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Journal from England and Scotland (Part 2)

John Dear | Sep. 11, 2012 On the Road to Peace

For the last three weeks, I've been traveling through Scotland and England on a national speaking tour about Jesus and peacemaking. This is the second half of my journal account. Read the first part here [1].

Monday, Sept. 3, Birmingham, England

Tonight, I spoke at St. Chad's Cathedral in Birmingham's City Centre. "How can we keep on speaking about peace even though we are so widely dismissed by people and ignored by the mainstream media and culture?" someone asked. "How do we communicate with people in the military?" another asked. In my talk about Jesus and peacemaking, I urged people to speak out, to be prophetic voices on behalf of the God of peace, to denounce our war in Afghanistan and pursue the Gospel vision of peace -- and to be faithful to the task at hand, no matter what the outcome. We leave the results in God's hands.

Yes, we may be ignored, dismissed and rejected, but so was Jesus, I said. Why should we expect a different reaction? We need to be rooted in daily prayer, a group or community of like-minded friends, and regular public action for peace. Then we just keep on going forward, doing what we can modestly for peace and justice.

I urged them to think of their own heroic abolitionists -- William Wilberforce, John and Thomas Clarkson, and the Quakers -- who worked so tirelessly for an impossible goal, the abolition of slavery. They spoke out and persevered. Our challenge is even greater -- to work for the abolition of war, poverty and nuclear weapons. We have to keep speaking out and building a new global movement for peace whose results we might not live to see.

Whenever I meet people in the U.S. who are in the military, young people interested in entering the military or people who work at military bases or nuclear weapons installations, I always ask them not to join the military, to quit the military, to quit their jobs building weapons, I continued. We need to urge everyone to leave the culture of war and find life-giving work. This is what Archbishop Oscar Romero did. He was always calling upon people to leave the death squads and the elite culture. "Be converted to the Gospel," he told people. Few did, and eventually they killed him, but he was faithful and did what he could, and his death planted the seeds for peace that continue to reverberate around the world.

Tuesday, Sept. 4, Liverpool, England

After spending the night at Fr. Gerry's rectory at Our Lady of the Wayside Church in Solihull, south of Birmingham, I drove north to Liverpool, which has certainly been built up since I was last here 15 years ago. It was another warm, sunny day, and I decided to keep driving just a little farther north to the family beach town of Southport, where I walked, had lunch and enjoyed the sea breeze. In the late afternoon, I drove over to the nearby town of Wigan, where I spoke in St. John's church to a friendly crowd of Liverpudlians.

They asked for my thoughts on the U.S.-backed occupation of the Palestinians and how we can promote interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims, but there were not many questions, mainly observations

about the sad state of the world. Earlier, I was interviewed for a second time by BBC radio. The reporter was friendly but relentless: Why do you get arrested so much? Do you think Tony Blair and George W. Bush are war criminals? What about Adolph Hitler? What about Saddam Hussein? What about President Barack Obama? Why is the church so silent about war? What about the just war theory? What about military defense? And so forth. I answered them each as clearly, as succinctly, as possible.

As I was driving here to Liverpool, I reflected upon this very full year -- I've basically been traveling and speaking almost nonstop since Jan. 21, when I gave the annual Martin Luther King Jr. lecture at Colgate University in Hamilton, N.Y. I've spoken at countless colleges over the years and given perhaps a hundred lectures alone since January, but I will never forget the college freshman who raised his hand that day for a question after my talk.

"John," he asked, "can you please tell me how to carry the cross like Martin Luther King Jr. did so that I can follow Jesus?"

I was stunned and moved to tears. Suddenly I realized that that is *the* question, the question every Christian should be asking, the one question no one asks, except this wise young man.

What does it mean to carry the cross? How do we carry the cross? How can we help each other carry the cross? For me, the cross is full-time, active, nonviolent resistance to the culture of war and the empire of death. It is a requirement for anyone who professes to follow the nonviolent Jesus; yet so few talk about it, much less engage in his steadfast nonviolent resistance.

After the talk tonight, everyone lingered until 9:30 for tea and biscuits. Then my hosts, Steve (from the justice and peace office of the archdiocese of Liverpool) and Maggie (from the justice and peace office of the diocese of Lancaster), and their families and co-workers had a dinner party for me next door at Fr. John's rectory. Steve had cooked a fabulous vegetarian dish and we stayed up well past midnight talking about God, Jesus, the church, the world, the peace movement, Liverpool and the Beatles. What good people! A wonderful evening.

Wednesday, Sept. 5, York, England

York is now my favorite city. A striking medieval town, the city center is closed off like Siena, so everyone walks the narrow, windy, cobblestoned streets, enjoying the shops and cafes, looking at the ancient buildings. In the center is the mammoth, gorgeous medieval church, the York Minster, begun in 1120. I was overwhelmed by the Gothic cathedral and the town, and spent almost the whole day wandering around its streets and sitting in the beautiful park.

