

Rachel writes . . .

With so much in the news that makes me feel sad or fearful, it was a joy in the first half of February to come across a story that gave me reason to feel joy and hope. I don't remember how I first stumbled across this particular news item, but it was about a group of nineteen Buddhist monks (and one dog) who set out on a Walk of Peace from their monastery in Texas to walk 2,300 miles to Washington DC. They left the monastery on October 26th and walked for four months, arriving in Washington DC on February 10th, where they were welcomed at Washington National Cathedral for an interfaith service. It was a journey of 108 days, which is a sacred number in Buddhism.

I don't know what they expected as they set out - maybe no one would notice their journey, or maybe a few people would greet them along the way. What actually happened was amazing. As they walked in single file, in silence, mindfully marking each step, walking through freezing temperatures, people came out in great numbers to offer food and drink, to cheer them on, and to kneel and ask for a blessing. When they arrived in Washington DC, thousands of people came out to greet them.

What was it about their journey that touched so many people? In an article in the Guardian, reference was made to how fractured American society is, and called the monks and their journey 'a balm for America's wounds'. The New York Times noted that Americans are feeling weary, and that the monks' journey gave people an opportunity to slow down, to think about peace. Many spoke about gaining a sense of calm being in the monks' presence. "May you be safe and warm. Thank you for your walk of peace. We desperately need this in our world now," one follower on Facebook wrote.

At Washington National Cathedral, they were welcomed by Washington Episcopal (Anglican) Bishop Mariann Budde. "Their long journey and gentle witness invite us all to deepen our commitment to compassion," she said. The dog accompanying the monks on their journey was a street dog with a heart-shaped mark on his forehead whom they had adopted when they did a similar walk in India. Aloka, which means "light" in Sanskrit, became a celebrity in his own right, with his own Facebook page.

In his book, *Three Mile an Hour God*, the Japanese theologian Kosuke Koyama notes that 'Love has its speed. It is a spiritual speed. It is a different kind of speed from the technological speed to which we are accustomed. It goes on in the depth of our life, whether we notice or not, at three miles an hour. It is the speed we walk and therefore the speed the love of God walks.'

This is the speed the monks walked, and the people who witnessed their walk also witnessed peace, calm and love. They stood by the side of the road to witness love. In the Gospels we read about Jesus and the disciples making their way from town to town, from village to village, on foot. They will have walked at the same speed as the monks did, at a speed where you can notice everything around you, where you can share a sense of peace and calm with those around you. This Lent, let us all walk at the speed that God walks - the speed of love.

Blessings, Rachel CJN