

Preface

Beginning with Experience

All good practical theology deals with everyday lived experience at some stage and often as a starting point on the theologically reflective cycle. We should like this book to be interactive with you, the reader, and so we begin with a short section where we “surface liminal experiences” and hope they might resonate in some ways with your own.

Surfacing Liminal Experiences

Walking along the Beach

Perhaps you have stood on the sea shore. Looking out to sea, you wonder what is beyond the horizon—what lands, what possibilities, what futures lie over there? Yet the waves still keep arriving from who knows where, with their regularly irregular breaking. The birds keep dipping and flying up into the air. You look back to the land, over the cliffs or sand dunes and remember where you have come from. There is a breeze coming from the land which reminds you of people you have been with, times you have been through and places you sojourned. They are, they have all made their contribution to the person you are and the breeze continues to caress your face. Not wanting to dwell on the past or

the future for too long—perhaps at a very particular moment in your life between things—you take a walk along the beach which has now become for you a place in between, a place to marvel in, a place both of process and movement and of the here and now.

Jacob's Ladder

Jacob is in deep trouble. As the second born of twins, he has just tricked his elderly blind father into giving him the family blessing instead of his elder brother, Esau. Esau, whom Jacob had already persuaded to sell his first-born birthright for a bowl of stew, has sworn to kill him. Jacob runs away from home, fleeing to his Uncle Laban's house where he hopes to find a wife and a possible future. At night he stops his journey by a random rock on which he lays down for a worried and fretful sleep. It is a nowhere place with no name or history, a place in between a trickster past and a perilous future. Asleep, Jacob dreams of a ladder that connects heaven and earth—joining them so intimately that this is how the angels come down to earth and return to their heavenly home. God speaks to Jacob with secure and sound promises about his future. When Jacob awakes with a start from this amazing dream he proclaims, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it. . . . How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God and the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:16-17). The nowhere place becomes somewhere holy, and Jacob is transformed. The place is named "Bethel"—literally the house of God—and Bethel remains a town you can still visit to this day.

Robin Hood

The uniquely English legend of Robin Hood offers us a hero who is "betwixt and between"—located between the rich and the poor, between the King and common people, between the city and forest. Robin subverts power, by taking from the rich and powerful in Church and state and giving to the poor, yet not in a revolutionary program but rather to reassert the rightful power in the land against the corrupt Sheriff and usurping King. The legend has located itself, despite the claims of others in other places, in Nottinghamshire. England has a North and South and the power and much of the wealth of the country is located in the South-East (a situation that has prevailed for many centuries).

Nottinghamshire is neither North nor South. In fact, if the River Trent is the dividing line between the North and the South, it could be exactly in the borderlands or even “no man’s land” between the two poles of the nation. It’s exactly the right place for our in-between hero’s derring-do.

The Camino Compostela

The Confraternity of St. James oversees a medieval pilgrimage route in northern Spain to Santiago de Compostela—and indeed many others which eventually join up with this route. From a few thousand pilgrims in the 1980s, the numbers following the *Camino Francés*—and all the other routes which lead from across Europe to Compostela—have grown now so that regularly hundreds of thousands of people complete the spiritual and physical challenge every year, many of whom are young.¹

On pilgrimage the trappings of normal life are stripped down to the most basic needs. Class, race, income, all identifiers of identity at home are rendered superfluous as pilgrims mix freely with one another in the daily task of making it—usually with sore feet—to the next *refugio*. Only one free night is allowed: stop any longer and you have to pay. People find themselves walking and sharing their stories with others they would never normally meet. The experience of walking the Camino has spawned much writing, from Christian and non-Christian alike—not least the German comedian, Hape Kerkeling’s (2009) best-selling reflections in *I’m Off Then*, and Emilio Estevez’s film, *The Way* (2010), starring his father, Martin Sheen.

Several of us can testify to the freedom of learning to travel very light on pilgrimage, the liberation of hearing life stories from the mouths of strangers now alongside each other. The value of the movement between periods of aloneness and those of great sociability and hospitality and the worth of being grounded physically during a prayerful time out of the regular structures of life.

Standing at the Threshold

All of these experiences have in common something about being at a threshold, neither in one place or the other, both literally

1. See the official Confraternity website with statistics compiled on those who complete the pilgrimage: <https://www.csj.org.uk/the-camino-today>

and figuratively. Something is surfacing which will change the people involved when they go back to “real” life in a different way, and sometimes with a different role. This book is about understanding and employing the power of “edge” experiences and “in-between” places in relation to the deeper processes of transformation they midwife. We believe we can offer some frameworks to help explain the energy available in the walk along the seashore, Jacob’s experience at Bethel, Robin Hood’s location, and the attraction of pilgrimage and many other such phenomena. If liminality is about “how human beings experience and react to change” (Thomassen, 2014: 1), what are the deep patterns, what decides whether such a process of change is liminal or simply transitional, or even makes someone marginal, leaving them stuck on the edge or genuinely transformative?

The Latin word for the edge, boundary or threshold is *limen* and this is where the word liminal in the title of our book comes from. We will say a lot more about the thinking behind the words liminal and liminality throughout the book. We hope we will offer some ways of considering together whether these experiences and yours could be called liminal or not and whether it is helpful to make the distinction.

Questions for Reflection

What experiences in your own life has this opening preface suggested to you? What do you find yourself associating with? Were those experiences in an explicitly Christian context or not? Describe what happened, the context in which it happened and the feelings that went with the experience. What was the outcome—what changed in you, if anything?