TRAVELLERS OF THE HEART

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15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
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Tel: +44 (0)1865 319700
Email: enquiries@brf.org.uk
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TRAVELLERS OF THE HEART

MICHAEL MITTON

EXPLORING NEW PATHWAYS ON OUR SPIRITUAL JOURNEY

To Julia
my beloved and faithful travelling companion

Contents

Chapter 1

The call to travel

Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

GENESIS 12:1–3

There is a great deal of travelling in the early chapters of Genesis. Adam and Eve were forced to travel from their settled and blessed land of paradise; Cain became a fugitive and a wanderer because of his murder of Abel; Noah travelled in his great boat to Mount Ararat, not because he planned a visit there but because, if he wanted to stay alive, he had no choice but to board that boat and go wherever the floodwaters took it; and the people of Babel travelled because they had foolishly attempted to become like God and, as a result, were scattered over the face of the earth.

In these early chapters of Genesis there is a great restlessness due to human sinfulness and folly, and by the time you reach chapter 12 you are pretty exhausted by it all. Then we come to Abram, a man who was by all accounts a good deal better and holier than the motley crowd of humans that we encountered in the earlier chapters. But if we think this means that at last someone is going to

settle down, we will be wrong. For Abraham (as he becomes) is the first truly great intentional traveller, and he does not travel because he is being exiled or punished, or to escape flood waters or Babel towers. He moves because of a calling, and it is a calling from the Most High.

Abraham, we are told a few millennia later by another great traveller, Paul, was a man of beautiful, simple, rugged and holy faith (Romans 4) and his travelling came from his desire simply to do what God asked of him. If we scan the pages of both Old and New Testaments, we see stories of many others who travelled in their desire to do what God had told them—Moses, Joshua, Ezra and Jonah, to name but a few. When we arrive at the New Testament and are introduced to Jesus, it is not surprising to find that he too is a traveller. Not only does he take the most momentous journey from heaven to earth, but, once on earth and into the stride of his earthly ministry, he journeys through Galilee and Judah, and even over the borders from time to time, to declare and demonstrate the wonderful good news of the kingdom of God. After the Gospels, we have the book of Acts, and there we find more people on journeys, such as Philip travelling to the desert (Acts 8:26–40) and, of course, the restless Paul, who made three great missionary journeys and ended his life in Rome, having travelled thousands of miles to share the gospel of Christ.

It may not altogether surprise us to hear about all of this travelling in the Bible, because so many great adventure stories involve travel. Take, for example, one of the epic stories of our time, Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, which is a travelling story from beginning to end, in which Frodo and his companions make the hazardous journey from the Shire to Mount Doom and back again. And if that is not enough, the story finishes with Frodo and a few others making a further, much more mysterious journey to the Grey Havens, introducing another dimension of travel. Such stories instinctively move us because the desire to explore, travel and discover is deep in the human spirit.

There is so much that can cause us to want to travel—curiosity, a need to escape, a longing for adventure, unspecific restlessness, boredom or, as in the case of Abraham, a sense of calling from God. Whatever the driver, many of us find ourselves travellers in this world. Some are literal travellers: they move around a lot geographically, always having another journey up their sleeves and on the look-out for new parts of the planet to explore. Others are less literal travellers—what we might call 'travellers of the heart'. They may experience all the same kinds of motivations that cause the physical travellers to get up and go to places, but the type of journeying is different.

For many people, of course, the two types of travelling go hand in hand, and this was true of Abraham. Every inch of his journey from Ur of the Chaldees to the promised land was matched by a parallel journey of discovering God. The God who spoke to him at the start of his journey appeared to be fairly straightforward, if pretty demanding, but, as Abraham journeyed on, he discovered him to be a God who was not at all straightforward. This God kept Abraham guessing by taking his time to fulfil the promises of children and land, caused a 'thick and terrible darkness' to come over him (Genesis 15:12, NIRV) when he might have expected quite the opposite, and even led him up a terrible path that appeared to be leading him to murder his son. As Abraham strode on down the dusty pathways to new lands, he became increasingly aware that God was leading him on journeys of the heart that at one time he would never have imagined possible.

