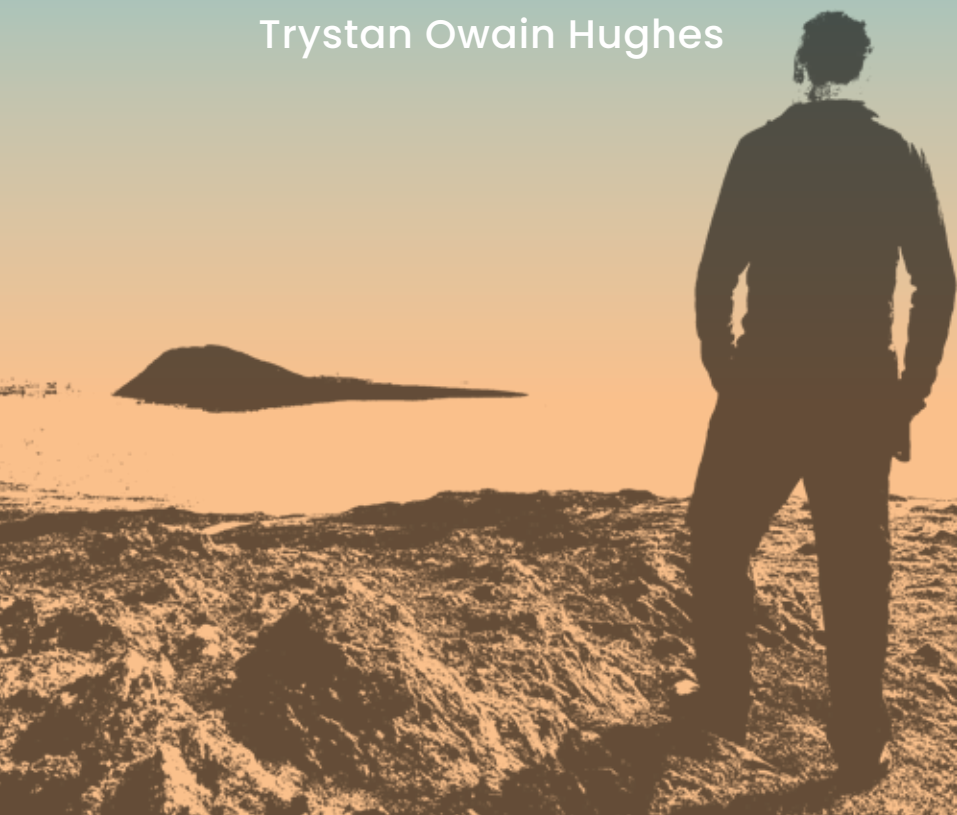


To Hell's Mouth and Back

Pilgrimage, suffering and hope

Trystan Owain Hughes



'A wonderful book of reflection, lament and celebration.'

Rowan Williams

‘Weaving together his experience of walking an ancient pilgrim’s way in his beloved North Wales and his experience of serious injury, Trystan Owain Hughes describes in this compelling book how we can learn to see God at work in our lives, even in the darkest of times. Through vivid narrative and honest reflection, peppered with references to poetry and novels as well as scripture, he draws us to reflect on our own journeys and pilgrimages, both seen and unseen. With questions for reflection at the end of each chapter, this is a wonderful and enriching book for both individuals and study groups to engage with.’

Cherry Vann, Archbishop of Wales

‘In this moving and beautifully paced book, we are invited to share different kinds of pilgrimage – not only pilgrimage to holy places, but the journey into the pervasive divine presence and gift in the world, and the journey into what it is to live as a vulnerable and suffering body. God is the magnetic centre for all these journeys. This is a wonderful book of reflection, lament and celebration.’

Rowan Williams, theologian and former Archbishop of Canterbury

‘Not just a story of a walk, but of a life. Trystan’s book is poignant, challenging and excruciatingly honest. It reminds us that hope can outshine the deepest despair.’

Rob Parsons, OBE, author and speaker

‘Through telling the story of his own journeying, Trystan Owain Hughes has produced a doggedly honest, deeply insightful, and rich spiritual resource for our own journeys through this life. The book takes the Welsh landscape, beautiful and terrible in equal measure, and uses it to draw a landscape of the human soul, providing prayerful and practical landmarks to remind us that it is Christ’s landscape and he journeys with us.’

