



## On Pilgrimage and Sacramentality: Hilaire Belloc's *The Four Men*

Recently, upon reading Hilaire Belloc's classic *The Four Men*, I came to a new appreciation: the virtue of "re-reading". The first read, I have learned, always tells you what happened, but each subsequent read tells you what it means. There is no better work to re-read than a book about a pilgrimage. Especially one described by Hilaire Belloc. We care where the pilgrimage takes us. But we care even more what the pilgrimage means.

Belloc opens his extraordinary journey having found himself in a state—a funk—in which we all may find ourselves sooner or later. It is the bittersweet position of taking stock in our life when, in a moment of naked honesty and true poignancy, we find we have strayed from our intended path. Belloc's moment came on the twenty-ninth of October, 1902 to be exact. He was in an English inn known as the "George" at Robertsbridge. Nursing port and staring at the fire, the intense, brooding Belloc arrived at a harsh conclusion: *You are missing what matters.*

It seems Hilaire Belloc said it best in his own words:

What are you doing? You are upon some business that takes you far, not even for ambition or for adventure, but only to earn. And you will cross the sea and earn your money, and you will come back and spend more than you have earned. But all the while your life runs past you like a river, and the things that are of moment to men you do not heed at all. . . .

Next, Belloc envisioned home. In a picture of unparalleled clarity, he saw the woods, the valley, the ridge and the perfect,



beloved river Arun. Home was calling. *Home.* It was then and there that Belloc castigated himself and became firmly resolved.

What you are doing is not worth while, and nothing is worth while on this unhappy earth except the fulfillment of a man's desire. Consider how many years it is since you saw your home, and for how short a time, perhaps, its perfection will remain. Get up and go back to your own place if only for one day. . . .

And with this almost Providentially appointed mandate, he would go. It is the stuff pilgrimages are made of. A general malaise about the way things are. A deep emotional (if not spiritual) call to set things aright. An irrepressible desire to start forthwith (for there is no time to lose!). Or, put another way, in the midst of uncertainty, melancholy or suffering, there is a Calling. It is a Calling to receive Grace. A Calling to come Home. *It is the stuff pilgrimages are made of.*

It is this initial dissatisfaction—this spiritual ennui—that would lead Hilaire Belloc on a pilgrimage home to his beloved land of Sussex. And over five days, from October 29th to November 2nd, 1902, traversing the dark broodings of All Hallow's Eve and

bright illumination of All Saints' Day, Belloc would find himself transformed. But not without help.

*The Four Men* is aptly titled because, along this pilgrimage, Belloc encounters three men who decide to accompany him for their own reasons. And this company was welcome for Belloc himself admitted, "All companionship is good, but chance companionship is the best of all."

And so, on his initial steps from his table in the "George" at Robertsbridge, Belloc would meet his first "chance companion": a sturdy whiskered elder nicknamed "Grizzlebeard". And in words that embody the great journey they began together, Belloc said, "Cutting ourselves quite apart from care and from the world, we set out with our faces westward, to reach at last the valley of the Arun and the things we knew."

In short order, Belloc (who dubs himself, "Myself") and Grizzlebeard would encounter "Sailor", a brash, outspoken sort who immediately takes on his new acquaintances' pilgrimage as his own. The pair are initially struck by the confidence with which this young buck would travel along with them: "There is no ship waiting for me in Bosham harbor, but I shall fall upon my

feet. So have I lived since I began this sort of life, and so I mean to end it.”

In turn, speaking with greater meaning than the Sailor understands, Grizzlebeard chastens, “It will not end as you choose.”

And so they walk along as three. Not long thereafter, the motley trio encounter their fourth man. “A lanky fellow, moving along in a manner quite particular to men of one sort throughout the world, men whose thoughts are always wool-gathering, and who seem to have no purpose, and yet in some way are by the charity of their fellows kept fed and clothed.”

