

## Pilgrimage by the Rt Revd Karen Gorham

It is good to be with you this evening and to talk on the theme of Pilgrimage. I am not sure what the word means to you, or whether you have ever been on what you would call 'a pilgrimage'.

Way back in the Old Testament we read 'Now the Lord said to Abram 'go''

'Jesus, while it was still very dark, got up and went...'

The song, by the pop group Talking Heads in the 80s – *A Road to Nowhere* has little basis here, for the story is all about going somewhere....

Our object today is the scallop shell, which has become a symbol of pilgrimage, Our theme for tonight. Pilgrimage touches upon many aspects of human existence, signifying not only a physical journey to a special place, but also an inner journey and indeed the journey of life itself.

Pilgrim and Pilgrimage are words that have carried a range of meanings over the centuries. The English term 'pilgrim' comes from the Latin word *peregrinus*, meaning someone on a journey, either a traveller on a brief journey or someone settling for a short or long period in a foreign land. Hence those early settlers to America were termed the Pilgrim Fathers.

The same word was used in the Bible to translate the Hebrew word for sojourner. And these terms undergirded a central image of the Christian life, as those people who were identified as temporary residents in this world, whose true home was in heaven.

Journeying to a place of special significance plays a part in almost all cultures and religions. The goal may be a site given prominence by particular events, the shrine of a saint or other significant figure or a remarkable geographical feature and pilgrimage, motivated by religious belief, is still very much alive in the twenty first century. It usually involves journeying alone or in a group, reaching a destination, encountering special rituals, objects and architecture, enjoying particular experiences and benefits and returning home.

As a Christian I look back and see that I have developed something of a pilgrim pattern over the years, travelling to many places. A planned retreat, walking a national trail, a visit to a cathedral or church or following the steps of a saint to Iona and Lindisfarne, and Ireland and beyond.

Although place is a central theme of our Old Testament, and the establishment of sacred places, a pattern that we could say was established by Abram as he moved from place to place, establishing altars as he did so, it is surprising that Christianity did not at first see pilgrimage to sacred places as either necessary or desirable.

The writers of the New Testament and the early Father of the Church chose instead to emphasise the concept of life itself as a pilgrimage

Christians are portrayed as strangers and pilgrims on earth. Early writers such as Origen, Cyprian, St Augustine and Gregory the Great emphasised the transience of worldly possessions and encouraged Christians to undertake a daily life of obedience to God which

would eventually lead to the security of heaven. The concept of ultimately belonging elsewhere strengthened Christians in times of persecution. It also challenged them on how to live day by day.

From the early days there has also been a seeking of an interior pilgrimage. The example of Jesus in the gospels, drawing away from day-to-day life to seek inner solace with the Father, comes into focus here, and from the late third century many Christians retreated from Rome, Alexandria and other places to live as anchorites in the deserts of Judea and Sinai.

These hermits took the concept of being pilgrims and strangers in the world in a radical way; it was a reaction to what was seen as an increasingly materialistic culture. Not all were suited to the solitary life, so communities sprang up of people sharing a common rule of life. The monastic movement became central to the mission of the church, shaping its worship and sustaining its intellectual life.

One such person was Antony of Egypt, known as the Father of Monasticism, who when he was around 20 years old after his parents had died gave away some of his family's lands, sold the remaining property, and donated the funds to the poor. He then left to live an [ascetic](#) life. After a while he headed out into the desert. He spent the next 13 years on the edge of the Western desert about 60 miles from [Alexandria](#).

Anthony maintained a very strict diet. He ate only bread, salt and water and never meat or wine. He ate at most only once a day and sometimes [fasted](#) through two or four days.

After fifteen years, at the age of thirty-five, Anthony withdrew from everyone living in an old abandoned [Roman](#) fort for some 20 years. Food was thrown to him over the wall. He was at times visited by pilgrims, whom he refused to see; but gradually a number of would-be disciples established themselves in caves and in huts around the mountain. Thus, a colony of ascetics was formed, who begged Anthony to be their guide in the spiritual life. Eventually, he yielded to their request and in about the year 305, emerged from his retreat.