Joanna Collicutt, Karl Jaspers lecturer in psychology and spirituality at Ripon College, Cuddesdon

‘This invitation to join Trystan Owain Hughes on the Pilgrim’s Way is a powerful window into the gift and depth of pilgrimage. The combination of his vulnerability and attentiveness to wisdom, from St Augustine to Depeche Mode, make him a life-giving theologian and a hopeful human being. I will certainly return to this book.’

Paul Davies, Bishop of Dorking

‘A powerful, beautifully written evocation of two “pilgrimages”: the first undertaken by choice, along the pilgrim pathways of Wales; the second imposed by circumstances, as pain comes to dominate the writer’s life. His searing honesty encourages us to discover hope in the midst of struggle and share his hard-won realisation that “opening ourselves to God’s light and love can transform all our journeys”’

**Dee Dias, director of the Centre for Pilgrimage Studies,
University of York**

‘This is a powerful and moving book, honest and unflinching in its depiction of the author’s experience of two types of “pilgrimage”. Exploring outwards from his personal journeys, Trystan draws on his own wisdom and that of many others to encourage deeper reflection on the challenges and rewards of pilgrimage.’

Sally Welch, writer and pilgrim

‘This is a beautiful book in which Trystan Owain Hughes uses a well-trodden pilgrim path to explore with tenderness and honesty the deep and unanswerable questions of suffering. The insights he gains from this journey of the soul are both comforting and challenging, but above all reveal the precious and robust hope that is at the heart of Christ’s kingdom.’

Michael Mitton, writer, speaker, spiritual director

‘Gentle and profound, this book is a must-read for all who are mired in suffering.’

Tanya Marlow, author and campaigner

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ISBN 978 1 80039 426 1
First published 2025
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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Acknowledgements

I wish to extend my deepest gratitude to the friends and family who have supported my writing over the years. Your endless enthusiasm and love have transformed the arduous process of writing into a truly rewarding adventure. This book stands as one of my most personal works, and I remain profoundly thankful for every bit of encouragement along the way.

A very special thank you goes to Sue Hurrell (and Bruce) and my wife Sandra, whose wise suggestions and painstaking chapter-by-chapter proofreading have enriched this work beyond measure. I am also hugely grateful to Peter Jones, Gwynan Hughes, Ainsley Griffiths, Jenny Wigley, Gaz Roberts, Wynford Ellis Owen and Eleanor Williams for their invaluable advice and assistance. Many thanks as well to everyone at BRF Ministries for believing my writing is worth sharing with others.

This book is dedicated, though, to those who journeyed with me on my two pilgrimages. Their company, support and compassion lifted and sustained me every step of the way.

Pilgrimage One (Pilgrim's Way, North Wales)

Thanks to Mum and Dad (Ros and Berw), Sandra Hughes, Angharad Sherrington, Perry Buck, Dafydd Bathers, George Oliver, Meinir Pierce Jones, Denise and Geoff Templeton, and Robin Fox.

Pilgrimage Two (The red sofa, Roath Park, Cardiff)

Thanks to Colin and Ann Francis, Haydn and Jill Hopkins, Chris Burr, Andy Wilkinson and Helen Blakely, Gwilym Roberts, Wyn Griffith, Gareth Erlandson, Jenny Wigley, Linda Alexandra, Anneliese Harnisch, Siôn Brynach, Julie and Martin Davies, Greg Dixon, Kath and Mike Lawley, Paul Fitzpatrick, Steve Edwards, Andrew James, Natalie Garrett, Emil

Evans, Gareth Harcombe, Jordan Hillebert, Caroline Downs, Richard Lowndes, Paul Francis, Norman Adams, Archbishop Barry Morgan, and to the wonderful church community of Christ Church, Roath Park. Finally, a huge diolch to my loving and endlessly patient family – to Lukas, Lena, Macsen Iago, and, of course, my incredible wife, Sandra. Ich liebe dich meine Familie.