Those who go on walking pilgrimages often testify to this parallel travelling. The 'outer' journey is about things like physical strength, footwear, weather conditions, navigation and resting places, but most pilgrims testify to the fact that as they walk the outer journey, all the while there is an 'inner' journey taking place. South African Bishop Eric Pike and his wife Joyce walked the Camino de Santiago de Compostela in Northern Spain in 2010, and, in writing about the experience of this 600-mile walk, he observed:

For us the pilgrimage was not about the distance we walked, nor the destination, though these were important elements in our Camino. What was, and is important, is what God did in us along the way in terms of transformation, cleansing and purifying. The blisters heal, the aching shoulders are restored, but what endures is the reality of the encounters with the ever present and gracious God.[1]

Pilgrimages are increasingly popular but not many of us will be regular pilgrims. However, all of us embark on a pilgrimage through life from the moment we are born. Like any pilgrimage, this journey has a beginning, a destination, resting places and untold numbers of discoveries, problems and encounters along the way. Just like the pilgrims trekking intentionally to a holy place, we are making our journey through this precious life of ours to our final destination of heaven. On this journey we also have a choice: we can put our heads down and march forward from the beginning of one day to its end, day after day, doing our errands, ticking off our checklists and generally getting the journey done as efficiently as possible, or we can travel in a more alert and attentive way, giving time and space to being aware of the journey of the heart. We can pause on our journey and take a look at the terrain around us, reflecting on the road we have travelled, making choices about the roads ahead of us, and thinking about the people we have been meeting on the way. As we do so, we see that our journey through life is full of fascinating twists and turns, encounters, discoveries, choices, gains, losses, highs and lows as well as a fair bit of the mundane and apparently ordinary.

It is this journey that I want to explore in this book, looking in particular at important influences that give our journey a sense of direction. There could be any number of ways of approaching this subject, but the one I have chosen is to work with my own personal experience and to explore the variety of spiritualities and traditions that I have either stumbled upon or deliberately explored in my travels of the heart over the years. It is always dangerous to

share our own experience, for it can too easily appear that we are being prescriptive for others or setting ourselves up as a kind of model that all should follow. I should be horrified if I succeeded in achieving either of these ends! However, I feel it is worth taking a risk in telling my story, because the best tutors to me over the years have been those who have been prepared to share their stories, their testimonies, their ups and downs of life, their struggles and discoveries. Often their experiences have been very different from my own, but as I listen to them, they help me reflect on what is taking place in me. They become, if you like, contemporary parables for me.

Jesus favoured the use of parables. His stories enabled people to think about how they were living their lives. It didn't matter whether or not they had the same experience as the one described in the parable. Simply by listening, they found themselves reflecting on their own lives. So, for example, few people listening to the parable of the good Samaritan would have been able to say, 'Exactly the same thing happened to me last week when I was going down to Jericho.' Yet even 2000 years later, we read that parable and find ourselves asking questions about how we treat our fellow humans. This is the point of sharing stories: not to get others to copy us but to open each other's minds to possibilities and to reflect on what is happening in our lives. There is, I suppose, an equivalent in watching someone else's holiday film. It can be pretty dull if we are simply observers of another person's experience, but it becomes wonderful when we find something stirring inside that says, 'It's time I did some travelling!' So as I share some of my discoveries, with snapshots of what I have discovered along the way, I hope that you will be helped to reflect on your own travels of the heart, and that you may feel inspired to make further explorations on your journey.

In my book *Dreaming of Home*, I wrote about the homing instinct that I believe lies within all of us—an instinct that searches for a place of belonging, a place where we can be truly ourselves

without fear or shame, a place where at last we can feel beloved on the earth. I want to hold firm to that homing instinct as I explore the theme of travelling in the heart. Many people find themselves exploring a particular spirituality because they are drawn to some aspect of it that feels like home. I have noticed that this is particularly true of Celtic spirituality. But while an encounter with a particular spirituality might feel as if it is drawing some people closer to their true home and place of belonging, for other people it could have quite the opposite effect. One very good yardstick for measuring whether a particular spirituality is going to be helpful is to see if it encourages you to become more fully 'you'.

There are many 'dechurched' people (those who once attended church regularly but have now left) who were attracted into a Christian spirituality, or a particular expressions of that spirituality, that eventually led them away from their true homeland rather than drawing them towards being more fully themselves. For them, such a tension becomes unbearable and they end up having to leave the church, often not knowing where to look next for their longed-for spiritual homeland. It seems to me that all spiritualities offer us great possibilities for either discovering or losing ourselves, and so the journey is filled with both adventure and risk. It is, therefore, a journey on which we need the companionship of the Holy Spirit, who leads us into truth (John 16:13).

As I reflect on my six decades in this world, I realise that I have explored a reasonable range of Christian spiritualities, and in this book I identify seven that have been important for me. The choice is by no means comprehensive and is very subjective. Let me repeat: I am writing about my own experience, and my hope is that in reading about it you will be encouraged to reflect on your journey and feel stirred to explore new pathways of your own.