Tonight, I spoke at York St. John's University, just a few yards from the cathedral but on the other side of the old city wall. I enjoyed meeting everyone and reflecting with them on our work for peace. Later, I drove north and stayed with my host, Barbara, chair of the justice and peace commission for the diocese of Middlesbrough, and her family.

While walking around York, I stumbled upon the home of St. Margaret Clitherow, whose house is now a chapel tucked in the middle of all the souvenir shops on one of York's little streets. On March 12, 1586, her house was raided and she was arrested for harboring Jesuit priests, who were considered notorious criminals and traitors to the government. Turns out, she had been secretly hiding them and helping them offer Mass. She was tried in the Guildhall, found guilty and sentenced to death "by pressing." Large weights were placed on her until she was crushed to death. As the crowd watched, she was heard to say, "Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, have mercy on me!" She was killed right next to one of the main bridges into the city center.

A wife, mother and well-known figure in town, Margaret was known for being loving, gentle and devout. She felt called to hide and defend these Jesuits and priests whose lives were in danger.

Sitting in her home, I was shaken by her story. As a felonious, notorious Jesuit in trouble for my work against the U.S. government and its wars, I was moved to think of St. Margaret. I was equally disturbed by the insane violence and killing between Christians -- Protestants and Catholics -- then and now, including the riots these last few nights in Belfast, Northern Ireland.

So I prayed to St. Margaret for support and will continue to preach the Gospel of peace and nonviolence in the hope that one day, Christians will stop killing each other and refuse to kill anyone, that we might start following the nonviolent Jesus.

Thursday, Sept. 6, Sunderland, England

Durham, England, is my latest favorite city. I spent the day here, wandering the streets and climbing the hill to tour the mammoth cathedral. I was deeply moved by this enormous cathedral because St. Cuthbert is buried here along with the great writer St. Bede, and their good spirits linger in the air. Cuthbert has been loved for 1,300 years in Britain, yet few Americans have heard of him. He was part of the famous Christian monastic island -- Lindisfarne -- founded by St. Aidan, but was known for his visions, healing miracles and peacemaking. Bede wrote about him, which is how we know the holy tales. Fundamentally, he was a person of prayer, and his prayer transformed him into a healing peacemaker who inspired millions. What a beautiful life and gift for us all.

Tonight, I spoke in the coastal town of Sunderland, near the Scottish border, on the North Sea. Fr. Michael welcomed me at St. Joseph's church in the neighborhood of Millfield, and a good crowd listened intently, with the possible exception of one or two people who walked out as I explained the failures of war and our rejection of Jesus' nonviolence. Afterward, Fr. Michael hosted a beautiful dinner in the rectory, and he and his friends told me stories of their church, St. Cuthbert, the dissolution by Henry VIII, and the ongoing struggles between the Catholic and the Anglican churches.

Over the past few weeks, I've been immersed in the past, in the long history of war, church division, and British saints while at the same time trying to lecture about the future, about the coming of a more just, nonviolent world -- all the while trying to stay calm through this hectic tour by living mindfully in the present moment.

But I confess I'm relieved to miss the Republican and Democratic conventions, which as far as I'm concerned are two sides of the same corporate coin belonging to the 1 percent. I see these conventions as liturgies for the anti-Gospel of corporate greed, war and global imperialism. They remind me that we are called to resist the culture of war, support the global movements for justice and peace, and claim our true citizenship in the reign of God.

Friday, Sept. 7, Leeds, England

Whitby is now my new favorite city. I was up early and drove south along the east coast of the North Sea, from Sunderland through Hartlepool and Middlesbrough into the North Moors and finally down into the gorgeous sea village of Whitby, where I stopped for lunch and a walk along the river. Red and white houses line the hills on both sides of the river, which is filled with blue and white fishing boats. The towering ancient ruins of the Whitby Abbey stand on the south hillside overlooking the town. A magical place.

It's been sunny all week, for the first time in three months. Driving along the English coast has felt like driving along the coast of Northern California, with the green hills leading down to the cliffs along the ocean.

Afterward, I headed over to Scarborough, another majestic town, this one standing high above a large beach. By chance, I drove up to the castle and found St. Mary's church and discovered Anne Bronte's grave. I could see why Charlotte buried her there; the graveyard looks over a hundred miles of spectacular English coastline and the North Sea. Now I'm back in York for a cup of coffee, on my way to Leeds to speak tonight at St. Benedict's church in Garforth.