For five or six years he devoted himself to the instruction and organization of the great body of monks that had grown up around him; but then he once again withdrew into the inner desert that lay between the Nile and the Red Sea, near the shore of which he fixed his home

on a mountain where still stands the monastery that bears his name.

Anthony was not the first hermit, but he may properly be called the "Father of Monasticism" in Christianity, as he organized his disciples into a community and later, was the inspiration for similar communities throughout Egypt and, elsewhere. Visitors travelled great distances to see the celebrated holy man.

It was not until later in the fourth century that place pilgrimage was introduced. The catalyst was the conversion of Emperor Constantine. Constantine brought to his new faith concepts of sacred places and sacred buildings derived from Roman and Greek pagan religion.

He and his mother Helena set about creating a Christian Holy Land. Although he never visited Jerusalem himself, the emperor instituted an extensive building programme in Palestine overseen by his mother Helena. Great churches were built. A Holy Land which offered an added dimension of spiritual experience.

Constantine gave his mother unlimited access to the imperial treasury in order to locate the relics of the [Christian tradition](#). In 326–28 AD Helena undertook a trip to [Palestine](#), and was responsible for the construction or beautification of two churches, the [Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem](#), and the [Church of Eleona](#) on the [Mount of Olives](#), sites of Christ's birth and ascension, respectively.

Local founding legend attributes to Helena's orders the construction of a church in Egypt to identify the [Burning Bush](#) of Sinai. The chapel at [Saint Catherine's Monastery](#)—often referred to as the Chapel of Saint Helen—is dated to the year 330 AD.

Jerusalem was still being rebuilt following the destruction caused by [Titus](#) in 70 AD. Emperor [Hadrian](#) had built during the 130s AD a temple to Venus over the supposed site of [Jesus's](#) tomb near [Calvary](#), according to tradition, Helena ordered the temple to be torn down and, according to the legend that arose at the end of the 4th century, chose a site to begin excavating, which led to the recovery of three different crosses. According to legend she had a woman who was near death brought from the city. When the woman touched the first and second crosses, her condition did not change, but when she touched the third and final cross she suddenly recovered, and Helena declared the cross with which the woman had been touched to be the [True Cross](#).

On the site of discovery, Constantine ordered the building of the [Church of the Holy Sepulchre](#). Churches were also built on other sites detected by Helena.

Several relics purportedly discovered by Helena are now in [Cyprus](#), where she spent some time. Among them are items believed to be part of Jesus Christ's tunic, pieces of the holy

cross, and pieces of the rope with which Jesus was tied on the Cross. The rope, considered to be the only relic of its kind, has been held at the Stavrovouni Monastery, which was also said to have been founded by Helena. According to tradition, Helena is responsible for the large population of cats in [Cyprus](#). Local tradition holds that she imported hundreds of cats from Egypt or Palestine in the fourth century to rid a monastery of snakes. The monastery is today known as "St. Nicholas of the Cats"

Helena left Jerusalem and the eastern provinces in 327 AD to return to Rome, bringing with her large parts of the True Cross and other relics, which were then stored in her palace's private chapel, where they can be still seen today. Her palace was later converted into the [Basilica of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem](#). This has been maintained by [Cistercian](#) monks in the [monastery](#) which has been attached to the church for centuries.

Fourth century accounts by visitors show how attitudes were changing. An account of someone who visited Palestine in 381 revealed both an eagerness to visit various places, but also to spend time praying and entering into the Biblical narrative.

The changes did not go unopposed, the appeal of 'seeing and touching' and entering into the life of Christ was clearly very strong but there were major theological questions to be answered. How could an omnipresent God be more accessible in one place than another? Would travel to holy places – help or hinder the longer life journey of daily obedience? These paradoxes have ignited debate ever since! However, despite these concerns, pilgrimages to Holy places continued to flourish.

