



WALKING ST MAGNUS WAY

ORKNEY PILGRIMAGE 2021



Day 6: Tuesday 18 May *St Magnus Way: Evie (Gurness) to Birsay*



Looking east from Gurness towards Rousay

According to tradition, the body of Magnus was brought from Egilsay, where it had been buried where he died, to the mainland at Evie. From there it was carried along the coastland to Birsay where it was buried in Christ Church. The first long section of the St Magnus Way roughly follows this route from Gurness to Birsay, sometimes walking along the shore, and at others along the cliff-tops.

Today we gathered early next to the Broch of Gurness. An iron-age community had lived in this broch between 400 – 100 BC. By the time of Magnus, the site was mostly a ruin, with only the bottom section of the broch visible. The landscape of Orkney contains many reminders that people come and go, living their lives and marking the landscape with their homes and monuments.

The theme for this section of St Magnus Way is 'Loss'. The encouragement is to use the long and demanding walk as a prompt to think about the many kinds of loss that we not only encounter, but then carry with us through the rest of our lives.



The first chair of St Magnus Way, David McNeish, writes for those walking this section:

'As we walk by, the shore, our footing is not always secure, and the coastline changes dramatically with the tide and the weather. You may find it helpful to pick up a stone from the shoreline. Each stone has been battered by the waves, smoothed over time, so that it is easier to hold, but still heavy. It can be like this with grief – the loss never goes away, but over time it is easier to hold. Easier but not easy.

We can ignore the pain of loss or wallow in it, confront it or deny it – but it is only, by, acknowledging it and integrating it into our lives that we can walk on, even if always with a limp.'

As I walked the bereavements and losses suffered by friends were very much in my mind and prayers. How to pray for those with broken hearts, other than to ask for the kindness and mercy of God, for true comfort and some sense of eternity? Mostly today I walked alone, a little separated from the group for ease of concentration and focus.

In the Saga, the mother of St Magus, Thora, plays a key role. It is she who petitions Earl Hakon that her son would be taken to a church and properly buried. It is said that she made her request 'with gentle tears'. More than just being present, she served him and his companions at her table. Those present with Hakon were those who had been responsible for the death of her son.

For me this story touches on the loss of so many through this last year, and right now in such countries as India and Brazil, where death is not just close, but the numbers involved overwhelming. So many have been denied proper funerals and the usual accompanying rituals around and at the time of death. Who will help these bereaved carry their loss? Who will petition for mercy for them?



The picture left is from the cliff top, with Birsay far in the distance. Sometimes we could see the end of the walk, at others we could only see where we had been. This Way, like the way of life, had to be walked in faith, that we would indeed reach a good destination.

To complete today's walk needed determination and a commitment to truly look loss in the face. What a relief then to finally come to Birsay. I ended the day exhausted from the physical and emotional efforts of the day.