Saturday, Sept. 8, London, England

Fr. Gerard welcomed me to his church and a good crowd turned out for my talk, which was hosted by my friend Fr. Simon Lodge. Afterward, Simon and I drove over to his rectory in Pontefract for a late meal. Today, I slept in and rested. We drove to the Leeds airport and turned in the rental car, then had lunch on a mountaintop overlooking a hundred miles of the Yorkshire Dales, with the village of Otley below. A glorious, clear, sunny September day.

I've noticed how many people refer to the posthumously published interview with Milan's Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini after his recent death. The BBC gave it a lot of attention; the priests and people are talking about it; and now the latest issue of *The Tablet* features it.

"The Church is tired in affluent Europe and in America," Martini said shortly before his death. "Our culture has grown old, our churches are big, our religious houses are empty, the bureaucracy of our churches is growing out of proportion, our liturgies and our vestments are pompous ... The Church is 200 years behind the times. How come it doesn't rouse itself? Are we afraid? Fearful instead of courageous?"

"This is the authentic voice of an Old Testament prophet," *The Tablet* writes in its lead editorial, "castigating the mighty in the name of the Lord." He wanted serious change from the total reformation if not the abolition of the curia to Communion for divorced and remarried Catholics to collaboration at every level of the church. I give thanks for his voice, and wish church leaders would heed his concerns and make the necessary changes that will help inspire a new generation. We can't afford to seek power, domination and authority and ignore the nonviolent Jesus and his Gospel of peace and love. If the church does not adhere to the Gospel of peace, love and nonviolence, it will die.

Sunday, Sept. 9, London, England

"The people of England are suffering from apathy," Fr. Simon said over coffee this morning. That's his take on the situation. While I've met marvelous people everywhere, there are few signs of a strong movement against war, nuclear weapons, greed and violence. Later at Mass, Simon preached on the prayer of Jesus as our fundamental prayer: "Your kingdom come, your will be done," he said, urging us to make that prayer the center of our lives, to let it transform our lives and the world. Beautiful.

Afterward, I took the train to north London and settled into the Guiseppe Conlon Catholic Worker House on Green Lanes. Ciaron and I went out to a nearby Turkish restaurant for vegetarian kebobs and talked late about our lifelong struggles for peace.

Monday, Sept. 10, London

This morning, I took the Tube to Knightsbridge to the Ecuadoran embassy, which is surrounded by British police. Inside, I visited with Julian Assange, the founder and director of WikiLeaks, who is wanted by the United States for leaking documents exposing its murderous war on the children of Afghanistan. He's been granted asylum by Ecuador in his ongoing struggle for justice.

Blowing the whistle on war crimes, as they say, is not a war crime. Perhaps someday, I'll write about our good visit, but for now, I urge everyone to pray for Julian and for everyone involved in his situation in Britain, Sweden, Ecuador and the U.S. And to pray also for Bradley Manning, the young soldier who allegedly leaked the U.S. documents, now in solitary confinement who also faces life in prison. My hope is that everything can be resolved peacefully and nonviolently, that they will both be freed, and that the American people will wake up and demand an end to our global war-making.

Afterward, I walked through London, stopping in the bookstores on Charing Cross Road, and visiting St. Peter's Church in Soho, where an exhibit on Mother Teresa displays her personal effects, letters, her handwritten M.C. Constitution, clothes and belongings. Very moving.

Tonight, I spoke at the church next to the Guiseppe Conlon Catholic Worker house and told of my experience 11 years ago after Sept. 11, my work for the Red Cross, organizing against the war in Afghanistan, and our recent protests against the drones at Creech AFB. It was wonderful to see so many friends again, such as Pat Gaffney of Pax Christi, Maria Elena of CAFOD, and Bruce Kent.

Tuesday, Sept. 11, London

I leave London this morning grateful for the many friends I've made, for all the good people I've met who are working for justice and peace, and for the hope they've given me. My prayer is simple: May the God of peace strengthen us for the journey ahead, inspire us to renew our work, bless our modest efforts for peace, and grant us a new world without war.

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John Dear will lead a daylong retreat, "Blessed are the Peacemakers," Sept. 29 in Los Angeles. To see John's 2012 speaking schedule, go to John Dear's website [2]. His new book, *Lazarus, Come Forth!* [3], explores Jesus as the God of life calling humanity (in the symbol of the dead Lazarus) out of the tombs of the culture of war and death. John's talk at last year's Sabeel conference in Bethlehem is featured in the new book *Challenging Empire* [4]. John is profiled with Dan Berrigan and Roy Bourgeois in a new book, *Divine Rebels* [5] by Deena Guzder (Lawrence Hill Books). This book and other recent books, including *Daniel Berrigan: Essential Writings [6]*; *Put Down Your Sword [7]* and *A Persistent Peace [8]*, are available from Amazon.com.

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