Christian theology did not (at least in theory) accept that certain places possessed inherent holiness, but Christians were prepared to honour people. And from the fourth century onwards, certain places came to be seen as holy through association with the trinity or with a person whose closeness to God had given them particular holiness.

It was the perceived presence of the saints through their relics that drew pilgrims and helped establish new sacred geography not only in the Holy Land but across Christendom, as relics were transferred from one place to another, and new local saints emerged. These saints' tombs would provide the majority of pilgrimage centres in subsequent centuries. They were now seen as the points at which heaven and earth, human need and an unseen powerful God intersected, with the relic of the saint acting as a bridge.

From the fourth century onwards there have been four main elements in the pilgrimage motif: the core concept of life as a journey towards the heavenly Jerusalem, together with three strands of practical interpretation:

- Moral Pilgrimage: serving God and others in daily obedience
- Place pilgrimage: including journeying to saints' shrines and other holy places to obtain forgiveness, seek healing and other benefits, to learn, to encounter God and express devotion
- Interior Pilgrimage: focussing on a spiritual journeying through prayer and meditation

stressing 'stability' and seeking the presence of God within the soul.

The extent to which it is possible to combine these strands has generated considerable debate and even conflict over the years. Although challenged over the centuries, all strands have survived to the present day.

The scallop shell is the traditional emblem of James, son of Zebedee and is particularly popular with pilgrims on the Way of St James to the apostle's shrine at Santiago de Compostela. Medieval Christians making the pilgrimage to his shrine often wore a scallop shell symbol on their hat or clothes. The pilgrims also traditionally carried a scallop shell, and would present it at churches, castles and abbeys on the way where they could expect to be given sustenance with all they could pick up with one scoop, be it oats, barley and perhaps beer or wine. The association with St James with the scallop can most likely be traced to the legend that the apostle once rescued a knight who had fallen into water and came up covered in scallops.

One legend of the Way of St James also holds that the route was seen as a sort of fertility pilgrimage, undertaken when a young couple desired to bear offspring. The scallop shell depicted as a pagan symbol of fertility. Alternatively, the scallop resembles the setting sun, which was the focus of the pre-Christian rituals in the area – therefore the way of St James became a symbolic move towards the setting sun – terminating at the End of the World, or the Abyss of Death, which fascinatingly is in Latin the name for the Atlantic Ocean, where in fact Compostela lies. This link between sacred and secular has continued up to this day.

So, what about our own Christian roots? - The notion of pilgrimage in the Anglo-Saxon church was remarkably flexible. Both the Celtic and Roman churches honoured the relics of saints and regarded places as holy because they were associated with particular people or events, both used pilgrimage as a form of penance.

Pilgrim journeys took many forms. Monks of the Celtic church embraced a willingness to undertake literal exile, leaving family home as a permanent act of renunciation, to journey with God into the unknown, as Abraham had done. Sometimes literally placing themselves in small boats to be carried wherever the waves would take them.

The Roman Church stressed the importance of journeying to particular places for particular reasons and as a result Anglo-Saxon England soon provided its own heroes and heroines of the faith. Over time shrines were established in honour of St Oswald, St Cuthbert (first at Lindisfarne and later at Durham), St Edmund, St Chad and St Swithun. All drew pilgrims.

In 1061, according to the Walsingham legend, an Anglo-Saxon noblewoman, Richeldis de Faverches, had a vision of the Virgin Mary in which she was instructed to build a replica of the house of the Holy Family in Nazareth in honour of the Annunciation. When it was built, the Holy House in Walsingham was panelled with wood and contained a wooden statue of an enthroned Virgin Mary with the child Jesus seated on her lap. Among its relics was a phial reputedly of the Virgin's milk. Walsingham thus became one of northern Europe's great places of pilgrimage and remained so through the remainder of the Middle Ages, with a revival in the 20th century.

Following the Norman Conquest pilgrimage to holy places, at home and abroad grew steadily in popularity, encouraged by the introduction of indulgences which provided penitential pardon, a growing interest in the humanity of Christ and the desire to escape the

confines of home and see the outside world.

