

In 1970 I remember being somewhere in the middle of a 25 mile day hike through the Yorkshire dales. I was part of a group of high school seniors on a geography class field trip. We were walking down a narrow lane with stone walls on either side. It was hot, and we were very tired. I remember I had painful blisters on both feet. Many of us – certainly me – were thinking about how we'd have done this differently; how we'd have made the walks shorter, the places we stayed more comfortable. I think I remember thinking that sitting at home in front of a warm fire with a good book never sounded so good! After an extended period of silence, the class comedian said “you know, in 25 years we'll look back on this as a wonderful experience!” You can imagine the derisive laughter!

But you know what? I DO remember that time with fondness! Not because of the walking, the blisters, the exhaustion, but because of the people who I was walking with. Many of their names have faded for me, but I can still see their faces, and what they were wearing. I remember where we stayed, and what we did, and how, when we came back we were different.

That, of course, is why pilgrimages have always been popular. The destination's always important, but the journey, and who you make it with – that's what it's really all about.

Both the Old Testament reading and today's Gospel have, behind them, a similar human desire: to control our environment; to control what's going on around us in ways that reflect both our particular perspective on the world – on how we think things should be – and to control what's going on around us in ways that meet our own personal needs. Because living can be a lot like that hike – full of sweat and blisters and exhaustion.

And when it seems like the world around us is unwilling to conform our view of the way that things should be, when our own needs aren't being met – when those things aren't happening we can get drawn into longing for a time when everything was the way it should be. Those golden days of yore.

In the Old Testament reading it's both – “Ah, do you remember those cucumbers?! Succulent, tasty, cool! And we could have them any time we wanted! And meat! Meat! Real meat, not this tasteless, brittle bread. Oh for those good old days! Why can't we go back?”

In the Gospel passage it's the same theme expressed slightly differently. The disciples were just reflecting their 1st Century culture but they sound very 21st Century: they wanted to control “the Jesus brand.” It's product infringement! Think of Apple winning a multi-million dollar settlement against Samsung last week and you get the picture!

In 1st Century Palestine Jesus wasn't unique as a healer. Archaeologists believe that the Pool of Siloam in Jerusalem – which some of us were able to visit in 2008 – was a healers' pool. When Jesus told the blind man to “go and wash in the pool of Siloam” in John's Gospel (ch. 9) he was almost certainly saying something that many healers in Jerusalem would have said.

The problem for the disciples was that others were doing healings BUT using Jesus name! In their mind that crossed a line – the world shouldn't work like that – it should work the way it always had, when healers respected other healers. “Why can't we go back?”

Beyond our readings some recent Jews and early Christians added another twist: not the halcyon days of yore but the halcyon days to come: a time in the near distant future when everything would be restored to it's rightful, God-given, original condition. Both the Book of Daniel and the Book of Revelation look for exactly this: the restoration of things to their original condition.

I believe that a nostalgia for a wonderful past, or a hope for the restoration of that past into the present, reflect something that's part of our core DNA – it's a basic human desire to live in a remembered better place, even if that place never existed as we remember it.

Both the readings reflect this backward glancing judgment that the past is better than the present, and that there's a right way and a wrong way to do things, and the right way is the speakers' way, the old way! That “speaker's way” is essentially the same in both:

- In the reading from Numbers the people long for an idyllic past, and then Joshua says, of the two who didn't go to the Tent of Meeting: “those two don't have institutional sanction! They've gone of the reservation!” It's not the proper way to do it!
- In the gospel, the disciples say “those others don't have institutional sanction! They've gone of the reservation; they're not doing it the way it should be done!”

And the response from Moses and Jesus is also the same in each: “The world you long for, the world that you think will make you feel better; that world no longer exists, even if it ever did; it can't exist now because the world is a different place AND YOU ARE DIFFERENT PEOPLE.”

Moses is saying: “You've forgotten the blisters and the exhaustion, the captivity of slavery, and you can't yet see that we are a new people, a different people, because of our journey together. YOU ARE DIFFERENT PEOPLE. We can't go back to the old places and the old ways.”

Jesus is saying: “you've forgotten why we're doing what we're doing here – forgotten the captivity of Roman occupation, the oppression of harsh government by those in league with them. And you've forgotten that, because of our journey, YOU ARE DIFFERENT PEOPLE, We can't go back to the old ways.”

So what are the new places and new ways? For the Israelites it wasn't so much a physical place but as state of being: freedom. Freedom from slavery; freedom to order their community in relationship with Yahweh. FREEDOM TO BECOME A NEW PEOPLE. If that meant that their religious life didn't entirely adhere to the traditional institutional ways that was just fine.

For Jesus and his mystified disciples it meant the same thing: freedom from the slavery of Roman occupation and religious institutional control, FREEDOM TO BECOME A NEW PEOPLE.

The past, and it's traditions, are not handed to us to preserve unchanged – we are different people

because of our past – our common past – we can't reclaim it unchanged and immutable AND WE SHOULD NOT EVEN TRY. The pain, and the blisters and the exhaustion and the sacrifice – and the joy and the companionship and the community – of those who have gone before us on their own shared pilgrimages of life continues to make those of us who follow them into new people, into a new community. That's what tradition really is: the gift of others' journeys of faith. It's as if we've have been given a great tree to care for; a tree that's filled with life, that's continually changing it's shape while keeping it's ultimate identity as a tree.

If we are to truly engage in this journey of faith it means remembering those who have walked together before us AND remembering that part of their gift is their faithful journey: to remember that they made their journey not only for themselves but for us; that they made their journey so that we might enter into a new future filled with God's goodness and grace, not so that we could preserve some stale imitation of the past simply because it is the past.

So go forth from this day carrying that torch – the light of God's transforming grace that makes all things new, and brings all of us to the great banquet supper of the Lamb. This is how it is for us as people of faith.