

Wayside Shrines (*Searching for Sunday*, chap. 24) – Psalm 118:1-2, 19-29, Matthew 21:1-11

What are the odds that the week Rachel Held Evans' book, *Searching for Sunday*, speaks about labyrinths would be the week we are building one – by outlining the path with sticks – here! You are welcome to come and walk the labyrinth anytime next weekend from 6pm on Thursday – when we are holding a short 'introduction' to the labyrinth- and to bring sticks to add to it.

Some of you will remember (it is pictured on our church website) the labyrinth the youth group built in 2015 - I can't believe it was 11 years ago! - out of cans that then went to a food pantry.

The most famous labyrinth, however, is the one inlaid in the floor of Chartres Cathedral in France, and the key characteristic of a labyrinth – that distinguishes it from a maze – is that in a labyrinth there is only one path to follow (a unicursal path is the fancy way of saying that). Walking that path is a form of meditation. If you are not good at sitting meditation – walking the labyrinth might be for you! And it is thought to have therapeutic effects – to reduce stress – leading to labyrinths being built at hospitals and in prisons. Evans writes that the path of the labyrinth also, *“reminds the pilgrim the journey of faith is rarely a straightforward one.”*

I remember the first time I encountered the labyrinth. It was January 2002 and we were in Japan visiting friends, after living there from 95 to 98, and I went with those friends to a conference where a canvas labyrinth, modelled on the Chartres Cathedral one, had been laid out on the floor of a gym.

I had just finished my theological studies, and we were expecting our second child, and I was looking for a pastoral role, and had been turned down by the only church that had interviewed me, and I desperately – desperately – wanted God to show me the path ahead.

From the way the conference facilitator spoke about the labyrinth I thought something amazing – something dramatic – would happen when I walked it, so I got up very early, so I would be alone, and went to the cold gymnasium and walked the labyrinth, left and left and right and left and right and left... all the way to the centre, praying and praying and praying, and then I walked out again and – nothing happened! There was no voice telling me a job awaited, no bright lights, no visions, no Bible verses popping into my head.

Rachel Held Evans is right. I wanted a path taking me directly to where I should go, but *“the journey of faith is rarely a straightforward one.”*

This section of *Searching for Sunday* is about Confirmation, which is a sacrament in the Catholic church and a rite for many Protestant traditions when those baptised as babies confirm their faith or choose *“one of these*

Christian traditions as their own". Baptists do not practice Confirmation because when believers are baptised, usually as adults, they are confirming that they belong to Jesus and to the church.

But, as Evans describes, for most of us confirmation or baptism, discovering where we are going and where we belong, like the journey of faith itself, is not a straightforward path.

Evans describes a time when she felt, as I felt on that trip to Japan, discouraged and uncertain. It was four months after the church she and her friends had tried to establish, had closed, and she took a trip, a pilgrimage of sorts, to a Benedictine monastery in Alabama.

It was a place where she felt very alien. *"I fumbled my way through the Kyrie, Gloria, and Sanctus, watching the people around me for cues for when to kneel, cross myself, and mumble along,"* she writes, and, *"I remained in the seat [during communion]. The 'Not Catholic?' part of my brochure suggested I use the moment to 'Pray for the reunification of the church,' which, though I'm sure it was unintended, sounded a lot like, 'You sit there and think about that schism you caused.'"*

But it was also a place where she felt, she writes, a little less alone; as she spent time in the quiet coolness of the church, as she gazed at a *pieta*, a *"wood carving in which Mary holds a broken Jesus in her arms, every mother's anguish etched into her face"*, as she lit candles for friends and for herself, and prayed, in John Milton's words, *"What in me is dark, illumine."*

"After all the contemporary Christian music and contemporary Christian books, after all the updated technology and dynamic speakers and missional enterprises", she writes, *"[After everything] all that I wanted from the church when I was ready to give it up was a quiet sanctuary and some candles. All I wanted was a safe place to be."*

Palm Sunday is also a period of discomfort and of joy amid the events of Holy Week. Jesus enters the city and there is confusion. *"The whole city,"* we read, *"was in turmoil, asking, 'Who is this?'"* Is this the one who will take us directly to the political and military power that we desire? And there is simply joy, the crowd spreading their cloaks and cutting down branches to make a path for this one they love, this one they know loves them, this prophet from Nazareth in Galilee.

For Jesus, too, this entry into Jerusalem is not a straightforward path. It is a left and a left and right and a left and a right and a left, that will take him, praying and praying and praying through all the events of Holy Week; to the last supper, to Gethsemane, to his trial, to his crucifixion, to his death and burial, and on the third day, to resurrection.

This week we have seen Sarah Mullally installed as the 106th Archbishop of Canterbury. As she said, *“As I look back over my life — at the teenage Sarah, who put her faith in God and made a commitment to follow Jesus — I could never have imagined the future that lay ahead.”*

Or the long path with all its twists and turns; growing up in Woking, marrying, having two children, working as a nurse, becoming England’s chief nursing officer at 37, the youngest person ever to hold that post, training for the ministry, being the fourth woman to become a bishop in 2015, and then bishop of London, and now Archbishop of Canterbury.

A long path. The kind of long path on which, Evans writes, *“no step taken in faith is wasted.”*

And Mullally depicted this by, in another historic first, walking, with her husband Eamonn, the 140km route along the Becket Camino, from St Paul’s Cathedral to Canterbury Cathedral, as an act of preparation for becoming Archbishop, and as an act of demonstration that faith is about following Jesus, faith is walking with God.

“It has become cliché,” Evans writes, *“to talk about faith as a journey, and yet the metaphor holds. Scripture doesn’t speak of people who found God. Scripture speaks of people who walked with God. This is a keep-moving, one-foot-in-front -of-the-other, who-knows-what’s next deal.... [But] no step taken in faith is wasted, not by a God who makes all things new.”*

As we accompany Jesus entering Jerusalem today, as we join with others calling for a welcome for refugees and migrants, as we go about our week reflecting on the events of Holy Week, as we come together again to remember Jesus’ death and celebrate Jesus’ resurrection, let us remember that we walk this labyrinth of life with God.