To stay with the theme of travelling, I imagined what these spiritualities would be like if they were part of a British landscape that I was traversing. The *Anglicanism* into which I was born, and in which I have served as a priest for over 30 years, looked like a wide

open plain, solid and dependable ground, secure enough to hold many habitations. *Evangelicalism* was the spirituality that brought my faith alive as a youngster, and that, to me, looked like the home counties, where I grew up. The *charismatic* experience that took me by surprise in my late teens and has been important to me ever since looked like a rushing stream, full of life and energy and delight but also menace—a bit risky and messy.

I encountered *catholic* spirituality mainly through good friends (both Roman Catholics and Anglo-Catholics) and I saw this spirituality as a kind of hilly border region, where I was being led into territories that felt different, sometimes even foreign, and yet full of interest. I saw *Celtic* spirituality as a range of Irish, Scottish or Welsh mountains, and I also thought of the Malvern Hills over which I walked many times when I lived in Worcestershire. These are apparently the most ancient of mountains, and the Celtic ways are ancient ways, as well as ways of great strength.

Then I had to consider *liberalism*, and I saw this terrain as marshlands, partly because I'm not so familiar with marshlands and partly because they feel to me a little dangerous. But although they seem dangerous, this is no excuse for not exploring, and I have discovered some wonderful wildlife in these lands that once held only threats for me. Finally I wanted to include some of the new life that I am finding in my work with *Fresh Expressions*. I saw this as the coastal regions, because here the known land ends and the seas begin. Here we are introduced to a very different terrain, where we find the spiritualities of the unchurched, which are very diverse and interesting.

I want to emphasise again that this is entirely *my* experience, and others doing this exercise will find that different terrains and landscapes come to mind as they consider their spiritual travels.

The final chapter of this book is called 'Rest and be thankful'. Some years ago, my wife Julia and I visited Iona and the area of Scotland around that special island. When we drove back to Glasgow Airport from Oban, we stopped at the wonderfully named

'Rest and Be Thankful' spot on the A83. Here you can stop the car to rest on your journey and look out on the most wonderful view (on a good day!). So, at the end of the book, I want to do the same—to pause on the journey, take a look at the view and, with gratitude, think of the ground we have covered. I will also draw together some principles that are important for this kind of travelling.

For many years I was fortunate to enjoy the friendship of Brother Ramon SSF, who died in 2000. Ramon consistently inspired me to be a heart-traveller. He grew up in Wales and came from a strong Welsh Baptist faith-fuelled family, but, as time went on, he discovered other spiritualities including Pentecostalism, Anglicanism, Franciscan spirituality and the complex of spiritualities within the mystical tradition. What I really admired about Ramon was the fact that he never jettisoned an 'old' spirituality in order to explore a new one. He would often say that he was a liberal catholic charismatic evangelical ecumenical Anglican—and he was!

It seems to me that Ramon modelled the right kind of travelling: he took the risk of exploring spiritualities that were new to him, and he made space for them not by throwing out the old ones but by growing as a person to accommodate the new. For him, the really important thing was that every spirituality should be a servant, helping to steer us in the direction of Jesus. The real danger came if they became lords of us and distracted us from Jesus. Any of these spiritualities can become like controlling powers, and we get stuck in awkward loyalty traps, feeling that we must toe party lines, impress party leaders and generally show ourselves to be true party members by adopting party language and styles of behaviour. In all our explorations, therefore, we will need to keep asking the same question: is this a path that will lead me closer to Jesus?

Even that simple language betrays a particular spirituality. I can see some of you flinch a little, as it sounds a bit too evangelical, while others might feel it isn't quite strong enough for their taste. It is impossible to find language that doesn't smack of one tradition

or another, and in the end we simply have to be true to ourselves. I think, though, that whichever spiritualities have instinctively been home for us, we do have a common bond, which is that we long to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, and our neighbours as ourselves. In the pages of the Gospels we find the one who has touched our hearts more than any other, who is the very reason why we are on this journey in the first place, and is the destination for which we yearn. In the final chapter of his book *Pilgrimage*, Andrew Jones writes, 'Pilgrimage is ultimately about progressing into the heart of God.'[2]

Finally a word about terminology: it has been hard to work out whether to use the word 'tradition' or 'spirituality' to describe particular expressions of our faith. Generally speaking, I choose 'spirituality' but, because one word can start to sound tedious when it is overused, I sometimes use 'tradition'. To be honest, I find that no word is really adequate, and I acknowledge that 'spirituality' has limited value, not least because there is much more to spirituality than particular ways of expressing our faith. The good thing about this particular word, though, is that it has the word 'spirit' at its heart, and what I am writing about is an activity in our spirits, an activity that needs the blessed and fluent life of the Holy Spirit.