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*Who would have thought my shrivel'd heart
Could have recover'd greenness? It was gone
Quite underground...
And now in age I bud again,
After so many deaths I live and write*

George Herbert

Prologue

When you come to a new place, you tell your tale; the story of where you came from and how you got here, because that is the story of who you are.

Kate Clanchy, poet

Life can only be understood backwards; but it must be lived forwards.

Søren Kierkegaard, philosopher

The first step

‘The beginning is the most important part of any work’, wrote Plato in *The Republic*. The same could also be said of pilgrimage. The importance of that first, decisive step cannot be overstated – it requires courage, determination and unwavering commitment. While some may doubt the value of spiritual journeys, the pilgrim steps forward with excitement and hope, drawn by the adventure and mystery that await. As I stood in the grounds of the medieval Basingwerk Abbey in Flintshire, North Wales, and threw my rucksack over my shoulder, I took the first stride of a 140-mile journey that countless other pilgrims had walked over many centuries. In that moment, I felt connected not only to the path ahead but also to the footsteps of those who had travelled it before me, each carrying their own hopes, struggles and prayers.

In the weeks leading up to my journey, I could not help but share my planned odyssey with anyone who would listen. Each time someone praised my courage, their words served as a reminder that this was

to be no ordinary walk. Yet nothing could have truly readied me for the sheer physical and emotional toll of the three relentless weeks of walking. And, as it turned out, the real challenge was not the miles travelled. Rather, it was the gruelling journey that awaited me in the months that followed. The first step of my pilgrimage may have been the most important, but it was far from the hardest part.

Journeys of faith

In recent years, pilgrimage has experienced a remarkable resurgence, capturing the interest of people from all walks of life. This revival has been particularly evident in my own country of Wales, where significant investment has been made to restore and develop ancient pilgrim routes, drawing more walkers than at any time since the Reformation. Beyond the physical and mental rewards of these journeys, there is something deeply moving about following in the footsteps of saints who walked these paths centuries ago. The renewed fascination with pilgrimage has even made its way on to our screens. The BBC documentary series *Pilgrimage* has brought the experience to an even wider audience, as celebrities from diverse backgrounds lace up their boots, shoulder their backpacks and set out on famous routes. Along the way, they share their stories, wrestle with questions of faith and explore whether these age-old paths still hold meaning for believers and non-believers today.

Anthropologists suggest that spiritual journeys stretch back far beyond the well-worn paths we walk today. Some even argue that pilgrimage has evolutionary roots, echoing the ancient migrations of birds and animals. From humanity's earliest days, journeying was essential, whether for survival, as our hunter-gatherer ancestors roamed in search of food and warmth, or for faith, as seen in sacred texts like the Old and New Testaments. Pilgrimage reached its height of popularity in the West during the Middle Ages, when the church encouraged believers to travel in search of divine connection, forgiveness and atonement. In fact, even the modern package holiday owes its

origins to religious travel, with 19th-century entrepreneur Thomas Cook building his global travel empire by organising trips for Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land.

Pilgrimage, though, has not always been welcomed and encouraged. From 16th-century Protestant reformers to 20th-century communist leaders, powerful figures have tried to suppress it. Still people found ways to journey, whether by visiting ancient shrines secretly and without fanfare or by taking secular pilgrimages to places like Lenin's tomb in Red Square or Mao Zedong's mausoleum in Tiananmen Square. No matter the obstacles, pilgrimage has endured. It seems to be woven into the fabric of who we are.

The Pilgrim's Way

The Pilgrim's Way in North Wales was a path I had longed to tread for many years. As a teenager I had been obsessed with surfing. Growing up on the North Wales coast, my favourite surf spot was the breathtaking four-mile sandy bay called Porth Neigwl, located on the far western tip of North Wales, at the end of the Llŷn Peninsula. I would camp with a friend at the top of the cliff, waking early to clamber down to hit the huge waves that would pound the shore. The English name for the bay is Hell's Mouth, as it appears as an ominous orifice and has been, historically, a place of great danger to sailors during storms. After an exhilarating day's surfing, my friend and I would then drive up to the top of the not-so-imaginatively named Mynydd Mawr (Big Mountain) to watch the sun setting on the beautiful Ynys Enlli (Bardsey Island).

