

The Revd Hugh White: A Long Walk in Sweden

Freezing to death seemed to be on the cards. How low would the temperatures have to go? The tent was basic, the sleeping bag of questionable quality. Yesterday Spring had been coming to southern Sweden, but today, as I started my long-anticipated walk, there was snow on the ground. My exhilaration at getting under way hadn't survived day one. I'd got lost more or less immediately, the snow causing confusion; the rucksack was unreasonably, stupidly, painfully heavy, and it looked as if I couldn't keep to my timetable even if I stayed alive.

The idea had been to spend six weeks of my sabbatical investigating the Swedish Church. It's a Church in many ways similar to the Church of England to which it is now closely affiliated under the Porvoo agreement. I wanted to talk to Swedish Church people about their circumstances in general. More particularly, there's a link between the Diocese of Oxford and the Diocese of Växjö and the beginnings of a Parish link between Jönköping (Växjö Diocese) and Deddington – a choir from Jönköping visited us last year. Could I do anything to strengthen these links? Then there was that romantic Swedish right to roam legislation which gives you liberty to pitch your tent more or less anywhere for a night or two. Did that really work? And perhaps I could improve my shamefully rudimentary Swedish by six weeks' exposure to the language without my Swedish-speaking wife.

Good enough reasons to be worrying now about diminishing body temperature in a freezing forest in the Småland Highlands? Possibly, but the comfortable hotel in Växjö from which I'd started in the morning seemed rather attractive that first night of the walk. At least I had several layers of clothing available, good gloves and, most important of all, a woolly hat.

Finding myself not dead the next morning, I could reflect that pilgrimages were not particularly meant to be fun; in the Middle Ages they were often undertaken as a penance, and there was clearly going to be penitential discomfort in this one. For the walk was a pilgrimage. The shrine I was seeking was that of St Birgitta at Vadstena, about 130 miles north of Växjö. I wanted to spend the latter part of Holy Week and Easter at the great abbey built at Birgitta's instructions in the 15th century for the religious community she founded. Through her community and through her writings Birgitta's influence was considerable – in England greatest in the 15th century – and she is now a patron saint of Europe. The Abbey she founded and its associated Pilgrim Centre constitute today a major spiritual resource. Birgitta, you might say, is part of a Swedish Christian pay-back to us; a pay-back for the important role in the evangelisation of Sweden played by English churchmen in the 11th century, when St Sigfrid, an Englishman, is said to have founded Växjö Diocese.

So I went from Sigfrid to Birgitta, from Växjö to Vadstena. Dropping down out of the snow belt to Lake Vättern I reached my first goal, Jönköping – on schedule, amazingly – and the warm hospitality of choir friends in that charming city. There I could rest and there I could leave some excess baggage. Some days and about fifty miles later, having walked up the east side of Vättern under a lighter load and with Spring now indisputably sprung – clamorous bird-song, small but brilliant flowers by the roadside, serene sunsets over the lake – I reached Vadstena. In the company of fellow pilgrims whom it was a pleasure to get to know, I experienced the Swedish Church's grave and decorous liturgies for Maundy Thursday and Good Friday, familiar and followable despite the foreign language, and Holy Week's culmination in the services of Easter Eve and Easter morning. The distribution of daffodils ('Easter lilies' in Swedish) at the end of the latter was just one of many greatly moving moments in the services I attended. Most moving of all, however, was to know myself, or rather to feel myself, a member of the world-wide Church, united to my fellow Christians not just in

Sweden, but everywhere; all of us, despite the differences of language and culture, one in the body of Christ.

Priests in the Swedish Church, despite that Church's wealth and its high staffing levels, don't get sabbaticals. The Church of England is in this respect, anyway, wiser. I have come back from my three months away refreshed and restored, with new perspectives and maybe even actually changed. I'd like to thank all those in Deddington and Hempton who bore heavier burdens than usual in looking after the churches of the parish in my absence. I hope you will come to feel it was worth it!

Hugh White

Note: Hugh undertook his 'long walk' over two weeks at the end of March and the beginning of April 2009.