May that same Spirit now be our guide through the plains and home counties, along streams and by borders, up mountains and over fenlands, and on to the coastlands. There, perhaps more than anywhere else, we stand a good chance of witnessing the Spirit of God, who, at the very beginning of the journey of this world, moved over the face of the waters with such surprising and energising life.

Chapter 2

Anglican plains

There is something indelibly Anglican in my soul. It's there as much by inheritance as anything else. Around the time I was training for ordination, my Uncle Jack Mitton contacted me. He lived with his daughter, Primrose, in Matlock, Derbyshire, and I had known him since childhood. A veteran of World War I, he used to delight in telling us that he escaped death in the trenches one night simply by choosing to go to the toilet at the right time. On returning to his night shelter, he found it demolished by an enemy shell. It was probably the violent noise of those trenches that left him fairly deaf, so any conversation with Jack had to be carried out at high volume.

Even in his late 80s he would drive the long journey to our family home in his Austin Cambridge and, during his summer visits, he would play cricket with me on the back lawn. We were, in a rather formal way, very fond of each other, and I felt touched when he announced one day that he had chosen to make me 'Custodian of the Family Memoirs', a duty I was delighted to accept. I still have in my loft four large boxes of assorted files, all detailing various bits of Mitton history, but among the volumes of paperwork and obscure books, he also passed my way photos of portraits of ancient relatives, most of whom seemed to be Anglican clergy. As a young man delighting in a much more carefree charismatic life, I wasn't altogether taken with these images of serious-faced, heavily robed clerics. Yet I had to acknowledge that, despite a couple of generations of secular Mittons immediately before me, when

I reached back to my great-grandfather I touched a long line of ancestors who, one after the other, were in holy orders and served in parishes in the north of England.

Although, as a young adult, I preferred to believe that I was completely uninfluenced by such a powerful and lengthy strain of Anglicanism in my family history, I now think it probably did have an influence, not least in giving me a sense of the Anglican Church being my natural, inherited church. I had very little interest in ancient ancestors at that time, whereas nowadays I do want to know something about them, perhaps because as we get older we seem to need to set our lives in the context of a wider story. Perhaps it is about finding a place of belonging in our family story and having some sense that we are playing a part in a longer story. In reflecting on our own spiritual journey, it is important to look back at our family history and see how faith found expression in that story, and what particular spiritual traditions influenced the family over the years. I have come across people who are now leaders of out-and-out free and independent churches who speak quite wistfully of their family roots in one of the main denominational churches. In the heyday of modernism in the 1960s and '70s it was the fashion to lampoon these churches, but now, in our postmodern era, owning a connection to a historic church denomination invites much less ridicule. This has perhaps made it easier for Free Church people to integrate their family story. It may even explain why some independent church leaders and members display a real affection for churches such as the Anglican Church, and quite a number even make their way back to it. Of course, a reverse journey could also be made: an Anglican worshipper may feel drawn back to a family affiliation with nonconformist churches.

My Uncle Jack liked to imagine that he had traced our family back to William the Conqueror, but I think this was more romantic and wishful thinking than the fruit of accurate research. However, he did succeed in tracking us back to a certain Robert Mitton who was baptised in 1629. Robert's son Roger is the first vicar to appear

in our family records, and he had the cure of souls in parishes in York and Skipton less than 40 years after the publication of the Book of Common Prayer. If I could line up all these parsons in my family history, what an interesting story of Anglican life they could tell me!

Anglicanism is a tradition that includes all those churches across the world that have a connection with the Church of England. It is an extraordinarily broad church and during my life I have had contact with a fair bit of it. I have walked for several hours down long grassy tracks to preach in remote Anglican churches in rural Kenya and I have prayed in incense-filled churches in South African townships; I have sung charismatic worship in St Andrew's Cathedral of Singapore and experienced High Mass in Episcopal churches in the USA. I have co-celebrated at a Eucharist in Japan and I have baptised adults in a murky pool in South India. Most of my work overseas has been at the invitation of Anglican churches and there is something very moving about being welcomed not only as a fellow Christian but also as a fellow Anglican.

I have noticed that once a type of Anglican life has been established in a country, the worshippers are, generally speaking, inclined to keep close to the expression of Anglicanism that was first planted there. Thus, the Anglican Church in South Africa is predominantly Anglo-Catholic after the missionary work of the Mirfield Fathers, whereas in East Africa it is more Evangelical following the work of mission societies such as CMS. In the UK, though, the scene is completely different. Here the differences are extraordinary. You can go to one part of town and find an Anglican church that, to all intents and purposes, feels Roman Catholic, with the priests wearing Roman robes, and language and liturgy resonant of Roman Catholic worship; then, just down the road in the neighbouring parish, there is a church where the vicar rolls up in jeans and open-neck shirt, with no vestments in sight, the guitar-led band plays light rock music, and you might think you were in one of the new churches.