This isolated island became a magical and mystical place in my mind – my dad would talk about going there on pilgrimage in his youth and my ornithologist brother would encamp there to track bird migration. As I began to study history at university, I became fascinated with the island's ancient past. Neolithic people lived in stone huts on the island over 4,000 years ago, and it almost certainly already held spiritual significance by then.

Its importance as a Christian site began when early persecuted Christians were said to have hidden there to escape pagan oppressors. By the end of the sixth century, St Cadfan had established his monastery there. In the Middle Ages, Pope Callixtus II declared the island to be one of the most holy sites in Britain. It was considered so sacred that dying on the island was believed to guarantee sainthood and immediate entrance into heaven. There were even times when coffins were carried over in relays to the island, in the hope that being buried in its soil had the same effect as dying there.

It was during my surfing years when I first heard about the Pilgrim's Way. This is a medieval pilgrimage route running along the top of North Wales, from Basingwerk Abbey, the medieval monastery near Holywell, to Ynys Enlli, off the coast of Hell's Mouth. As a teenager, I felt certain that one day I would tread in the footsteps of those early pilgrims.

As it transpired, it was to be many years before I was able to undertake that journey. At first, work got in the way, as I was unable to secure three consecutive weeks of leave to complete the journey. Soon, though, it was neither time nor work but my injured body that prevented me from embarking on this endeavour. In my early 30s, I had suffered a serious back injury and underwent spinal surgery. A titanium bolt was inserted in the base of the spine to stabilise my back. Two years later, the excruciating pain was continuing to impede almost every part of my life, and I was hospitalised again in the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in London. There I undertook a four-week course of intensive physiotherapy, pain management and occupational therapy, which included being taught such basics as how, in a light of a back disability, to clean the bathroom, vacuum the house and wash dishes. While I was subsequently able to live a relatively normal life, my spinal trauma resulted in daily chronic pain and continuing disability, with standing still or sitting for any length of time causing considerable discomfort.

Pilgrimage preparation

In building up fitness through hiking, Pilates and physiotherapy, I arrived at a place where my back seemed sufficiently strong to embark on the journey I had longed to undertake for decades. I also had the incredible opportunity to apply for a three-month sabbatical from work, a chance I could not pass up. My plan was ambitious, yet I was sure it would be deeply fulfilling. I was to spend the first three weeks walking the 140-mile Pilgrim's Way, immersing myself in its history and spiritual significance. Then, with two whole months ahead of me, I would embark on an exhilarating journey across the country, visiting ancient religious sites from Lindisfarne to the Orkneys. Having three months away from work felt like an extraordinary gift, and I could not wait for the adventure ahead. I was certain this time would be both inspiring and spiritually transformative.

As the Pilgrim's Way had recently been relaunched, it was an opportune time to take up its challenge. White waymarker disks had been erected intermittently along the trail, making use of existing public rights of way. The path traverses the dramatic, rolling hills of the Clwydian Range, the sweeping Conwy Valley with its majestic river, the breathtaking Eryri (Snowdonia) National Park in the shadow of the highest peak in England and Wales, Yr Wyddfa (Snowdon), and the spectacular sea views of the Wales Coast Path. The trail also takes in countless ancient stone churches, dedicated to prominent Celtic saints, which provide shelter and rest along the way. At these churches, and in some post offices and cafes, pilgrims can pause to stamp their 'Pilgrim Passport'. The stamps, designed by local primary school children, detail the ancient landmarks, legends and sites encountered on the trail.

And so it was that I committed myself to undertaking this arduous trek on foot. I prepared as best I could. Hailing from inclement North Wales, I knew the importance of good waterproof clothing. I also studied Ordnance Survey maps in great detail and trained my body with daily walks, leading to an increasing obsession with the step count on my Fitbit. No matter how carefully we plan, though, pilgrimage always

holds an element of the unknown. We cannot predict the people we will meet, the lessons we will learn or the twists the journey will take. Most of all, until we take that first step, the significant challenges ahead remain hidden, waiting to unfold.