Marjory Kempe was a Norfolk Woman born in 1373. After she married and had 14 children she decided with her husband to take vows of chastity before the Bishop of Lincoln and spent the rest of her life travelling on Pilgrimage. These travels were recorded in the 'Book of Marjory Kempe' the oldest known autobiography in the English Language.

Margery Kempe must have cut quite a figure on the pilgrimage circuits of Medieval Europe: a married woman dressed in white, weeping incessantly, and holding court with some of the greatest religious figures of her time along the way.

She sailed from Great Yarmouth to the Netherlands, travelling to Constance, to Venice and onto Jerusalem, mainly on foot. Her fellow pilgrims becoming irritated by her because she always talked of God. She then went to Spain from Bristol, then to North Germany and the Baltic. Misunderstood all her life she was tried for Heresy but cleared following the intervention of her bishop. She hungered for the conversion of others even unto the ends of the earth. Obedience to the will of God; confidence in God. This was her compass. By this she walked.

Margery was one of several notable female mystics in the late medieval period. The most well-known example at the time would have been St Bridget of Sweden, a noblewoman who dedicated her life to becoming a visionary and pilgrim following the death of her husband.

In 1350, a Jubilee Year, Bridget braved a plague-stricken Europe to make a pilgrimage to

Rome accompanied by her daughter, Catherine, and a small party of priests and disciples.

Chaucer's Canterbury Tales evokes an image of roads busy with pilgrims heading to the shrine of St Thomas Becket, an important centre of pilgrimage in the late fourteenth century. The Crusades were intimately connected with and to some extent perceived as an extension of the practice of pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

The most important aspect of real-life pilgrimage used by Chaucer in the Canterbury Tales is the fact that a wide variety of people, of different classes and different places might be found together on pilgrimage. The saints represented an important resource for the medieval Christian on the pilgrimage of life.

The careful management of pilgrims, the composition of guidebooks and the manufacture of souvenirs are characteristics of late medieval pilgrimage which can be regarded, to an extent, as precursors of modern mass tourism.

In England, as in a number of other European countries, the Reformation proved to be a watershed in the story of pilgrimage. The Reformer Martin Luther moved from questioning the value of pilgrimages to outright condemnation. Before long the majority of English shrines were destroyed; their statues and relics discredited. The monasteries, which has supported place pilgrimage were suppressed.

In fact the only [shrine](#) in Britain to have survived the [Reformation](#) with its [relics](#) intact, apart from that of Saint [Edward the Confessor](#) in [Westminster Abbey](#) is in the County of Dorset. The saint in question is the somewhat obscure Saint Wite (Latinised as Saint Candida) after whom the church and the village of Whitchurch Canonorum are named. She is thought to be either a Christian martyred by the Danes or alternatively a [West Saxon anchoress](#). Nothing more is known of her. However, in the Middle Ages visiting her shrine was a popular as visiting Canterbury or Westminster Abbey.

Protestants might have turned away from both pilgrimage to places and the inner journeying of the anchorite and monastic movements, but the concept of life as pilgrimage remained a powerful and fruitful image. The greatest and undoubtedly the most influential expression of this theme occurs in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*

Pilgrimage to place might have been rejected, but travel went on and the discontinuities were fewer than might have been imagined. The centuries that followed the reformation were ages of exploration in which a curiosity to see the world was unfettered. And during the eighteenth century the Grand Tour formed a kind of cultural pilgrimage from which travellers returned with new artistic and architectural perspectives and artefacts which influenced and shaped their everyday environment.

The nineteenth century witnesses a major resurgence of interest in the Middle East as archaeological discoveries in Egypt and elsewhere excited interest. In 1869 Thomas Cook, led his first party to Jerusalem and by the end of the century he had enabled some twelve thousand people to make the journey. Cooks tours brought together once more the elements of adventure, instruction and devotion. During the same period there was also a resurgence of local pilgrimages in Britain as cathedrals began to attract visitors to sites which offered a blend of historical, cultural and spiritual experience.

