who live in it’ (Psalm 24:1)?

Like Ash Wednesday, Lent is not mentioned in the Bible, so scripture neither forbids nor enjoins its practice. Accordingly, Christians can prayerfully decide on how or whether to use this 40-day period. For example, Prime Minister Theresa May, a vicar’s daughter and practising Christian, confessed that she had given up crisps for Lent in 2017. Others, like MP Carol Monaghan, may decide to have the sign of a cross on their forehead. More importantly, since Lent offers a specific period for self-examination, self-denial and the forsaking of our sinful habits, it is also a reminder that repenting of our sins and identifying with Christ is not only for 40-odd days a year. The Olympic marathon runner and gold medallist at the 1969 European Championships and 1970 Commonwealth Games, Ron Hill, has run at least one mile every day. Between 20 December 1964 and the end of January 2017, when he had to miss a day, he had clocked up, by my estimate, some 19,032 consecutive days of running at least a mile. So, we begin and continue this Lent our journey *Towards Jerusalem*. My prayer is that whatever these next 40-plus days may hold, there will be more *progress* than *regress* that will keep us going every day, long after Lent, as Easter people, denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following the crucified one.

BRF Lent Book

God has an agenda for cities. Steve Brady is convinced of it. The Bible is full of significant cities and the biblical story is full of imagery of cities – culminating in the Holy City, birthed in and through his people. *Towards Jerusalem* is a unique Lent book, a call to live for a vision bigger than ourselves, marching to a different drumbeat towards 'Zion', God's new Jerusalem, and all that this means in transformative terms for today's Christian believer.

Steve Brady was born in Liverpool. He has been in full-time Christian ministry for over 40 years, is Principal of Moorlands College, holds a PhD in theology, and serves as a trustee of the Keswick Convention. He has authored several books, including BRF's Advent title *The Incredible Journey: Christmas from Genesis to Jesus*. He is married to Brenda, and they have two children and four grandchildren.

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