

The Archbishop of York John Sentamu on his pilgrimage

Six months and 2,661 square miles: what the Archbishop of York learned from his pilgrimage of Yorkshire



The Archbishop of York Dr John Sentamu on his pilgrimage CREDIT: CHARLOTTE GRAHAM - GUZELIAN

A few years ago, during his annual nine days of silent reflection on Holy Island off the Northumberland Coast, the Archbishop of York heard a voice. It came to him about midday and spoke three simple words: ‘on the road’.

“It took me a while to study it,” the Most Rev Dr John Sentamu says. “But then I realised. That is what

I am going to do.”

An operation for an advanced form of prostate cancer in 2013 delayed his plans but on December 1 last year, after seeking the Queen’s blessing for an extended leave of absence from regular church duties, Dr Sentamu set off from the North Yorkshire town of Whitby.

Ahead of him lay a six-month pilgrimage across the Diocese of York which spans 2,661 square miles.

“I’ve been in York for 10 years and wanted to get to know the place better,” he says. “It’s a vast diocese, and once we worked out I needed to spend six days in each deanery, I’m afraid you couldn’t do it under six months.”

With shock-absorbing poles in each hand and porridge oats in his bag, the 66-year-old began to simply walk.

Today that marathon journey comes to an end with a service at York Minster. Over the past 122 days Dr Sentamu has called in at more than 130 schools, 480 churches and 22 hospitals and hospices. Along the way he has waded through the winter floods, been called into spur of the moment baptisms including one in the fountain at Castle Howard, and worn the soles of his once sturdy leather boots down to the base.



The Archbishop addresses a congregation during his pilgrimage CREDIT: CHARLOTTE GRAHAM - GUZELIAN

The walk has coincided with his tenth year as the Archbishop of York, and Dr Sentamu says the revelations he has encountered along the way have ranged from the mundane – “I never realised the East Riding produces the largest quantities of peas in the whole of Europe” - to the deeply spiritual.

On Friday, when the Telegraph joined him for some of his final few miles through the outskirts of York, he revealed publicly to a church congregation for only the second time a personal story of the barbarism of Idi Amin’s Uganda which he fled in 1974. The first time he had spoken of it was only the previous week.

During prayers at both St Oswald’s Church in Fulford and Heslington Church, Dr Sentamu described how eight friends from Makerere University in Kampala had been “butchered” in front of him. A vice chancellor he knew from the university also disappeared and has never been found alive.

“Why I am still alive is a mystery to me,” he said. “I was very resentful. It was very hard and I was having nightmares.” Eventually, he was given “the strength to forgive Amin and the general who did these things”.

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Dr John Sentamu

Speaking after the Heslington Church service, Dr Sentamu says he felt moved to offer up his own example to the congregation to help them forgive. “As a preacher, examples from my own life come to fruition.”

In 2005 Dr Sentamu embarked on a similar odyssey, touring his West Midlands diocese on foot to mark its centenary. But that was a far smaller distance to cover and he completed it in 39 days.

Yorkshire has proved far harder going. On what he describes as the toughest day – an 18-mile trudge through monsoon-like conditions to the most northerly point of his diocese called The Gare - a BMW driver stopped to offer the Archbishop a lift and called him “nuts” when he refused.

Walking with his purple scapular over black combat trousers and a Craghoppers fleece, the 97th Archbishop of York certainly attracts plenty of attention. When he made an impromptu stop to bless a jewellery shop in Bridlington, he says the owner screamed when she recognised who it was.

Playing the conga drums at St Oswald's primary school CREDIT: CHARLOTTE GRAHAM - GUZELIAN

He moves at a blistering pace although regularly stops for impromptu conversations with people he encounters along the way. Outside St Oswald’s Church he was asked by a woman who had just been diagnosed with cancer for the third time to join her in a moment of prayer. Around the corner outside the adjoining primary school, he was approached by a man called Majid Hussein, a 51-year-old

Ugandan Asian whose family was expelled under Idi Amin and moved to York in 1973.

Dr Sentamu says he has experienced countless moving stories on the road. “There was a mother in the middle of a road which was flooded and she asked me to baptize her child,” he says. “I baptised another child in a well and met a woman who was supposed to die that day but survived another 13 days.”

He also recalls meeting an East Riding farmer who gave him directions when he was lost in a field. “I thanked him and told him I was going to bless his farm, and this tear started coming down his cheek. He said nobody had ever blessed him before.”

He has been grilled about same sex marriage, Brexit, poverty and the rise of Isil

Dr Sentamu has been out on the road from Tuesday to Sunday each week and stayed in the houses of widows and widowers along the way. “We love talking negatively about our society,” he says. “But that is not the truth.”

On Friday we visited two schools: St Oswald’s Primary School - where Dr Sentamu accompanied the choir with an impromptu performance on the conga drums – and Fulford School.

There he met a group of 13-year-olds taking part in his Young Leaders Award, established five years ago. Freya Ellis, a 13-year-old from the village of Bishopthorpe, told Dr Sentamu she was raising money through a bake sale for a woman in her village diagnosed with motor neurone disease the day before Christmas.

He also met with a group of A-level students and was asked by one, 18-year-old Laura Bewsher, about his views on same sex marriage, which he has previously opposed on record.

“I have always believed to diminish homosexual people is not right,” Dr Sentamu replied. “My opposition to same sex marriage is because I don’t think the state has the right to define it.”

He continued: “I don’t think the matter for me was clearly thought out. I still hold out marriage is between a man and a woman. Now it has come in, it seems to me the church has to respond with compassionate care.”

Responding to such questions from young people, Dr Sentamu says, has been one of the joys of his pilgrimage. The same sex marriage query was only the second time he has been asked in six months but he says he has also been grilled about Brexit, poverty and the rise of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (Isil).

“Everywhere I’ve gone they’ve engaged,” he says.

The actual number of miles he has walked remains a closely guarded secret. Dr Sentamu has been recording his steps on an iPhone app and will release the figure when the pilgrimage is complete.

But whatever the amount is, that will not be the end of it. He insists his experiences over the past six

months has been so profound that it has changed the way he feels he should be carrying out his ecclesiastical duties.

“I can’t go back now,” he says. “I can’t simply go back to the way I was working before. There was nothing wrong then, but I still want to be doing what I have been doing: praying, witnessing, blessing.”

The preacher, it seems, is not stopping yet. He may, however, need to invest in a new pair of walking boots.

Joe Shute - The Sunday Telegraph