One of the distinctives of the Church of England is this breadth of life. Although held together by the four main essentials defined in the Lambeth Quadrilateral,[3] it is nonetheless able to express itself in great diversity. Of course, this diversity puts it under great strain as increasingly polarised views, particularly on human sexuality, stretch the unity of the Anglican Communion to possible breaking point. My sense is that in the UK we are better equipped to manage such diversity and can live better with difference. When my faith came alive in my late teens, for a time I was very intolerant of those forms of Anglicanism that varied from the type I loved. As I shall explain in the next chapter, I was most definitely evangelical and, as far as I was concerned, the liberal and high church expressions of the Church of England were to be resisted. There are still quite a number of British Anglicans who feel very strongly about their tradition today, but I notice that the majority have a generous heart and manage well this breadth of spirituality.

The breadth is not just about spiritual traditions, however. It also relates to the reach that the Church of England has into our communities. Although the parish system is under strain in this post-Christendom era, there is still enough memory to cause the unchurched majority to welcome clergy to school assemblies and other community activities, and to feel drawn to churches when there are national tragedies or special occasions such as Remembrance and Christmas.

So, for me, the Church of England was the starting point on my spiritual journey. All of us who grow up in churchgoing homes will develop a unique relationship to our particular church. The church we are taken to (or, in some cases, sent to) is our first experience of worship and, no matter how young we are, we will develop feelings about it. We will not only learn some general theology but we will also pick up the customs and beliefs of that particular church. For those early years, we will regard that type of church as 'normal', and we may well believe that all Christians follow their faith in that way. As a young child, as far as I was concerned there was no

church other than the Church of England. As an infant growing up in Edinburgh, I was taken along to St John's Church on Princes Street and the routines of Anglican Sunday worship became as normal as the roast lunch afterwards and the walk up Blackford Hill in the afternoon.

When, at the age of seven, I moved with my family to the village of Great Missenden in Buckinghamshire, it came as no surprise that on our first Sunday morning we packed ourselves into the car and made the first of many trips through the village high street, up the little lane and over the new bypass to the Chiltern-flint church dedicated to the great saints Peter and Paul. There I would sit on the polished pinewood pew in my Sunday best and, as the ancient words from the ancient vicar drifted around the ancient church (and well above my young head), my mind happily drifted where it would and was seldom occupied by the subject-matter of the sermon, readings, prayers or hymns. The sense of antiquity was comforting in a way, but the rest of my life was being lived in the modern world of the 1960s, with its mix of threats and opportunities, and little that was said or sung in church seemed to bear much relation to that world.

Years later, I visited that church again and was taken aback by the wealth of emotion that was stirred in me as I entered the building. I had not set foot inside for over 40 years and, before entering, I could remember very little of it, but once inside I was astonished to discover how familiar the pews, windows, stone carvings, patterned flooring and other furnishings felt. As I sat there in the stained-glass filtered sunlight, I was taken back to my childhood days and felt once more the solid security of my father sitting next to me. What came back to me was a sense of sitting in a world that really belonged to others, in particular those who understood the words and those who managed to achieve some kind of connection with a past that felt much more like theirs than mine. Nonetheless, even then I had known without any doubt that there was a place for me in that building and among those people; while others in the

congregation applied themselves to the words of hymns, prayers and sermons, those words became a comforting backdrop for me as my mind wandered, as it so frequently did in those days, to apparently unconnected thoughts and events. My eyes would roam around the beautiful building, and a kind of partnership built up between my thoughts and the carvings, windows, floors and arches. They were by no means unreligious thoughts, but in truth the religion I felt did not seem to have much to do with the religion practised by the grown-ups in that church.

Hours and hours of Sunday mornings and evenings were spent in this way, and so engraved on my mind were the impressions from that time that when I re-entered the building after 40 years, I felt I knew each and every stone, carving and window pane as a long-lost friend and experienced an extraordinary surge of affection for it all.