The six pilgrimage experiences

In hindsight, it was apt that the pilgrimage began in the twelfth-century Besingwerk Abbey. On the one hand, its impressive frame is a testament to the beautiful rich tapestry of faith held by our ancestors. On the other hand, the abbey is now an empty shell, which intimates only something small of its glorious past. As such, its crumbling walls are a stark reminder of the inhumanity, pain and suffering of the past, not least in the dissolution of the monasteries during the 16th-century Reformation. Such ruins, as travel writer Nick Mayhew-Smith puts it, 'bear witness to just as much anger and destruction as they do to love and devotion; they are places with a history of death, of mourning, of desecration'. My pilgrimage was to mirror the history of Basingwerk Abbey. The walk was not to be about joy and wonder alone. Rather, it was to take me to dark, distressing and depressing places. Furthermore, in the months after hiking the Pilgrim's Way, I would be forced to tread a second journey in which I would face a very different 'Hell's Mouth'.

As my North Wales pilgrimage came to an end, I crossed to Ynys Enlli on a calm and crystalline sea. I had no way of knowing the storms that would await me upon my return home. Very soon I was forced to confront a serious relapse of my spinal injury, a struggle made heavier by the looming shadow of depression and anxiety that so often accompanies the loss of health. The peace of Enlli felt distant as I was pulled into the depths of pain, uncertainty and helplessness.

I have come to see that second journey of injury and recovery also as a pilgrimage. Spiritual journeys, after all, share certain core elements. While the depth of pilgrimage cannot be fully contained, there are six distinct experiences that could be said to define such sacred travels:

suffering, wonder, signs, company, dependence and hope. This book is, therefore, not a chronological memoir, unfolding as a narrative, full of twists and revelations. In fact, you will know the ending from the very beginning. Instead, it takes a reflective approach, exploring each of these six pilgrimage experiences in turn. By doing so, it will invite us to attune our eyes and ears to God's presence in our own journeys. The chapters are shaped by my two very different pilgrimages: the first, the physical journey across North Wales, and the second, a journey of healing undertaken from the confines of my sofa. Each chapter will alternate between these two contexts as they are divided to reflect on each journey separately, offering insights from both.

We begin the first chapter with adversity and *suffering*, which can so often permeate pilgrimage. If the book were to end there, though, it would leave us with a bleak picture of life's journeys. Thankfully, suffering is only part of the story. Pilgrimage offers other experiences that are vivid, life-transforming and filled with grace.

In the second chapter, we will explore the sense of *wonder* found in our journeys and consider how the beauty of the natural world and sacred places stirs something deep within us.

The third chapter focuses on '*signs*', those unexpected moments when God's presence breaks through, lifting us and leaving us awestruck.

The fourth chapter highlights the significance of *company*, celebrating the often-unlikely mix of friends and strangers who journey with us. These people remind us of the central role of love and support in our lives.

Building on this, the fifth chapter examines our *dependence* on others and the importance of gratitude as we navigate our lives.

Finally, in the sixth chapter, we arrive at *hope*, which lies at the foundation of all our journeys. Hope weaves through our joys and struggles, infusing even the most ordinary moments with meaning and purpose. Hope is the thread that holds our journeys together.

Embracing our own pilgrimages

In exploring these six profound experiences that shaped my two journeys, this book also invites you to see your own paths as sacred and transformative pilgrimages. At times, you may be taken over literal mountains and through literal valleys, as you embrace physical pilgrimages. More often, though, the landscapes you navigate will be the unseen terrain of life's journeys.

So, as you read, consider the journey you are on right now. Perhaps it is a journey through *illness* or *recovery*, where uncertainty and struggle weigh heavy. Or the path of *vocation*, as you seek to discern God's calling. Or the daily rhythm of *work*, where you strive to find meaning in your labour. Or the journey of *education*, as you stretch your mind and grow through study. Or the passage of *faith*, as you wrestle with questions and deepen your beliefs. Or the journey of *family life*, as you pour yourself into the people you love. Or perhaps you are simply using this book to help you journey through *Lent* or *Advent*. Or maybe you relate to more than one!

