



The significance of Christian pilgrimage: journey and place by The Reverend Anthony Ball, Rector of St Margaret's Church

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In a post-COVID-19 world it would be naïve to expect the concept of pilgrimage to be immune from the kind of changes other aspects of our lives – religious and secular – are experiencing. We should expect some development in the practice of and motivation for pilgrimage. It is exciting to think about how ancient concepts can work in new ways as they are reimagined for the current age. Earlier generations of pilgrims would have known nothing of virtual reality or the possibilities opened up by social media and digital communication. For example, did you know that you can visit the Vatican on Minecraft? Such possibilities are coupled with a surge in recent years of the number of people undertaking pilgrimages (physically) – whether rediscovering ancient pilgrim routes and destinations or creating new ones. If developments in how we understand and undertake pilgrimages are to be authentic, we need to look at their history and significance.

Pilgrimage is not an exclusively Christian practice – we have only to think of the *Hajj* for Muslims or the Hindu *Char Dham* – but has been a feature of Christianity from its earliest days. The significance of the pilgrimage is in both the journey and the destination, with each pilgrim having their own sense of the relative importance of those two elements. During the COVID lock-down the Archbishop of Canterbury and the Chief Rabbi were amongst several Christian and Jewish leaders who jointly undertook “virtual pilgrimages” to sites connected with key workers.

In the early Christian Church there were two principal reasons for going on pilgrimage – both rooted in the Bible. First “to follow the pattern of Abraham, to wander for God”¹ and second as a penance, often for crimes of violence, with the pilgrim usually required to beg food and shelter on the way, imitating the wanderings imposed on Cain².

In the 4th century after Jesus' death, Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, visited the Holy Land and identified a number of sites where events recorded in the Bible took place and where Jesus was believed to have been active. Churches and other buildings were erected on these sites to promote devotion and accommodate the practice of pilgrimage. One of the earliest accounts we have of such a journey, about 50 years after Helena's ‘discoveries’, is by a Spanish nun Egeria and her diary provides considerable detail about how the local Christian community celebrated and recalled key moments in Jesus' life. The pilgrim could connect with Jesus and his ministry by visiting the particular places.

It was not long before sites connected with events and the lives of martyrs and saints similarly became pilgrimage destinations. In the Middle Ages, and after the journey to Jerusalem became more difficult

¹ Stephen Platten *Pilgrims* (Fount, London, 1996) p.9. For the story of Abraham see Genesis 12.1ff

² Genesis 4.1-16

for European Christians, the practice extended with the “connection” provided by relics of saints and martyrs. In addition to Rome, destinations such as Santiago de Compostela and Canterbury attracted pilgrims from all over Europe – and the fellow pilgrims encountered on the journey formed part of the experience, as we see in *The Canterbury Tales* by Geoffrey Chaucer (himself buried in Westminster Abbey).

The flourishing of pilgrimage in medieval times was founded on the power attributed to relics and the intercession of the saints, adding another dimension to the significance of the practice. Pilgrims believed that physical proximity to the saint (who was present in the relic) made their prayers – for themselves or a loved one – more effective. Westminster Abbey, for example, housed not only the body of St Edward the Confessor but also several other relics which, it was claimed, had been touched by Jesus himself. Today we see a reminder of this in the 12th century pictures of St Thomas and St Christopher facing those entering the Great North Door (where pilgrims would have entered).

As in our own day, pilgrims would often leave donations of money or precious objects alongside their prayers. The distortions that accompanied the wealth so created contributed to the upheaval of the Reformation that, in these Isles at least, led to the destruction of relics and shrines and an unrelenting attack on the practice of pilgrimage. Having its roots in the Bible, the practice proved durable and, whilst there is a greater recognition amongst Christians that God is everywhere and in all, we are witnessing a revitalised interest in pilgrimage and its traditional link to repentance and, therefore, renewal.

The remarkable buildings that marked the pilgrim’s physical destination were built to the glory of God, often part of the vision that prompted the pilgrimage and their promise sustaining them on the journey. The architecture of Westminster Abbey, inside and out, inspires awe and wonder in thousands of people each day. Imagine what it must have been like for a 13th century pilgrim to discover such magnificence - some must have wondered if they were seeing a vision of heaven. The 21st century pilgrim already has the option of visiting the Abbey online. We are only beginning to explore what might be possible with, and our responses to, virtual reality rather than physical architecture.

Pilgrimage has always been a matter of devotion, a rich experience in which the outward/physical journey is undertaken alongside an inner/spiritual one. Just as the landscape and people one encounters on the journey shape the experience, so the pilgrimage site has a lasting resonance. A pilgrim who has reached their destination experiences a connection with the person or event it represents and all those who have shared the space beforehand. Physical and virtual experiences and resonances are different, but both have a journey and a destination, both prompt an inner response and both are shared with those who have gone before. For many, a pilgrimage provides a tangible sense of being part of something greater, a means of joining in the story of the Church universal, of Christians in all times and places. The pilgrim may or may not set off with a sense of duty towards God, but the hope is that somehow and somewhere on the journey, at the destination or once back at home (or any combination of those over time) they will be changed through an encounter with the Divine.

Follow-up questions

After reading this article, your students could debate one of these questions verbally or provide a written response for homework

- What is your understanding of a pilgrimage in association to faith?
- In what way can modern technology allow for changes in our definition and experience of a religious pilgrimage?
- What are the two principal reasons for pilgrimage in Christianity, and why are they important?
- What are the similarities and differences in Westminster Abbey's role as a site of pilgrimage for the medieval and modern-day pilgrim?
- Is the act of pilgrimage more about the journey or the final destination? Explain your views.