During the first half of the twentieth century key medieval pilgrimage sites once again began to attract significant numbers of pilgrims. Catholic pilgrimage continued and in the decades that followed the Second World War, with the rigid divisions between Catholic and Protestant spirituality beginning to relax, Christians of all denominations began to visit the Holy Land and other sites overseas.

There has also been in recent years a general revival in the perceived importance of 'place' as having something of a spiritual quality and today holy places are no longer the monopoly of Christians. Those who travel to traditional Christian sites such as the Holy Land, Glastonbury, Iona or Lindisfarne may well have no particular religious belief but instead may make such a journey because it offers time out, space for reflection, a chance for individuals to explore the world and their place within it.

Recent decades have witnessed an extraordinary revival of interest in the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, now the focus of journeys, often made on foot, over weeks or months, by believers and non-believers alike.

The route was made popular again in the Film 'The Way' starring Michael Sheen, about a man who walked the Way of St James in memory of his son, coming to terms with his own grief. It highlighted the motivation for different individuals to undertake such a pilgrimage whether for religious or non-religious reasons. A theme explored in more recent TV programmes where groups of celebrities, some of faith, some anti faith and others exploring have together walked to places like Rome, Compostela and Jerusalem.

Are they, and the many who visit cathedrals, monasteries and other sites of religious significance or their artistic and historic interest, tourists or pilgrims – or one in the process of becoming the other?

Many who begin as pilgrims or unexpectedly find themselves becoming pilgrims on the way report that they return home changed in some significant way.

The pilgrim movement which grew so significantly within Christianity during the closing decades of the twentieth century shows no sign of faltering. The desire to set aside space as sacred and the instinct to link physical and inner journeying seem as strong as ever.

Last year I inaugurated the latest Dorset Pilgrim route by walking from Wareham to Shaftesbury Abbey. The St Edward's Way has been way marked by the local Ramblers, and the hope is that churches along the Way will be linked. Edward King and Martyr was murdered in Corfe Castle and his body taken to be buried in Shaftesbury Abbey. Shaftesbury Abbey itself was established in 888 AD by King Alfred and Edward's relics arrived in 981, miracles were to have occurred and the place soon became a centre of Pilgrimage. Which obviously did quite well. At the time of the [Dissolution of the Monasteries](#), around 1539, a common saying quoted by Bishop [Thomas Fuller](#) conjectured "if the abbess of Shaftesbury and the abbot of [Glastonbury Abbey](#) had been able to wed, their son would have been richer than the King of England" because of the lands which it had been bequeathed. It was too rich a prize for [Thomas Cromwell](#) to pass up on behalf of King Henry VIII.

I am not sure that modern day pilgrimages could generate that much income. However, the visitors to our Cathedrals and religious sites do enable those places to be maintained and continue to contribute to the local tourist industry, keeping shops, hotels and restaurants in business.

A lot is being spoken currently about the creation of Spiritual Capital. It is an interesting concept, not just about the influence of the Christian faith, or faith on an individual personally but about the difference it makes to a particular place or locality. I am sure we have all been to somewhere where we have felt the prayers of those who have gone before us, or described places as 'thin spaces' where it feels like heaven and earth are not too far apart, or treading on 'holy ground' as we place our own footsteps in those who have ventured in years gone by. It is that spiritual sense which continues to draw people to make journeys, to search for meaning, to seek silence and solitude or to meet companions on the way.

A medieval pilgrim returning to Jerusalem, or Compostela, Rome or Canterbury would still see crowds filling the streets and perhaps gaining a new perspective on their everyday lives, and the scallop shell continues to act as a reminder of the blessings of journey.

Week by week Children are baptised into the Christian church, many having water poured



onto their forehead from a scallop shell – symbolic that the journey is just beginning, the pilgrimage of life wherever and however it happens with its deepest meaning is open before us.