All of your journeys can be seen as pilgrimages in themselves, shaping and transforming you, and, as you read, you will recognise the six experiences explored in this book shining through them. In each chapter of the book, following the exploration of my two journeys, a third section will help you to pause and consider your journeys, finishing with some questions to guide your personal reflection. You will be encouraged to encounter the struggle of suffering, the wonder of God's presence, signs that guide you, strength from those who walk beside you and humble reminders of your dependence on others. And through it all, you can open yourselves to the hope that redeems each step you take. By recognising these experiences in our own journeys, we not only come to understand ourselves more deeply, but we also begin to see where the light of God's grace is breaking through to illuminate our paths. In those moments, transformation happens, and we are drawn ever closer to becoming all that God intends us to be.

While the third section of each chapter, which concludes with questions for reflection, invites you to explore your own journey more personally, the book also includes a concise study guide at the end. This can be used for deeper individual exploration or as a resource for small group discussion, whether during Lent, Advent or any other season. The guide offers questions designed to help you think more deeply about the paths you are walking and to encourage meaningful conversation when meeting with others. It also includes suggested prayers to help bring your time to a thoughtful close. Whether you are reflecting alone or with others, it is hoped that these resources open your heart to the gentle unfolding of God's presence in your journeys.

Journeys of transformation

Kierkegaard compared Abraham's arduous journey up and down Mount Moriah (Genesis 22:1–19) to a pilgrimage. The patriarch's travels, which included that shocking divine instruction to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac, involved much anxiety, struggle and suffering. But he eventually, in Kierkegaard's words, 'headed home joyously, cheerfully, with trust in God'. It was a profoundly transformative event that left an indelible mark on him. He returned to Beersheba with a transformed perspective on relationships, not least his relationship with the transcendent. He had, after all, witnessed God's provision firsthand, and this reaffirmed his trust and faith in God as Father.

Similarly, I found myself profoundly transfigured through both my North Wales pilgrimage and my journey of injury and recovery. My ordinary, everyday life was deeply affected by the people I encountered, the experiences I underwent and the places I visited, both literally and metaphorically. My journeys involved struggle and suffering, but, like Abraham's ascent and descent of Moriah, they also paradoxically reinforced my trust in God's care, love and provision.

As such, on so many levels, philosopher Charles Foster's description of pilgrimages as 'the ultimate otherness' rings true. Both of my

journeys felt like surreal desert experiences, marked by exhilarating highs and crushing lows. Both pushed me beyond the familiar, forcing me to wrestle with life's deepest questions. They challenged me to confront, and even question, my intimate relationship with God. Yet, in both, he met me in my wilderness, bringing redemption, renewal and the promise of resurrection. My whole being was awakened as his love reached me in such unexpected ways. And, slowly but surely, the barrenness of Lent and the agony of Holy Week gave way to the triumphant, life-affirming hope of Easter Sunday.

TIME TO REFLECT

- Think back to any physical pilgrimages you've taken – where did you go and why?
- What other kinds of journeys are you on in your life right now?
- As you read this book, take time to reflect on both the physical pilgrimages you have made and the personal or spiritual journeys you are currently navigating.

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Cherry Vann, Archbishop of Wales

'Poignant, challenging and excruciatingly honest.'

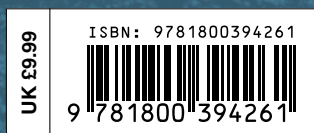
Rob Parsons OBE

After a gruelling 140-mile pilgrimage walking across the rugged terrain of North Wales, Trystan Owain Hughes finds himself facing another, very different pilgrimage as he recovers from a serious injury sustained on the walk.

In *To Hell's Mouth and Back* he explores his experience of suffering, considering how God can redeem and transform pain and disability, and examines how common experiences of pilgrimage are echoed in the challenges of our life journeys. Along the way, the reader is led to consider the journeys we all face, as we search for God's presence and hope in our joys and pains.



Trystan Owain Hughes is director of ministry development in the Church in Wales and canon emeritus of Llandaff Cathedral in Cardiff. He has also been vicar of a large church in Cardiff, diocesan director of ordinands, university chaplain, senior lecturer at various universities, director of Masters courses at a theological college, and a regular contributor to BBC Radio 2 and BBC Radio 4.



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