For any who have grown up in the Christian faith, I would strongly recommend trying to revisit the building where you worshipped in those formative days of childhood. There, memories can return that may well have been among your first religious experiences. For some, these may be very distinctive and spiritual memories, perhaps recalling a real awareness of the numinous holiness of God; for others, they may be memories of God's love, so strong that it almost seemed tangible; and for yet others, there may even have been revelations or visions. There will be some who recall singing hymns that they grew to love, and for others there may be bits of sermons that they remember, perhaps because the preacher spoke so precisely to a particular life situation that it left an indelible mark in the soul. And there will be some who return to the place of worship but, before they feel any remembrance of Sundays, meet head-on a sharper and less welcome memory of a family funeral. Then, the coldness and fear of those early days of grief can suddenly return as a sharp, wintery breeze.

Whatever we discover when we get there is likely to be valuable as we sit in the pew or seat, draw ourselves down to our deeper

memories and explore what we find. We may well gain insights into the way our faith first found shape and language in our souls.

I was sent to a preparatory school in the nearby town of Amersham. At that school, there were brief acts of worship at the beginning and end of each day, when the headmaster would summon us to pray, always faithfully using the Anglican collects. Even though I have never been able to learn lines to save my life, the words of those collects have somehow stuck fast in me, so that when the season of Lent arrives, it is second nature for me to ask God to 'create and make in us new and contrite hearts, that we lamenting our sins and acknowledging our wretchedness may obtain of thee, the God of all mercy, perfect remission and forgiveness'. It never seemed to matter to me that I had little clue about the meaning of words like 'contrite' and 'remission'; somehow, my growing acquaintance with the words gave them a comforting quality. For me, church and school worship were occasions when there were no demands made and no real risk of being made to look foolish, where familiar words somehow managed to give me strength.

I don't often take Book of Common Prayer services now, but when I do, and when I start the Confession by acknowledging 'the devices and desires of our own hearts', I am instantly taken back in my mind and heart to those days in school and church. I don't think I'm alone in this experience, and I suspect that many of those who love Book of Common Prayer services have similar memories operating, and are reaching out to parts of their own personal history for safety and assurance. These are powerful emotions, and they are one of the reasons why leading a church into change can be so difficult. We can very easily dismiss such feelings as 'nostalgic', but humans have always drawn much strength from such experiences. To slash away at these memories without any reference to their value can cause enormous pain to people. If such services have to leave our regular patterns of worship, proper care has to be given to the passing of these old rites, so that those who draw strength from them can be guided to new resources. In reality,

much of our Christian pilgrimage is about learning to let go of one way of expressing our faith and trusting the Holy Spirit to lead us to another that will become just as full of life for us.

The daily worship in the classroom at my prep school gave way to worship in a far grander building at my public school. In the era in which I grew up, it seems that children generally went to the school determined for them by parents, and in my case it was always assumed that I would attend the public school that my father and uncle had attended in the 1920s. I am convinced that if I had had any say in the matter, this school would not have been my choice, and, as we drove up to the austere Victorian Gothic buildings of Charterhouse School on a clear September day, some of my worst fears were confirmed. For me, it held nothing but terror in those early days, and the only place of solace and solitude was in the safe confines of the outside toilets, where I would read letters from home that kept me connected with a far warmer and more welcoming world. Quite why the homesickness was so severe, I have never really discovered, but in time its severity passed and I settled.

I don't remember praying in those rather dark days, and there was no great comfort in the vast and lofty Memorial Chapel designed by Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, which was the largest World War I memorial in England. The names of all those dead heroes meant little to me as I wandered through the huge oak doors and sat in the front row with the other new boys amid unwelcome smells of sour wood polish, pubescent sweat and flatulence. In time, however, even this cavernous building became a place of safety for me, and I had my first experiences of being moved, sometimes almost to tears (if I had dared show them), by some of the hymns. Even now, if I hear the powerful setting of George Herbert's poem 'Come, my Way, my Truth, my Life' by Alexander Brent Smith, I feel something of the stirring I felt as we sang the great crescendo at the end of each verse. But generally, in those early days, there was little movement in my spiritual life through the chapel.

The chaplain was a man called Henry Bettenson, who was renowned (so I discovered many years later) as a leading expert on the early Church Fathers. To me he was an elderly man in a black robe with long silver hair, and I imagined that if ever I were to meet such Old Testament prophets as Jeremiah or Ezekiel, that was how they would look. When he prepared a small group of us for confirmation, we met in the huge living-room of his home. We sat in a row beneath a lofty upper gallery, and he explained the faith while walking up and down before us. He spent the entire hour working away at his pipe, digging out old bits of worn-out tobacco and then packing in crumbling, beautiful-smelling tobacco, before combusting the thing with astonishing smoke and drama. I learned nothing about the Christian faith in those sessions but I have never lost my love of the fragrance of pipe-smoke!