Grizzlebeard further characterized this strange fellow as someone in possession of the things the other three lack: unpredictability and impracticality. He was the type not to be trusted with a gun. But, as Grizzlebeard concludes, “This man before us, if I mistake not, is of a kind much nearer to God.”

Behold, the Poet.

And so the unlikely quartet was fully joined and would venture together to a place they once knew. Home.

Along the pilgrim’s path (as well as in inns replete with tankards of beer), the four men would talk. Little was done in the way of formal introduction. That was for stuffy and insincere sitting rooms. Instead, they became acquainted through the stories they told, the legends they recited, the songs they sang and the truths they defended.

Mile after mile, meal after meal, drink after drink, they talked. Profundities were mixed with superficialities. Humor was mixed with ineffable truth. At one time, one of the men is the sage. At another, the same man is the fool.

It is the curious (and almost singular) gift of Belloc the storyteller and Belloc the poet to have two such rare and admirable gifts. He carries the ability to regale a crowd of half-drunk pub dwellers with a story so funny that they would be doubled over and breathless from laughter. And yet simultaneously, Belloc possesses the capacity to so tenderly touch a matter precious to the soul that the poignancy lands like the gentlest kiss and moves the reader to welled-up emotion.

So the story of St. Dunstan violently pulling the Devil around by his nose is shortly followed by a thoughtful dissertation on friendship.

The worst thing in the world is the passing of human affection. No man who has lost a friend need fear death. . . . For the comprehension by one soul of another is something borrowed from whatever lies outside time: it is not under the conditions of time. Then if it passes, it is past—it never grows again; and we lose it as men lose a diamond, or as men lose their honor.

And the Poet’s insight that “[t]here is always some holiness in the rising of rivers, and a great attachment to their springs” is soon countered by a bawdy, full-throated but highly theological song by the Sailor to a growing and curious crowd of onlookers. The song’s title conveys the bellowing vigor with which it was no doubt sung: *Song of the Pelagian Heresy for the Strengthening of Men’s Backs and the Very Robust Outthrusting of Doubtful Doctrine and the Uncertain Intellectual.*

Now the Faith is old, and the Devil  
is bold,  
Exceedingly bold indeed;  
And the masses of doubt that are  
floating about  
Would smother a mortal creed.  
But we that sit in a sturdy youth,  
And still can drink strong ale,  
Oh—let us put it away to infallible  
truth,  
Which always shall prevail!  
And so it is for five straight days among  
four wondrous men.

But the days pass quickly and, before long, the four men find themselves enjoying one last meal, one last toast before their agreed upon separation takes place at the borderlands of Home. It is a melancholy parting, sweetened only by the expectation of reaching their pilgrimage’s end as encapsulated in the words of the Poet:

When I get to my own country  
I shall lie down and sleep;  
I shall watch in the valleys  
The long flocks of sheep.  
And then I shall dream, for ever  
and all,  
A good dream and deep.

For Grizzlebeard, the return home, though always welcome, is never a final satisfaction. It never fully slakes the thirst of the soul for the repose it desires:

For my part, I have travelled very widely . . . and, one time and another—altogether forty times—I have come back to the flats of my own country, eastward of the Vale of Glynde. I have seen once more the heavy clouds of home fresh before the wind over the Level, and I have smelt, from the saltings and the innings behind Pevensey, the nearness of the sea. Then indeed I have each time remembered my boyhood, and each time I have been glad to come home. But I never found it to be a final gladness.

As Belloc mournfully bid goodbye to his three friends—nay, brothers—they disappeared into the mist. He was home, but not yet Home. And though the Water that would resolve all thirst, the Bread that would sate all hunger and the Home which would grant supreme rest was not yet here, Belloc could rest assured. Though his Final Gladness was yet to be, the pilgrimage was one of deeply sacramental moments. “To us four men, no one of whom could know the other, and who had met by I could not tell what chance, and would part very soon for ever, these things were given. All four of us together received the sacrament of that wide and silent beauty, and we ourselves went in silence to receive it.”

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