It was Bishop George Reindorp who came to confirm us in late November, when hope was rising for the end of term and the Christmas holiday. I was 15 by then, and I remember some boys discussing how the confirmation service could be a religious experience. I liked the sound of this, and as the bishop moved along the Communion rail, confirming us, I remember being touched by the use of our Christian names, for it was the usual custom in school to be addressed only by our surnames. So when the bishop placed his large hands on my head and said 'Confirm, O Lord, thy servant *Michael* with thy Holy Spirit', there was something intrinsically consoling and touching about such a senior figure calling me by my Christian name. In those moments I reached up to heaven with every part of my spirit that I could muster, in the hope of getting some kind of religious experience, but, try as I might, I never 'got' anything to speak of. Others claimed they did but, as far as I was concerned, I was passed by.

However, I did gain a silver propelling pencil, made in England by Yard-O-Led and given to me by my parents, who had taken the trouble to have my initials and date of confirmation engraved on it. The same pencil sits on my desk today, and I have still not worked

through the yard of lead that is packed away in neat sections within. Picking it up today reconnects me to that autumn day all those years ago, and it reminds me that the experience of feeling a bit left out of spiritual encounters has often been a feature of my journey. I have noticed it especially in charismatic meetings, where others seem to have such deep and special encounters with God, while I have moments of feeling disturbingly untouched, and come to uncomfortable conclusions about why God should have passed me by once again. That, at least, is how my emotions interpret the experience, but when I push beyond those feelings, I discover that God is not one whose presence and blessing can be summoned up to order or be expressed in the same way for every person.

As I reflect on my confirmation experience now, I see that I would have done well to dwell on the surprise and delight I felt on hearing my Christian name at the altar rail. That, I feel sure, was what God wanted to give me at that moment of confirmation—a revelation that he called me by name. Because I was looking for something else—that experience that the other boys spoke of—I failed to acknowledge the very precious experience that God was giving me. It was a very personal message about how, in a world that can often be cold and hostile, there is a God who turns his face towards us in kindness and calls us his friend. This makes me wonder how often we miss the most beautiful gifts from the hand of God because we have held tight to expectations about what they should look like and how they should feel.

It was not until the end of my school days that I found someone who became my first real tutor in Anglican spirituality. When I was 17, my parents moved house again, this time to another village in Buckinghamshire—Weston Turville. The vicar was Stanley Jones, a single man who occupied his huge vicarage with his mother and an unpleasantly smelly dog. Tea at the vicarage was a mixed blessing when his beloved dog was in the room, but I found conversation with Stanley fascinating. He was a very intelligent but very unself-

confident man who seemed to be nervous of many people and things. He was a high churchman who loved the liturgy and sang the choral parts of the service with a strong, clear voice. I had never come across this kind of service before, as all my Anglican experience had been fairly middle-of-the-road. I rather disliked it at first but I warmed very much to Stanley and it wasn't long before I regarded him as a true friend. Because he was so much more 'normal' than any other vicar or chaplain I had met, he was someone I could trust and, to some extent, relate to. We would talk for ages in his vicarage, and then he would take me across to the church where we would kneel in one of the congregational pews.

My memories of those moments always include sunshine beaming in through the coloured windows, and Stanley praying in his formal yet vulnerable way. Yes, it was Anglican comfort again, but something real was happening and I was getting to know someone who truly loved the Anglican Church. As it turned out, it seemed that it was not a church that really loved Stanley, and I was often saddened to see him burdened under pressures from either the congregation or the diocese. He died suddenly and far too early, while I was a curate, and when the bishop stood in the pulpit and declared, 'Today is a day of joy', I could not have agreed less. Technically the bishop was right, and Stanley had entered into the joy of his Lord, but for me it was a grievous loss of a friend and mentor.

For most of us, it is people rather than books, buildings or events that shape our spiritual journey and give it direction. Yes, there can be wonderful spiritual experiences that have a marked influence on us, and I shall write about some of them later in this book. But I have to say that the chief influence on my journey has been observing the way faith is played out in someone's life. I need to see it work in practice: someone has to incarnate faith, in order for it to make sense to me. When I was ordained in my mid-20s, I made a point of writing to all the people I felt had been messengers of God to me on my journey to this important point

in my life. I included a note to the old headmaster of my prep school and received such a moving reply that it had me in tears. He must have had days of wondering whether his diligent tutoring of the boys in Christian faith and worship was having any effect at all, and it was clearly a great comfort to him to know that, for at least one of those boys, the experience had been meaningful and significant.

This headmaster, the village church vicar and a few others along the way were the ones who moved me enough to get me to think about faith. In none of those Anglican churches or chapels did my faith really come alive: that happened separately, but by no means independently. It came as a surprise—not to say shock—when I felt God call me to serve him in the Anglican Church. My call came soon after a strong charismatic experience and I was all for offering myself into Pentecostal ministry. But the word of God to me was clear: I had to serve him in the church of my ancestors and my family. It did not feel a comfortable choice, but I believe it was a right one.

The discomfort has never quite left me. I have now served as an Anglican priest for several decades, and yet I can still feel a little out of place in a big clergy meeting. Even when I was installed as an honorary Canon in Derby Cathedral, at a great service on All Saints Day, there was still a part of me that slipped quietly away from the words of the great hymns and prayers, daydreamed and felt just a little out of place. It is perhaps true for all of us who have drawn from several traditions and spiritualities that no one tradition will seem fully like home to us, and this can make us feel disturbed and possibly lonely, but such disturbance can be very healthy. Psalm 139 is one of the best-known Psalms: it starts, 'O Lord, you have searched me and known me', and continues, 'You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.' The God we serve is the one who knows us by name and is familiar with all the pathways of our lives. It seems to me that if we try to conform ourselves to fit exactly with one particular tradition, we

may be missing some very important pathways in our souls, pathways that are known to God.

It may be that, for some people, all their pathways can be found in the Anglican tradition, and Anglican life feels like an 'exact fit' for them, but I suspect that for most, this will not be the case. The church of which they are members, whether it be Anglican, Methodist, Baptist, New Church or whatever, will not understand *all* the pathways within them. When one such pathway becomes important for us, and it is one that is not accepted in the church of which we are a member, we become a little lonelier and the church feels a little less like home for us. It is quite possible to live in creative tension with this feeling, but for some people the tension becomes too much and they find they have to move somewhere else. For too many, the 'somewhere else' is a churchless life, because they feel that no church understands them, but the church stream that we connect ourselves with can be a source of great strength to us when we are allowed to own and celebrate the different pathways within us. It can be the firm ground and place of safety from which we do our exploring.

Not long ago, I was invited to do some work with a church in Colorado, that beautiful state in the USA that is dominated by the great Rocky Mountains. The church was situated in the northern part of the state, but, before the visit, my wife and I holidayed in the southern part, in the region just north of New Mexico. One day we drove out to the Mesa Verde National Park. There we visited the beautiful ancient cliff dwellings that once belonged to the Puebloan people. 'Mesa Verde' translates as 'green table', and this massive 'green table' stands high in a plain of indescribable vastness. I am used to viewing plains in England but nothing prepared me for the huge size of this one. To stand on that vast 'green table' and look out at land that stretched far, far away to a most distant horizon was almost eerie. At the same time, though, it was strangely and extraordinarily reassuring. Here was good old planet Earth, providing a solid foundation for our lives. Here we could see a world

without too many obvious demands. I suppose you could say that living down there might seem a little boring—you could drive for hours and never climb any hill to speak of—yet the land was by and large fertile and productive and reliable. Of course, if you live down there, you do get a fabulous view of the Mesa Verde, and you can also admire the great snow-peaked mountains of the Rockies. It is a flat land but a good land, and the surrounding geography inspires you to adventure.

This is *my* experience of the Anglican tradition. I am keen to put 'my' in italics here because I am describing my personal experience of Anglicanism. It has offered me a safe foundation for my explorations. It is the land in which I dwell, and it is the home to which I return. It has not provided me with dramas like high mountains or white waters, but from this plain I have caught sight of distant mountains, and it has given me the desire to travel and has served as an excellent base camp for further exploration. I have also found it to be a generous and open land, so that when I come back from my travels with stories of what I have discovered, it delights to hear about my discoveries and is wonderfully respectful of the different geographies and cultures that I have encountered. I sense we all need to find one tradition that serves us in this way—a spiritual homeland that we know our way around and which acts as a blessed fixed point in our lives. I have no doubt that God does indeed bless such plains as these.

Questions for reflection

- How much do you know about the spirituality of your ancestors? If you don't know much, try to find out a little more. To what extent has their faith shaped and influenced yours?
- If you grew up in a churchgoing home, what are your reflections on the Christian tradition that was presented to you? What aspects of it are true to your journey now, and what have you

needed to leave behind? Are there aspects that you need to either let go or rediscover? If you did not grow up in a churchgoing home, what did influence you spiritually as a child?

O Lord, you have searched me out and you know all the pathways of my life. Thank you for the solid plains that have been a homeland to me. When I dwell in these plains, help me to draw from their goodness but also keep my eyes open to the adventures beyond.