

Christian Pilgrimage

A pilgrimage is a journey that Christians take to a holy place or place of significance. The earliest Catholic pilgrimages dates back to AD 328 when St Helena, the mother of the emperor Constantine, who after coming to faith, travelled to the Holy Land where she visited many places including Bethlehem, the place of Jesus's birth, and the Mount of Olives, the place of Jesus's Ascension. At the place where Jesus died, Helena had the site excavated where three crosses were discovered. Helena brought a woman suffering with grave illness to touch the crosses. When she touched the first two, nothing happened. When she touched the third, she was miraculously healed, and the third cross was declared to be the 'True Cross.' It was at this site that the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was built.¹ St Helena's pilgrimage to the Holy Land became the prototype of many Christians visiting the Holy Land right up to the modern day.²

The bible also has a strong pilgrimage tradition. When God calls Abraham, Abraham is called to leave his country, his people, and his father's house and to journey to a new land. If Abraham chooses to follow God's call, God promised to make of Abraham a great nation, to bless him and to make his name great, and that all the nations of the earth would be blessed through him (see exodus 12.) Abraham himself did not get to see all the fruits of God's promises in his lifetime, however, through Joshua, after wandering in the desert for forty years after escaping from slavery in Egypt, God's people are led into the promised land and become the great nation of Israel. Through God's own son, Jesus, a descendant of Abraham on his father's side, Joseph, all nations of the earth are blessed through the establishment a new covenant for the forgiveness of sins. The apostles are called to go and make disciples of nations. Furthermore, among Jews and Christians till this day, Abraham enjoys the title, 'father of faith.'

As we have seen, when the Israelites escaped from slavery in Egypt, they wandered in the desert for many years. In this pilgrimage experience, God's people were faced with many temptations. God wanted the people to depend on him, but they often cried they were hungry. They bemoaned that if only they had remained slaves in Egypt, they would have pots of meat and could eat all they wanted rather than starve in the desert. To alleviate their hunger God says to Moses that he would rain down bread from heaven (see Exodus 16.) When Moses and the people arrive at Sinai, God wants to establish a new nation with a new way of life, for this he gives them the ten commandments. When

¹ "St Helena" Catholic Online Accessed: 30/06/2024

https://www.catholic.org/saints/saint.php?saint_id=123

² "St Helena, the first Christian Pilgrim" Accessed: 30/06/2024 American Numismatics Society

<https://numismatics.org/pocketchange/helena/#:~:text=His%20mother%2C%20Helena%2C%20was%20not,at%20the%20time%20she%20embarked>

Moses goes up to the mountain to receive the tablets of stone the commandments are written on, Moses returns to find that the people had Aaron construct the golden calf so they could worship it. Moses had spent forty days (another pilgrimage in itself) on the mountain top. During this time the people had grown impatient and committed the act of idolatry, and in his anger, Moses smashes the stone of the tablets (see Exodus 32.)

The New Testament is rich with pilgrimage journeys too. After the angel appeared to Joseph in a dream and told him to take Mary as his wife and name the child she was carrying Jesus, Mary and Joseph made the journey to Bethlehem to register in the census (see Luke 2.) When many made the journey into the wilderness and hear John the Baptist preach the message of repentance, they are baptised (see John 3.) After his own baptism, Jesus himself was driven into the desert where he was tempted three times by Satan. Firstly, Satan tempts Jesus to turn stone into bread to satisfy his hunger. Jesus responds by saying that, "Man does not live on bread alone but from every word that comes from the mouth of God." Satan then tells Jesus to throw himself of the highest point of the temple so that God may send his angels to intervene. Jesus responds by quoting the third commandment, "Thou should not put the Lord God to the test." And lastly, Satan offers Jesus all the kingdoms of the earth if he bows down and worships him. Jesus again quotes from the ten commandments, "You shall have no other gods but me" (see Matthew 4.) When St Paul set out on the road Damascus to arrest followers of the way, he was thrown off his horse and heard a voice call out to him and say, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Saul said, "Who are you Lord?" The voice said, "I am Jesus whom you are persecuting" (See Acts 9.) St Paul, blinded by the light continues his journey to Damascus where his sight is restored, and he is baptised. The biblical experience of pilgrimage shows us that when setting out on pilgrimage it is important to take God with us and let him lead us on the journey. Pilgrimages are a Spirit led experience. Like the journey through the desert, on pilgrimage, we must learn to depend on God to provide for our every need as we leave behind the comforts of our everyday life. Like the pilgrims of John the Baptist, pilgrimage is an opportunity to reflect on our relationship with God and others, and to repent of our sins. Like Jesus, as we take the opportunity to draw closer to God, we too may experience temptation ourselves. Like the Israelites journeying through the desert, we may experience impatience, but it is in these moments, like Jesus, we must turn to the Word of God to help us with each battle. So, pilgrimages present us with a great opportunity to grow in our relationship with God. The challenge for us, is take all we have learnt or received on pilgrimage and to live out these fruits in our everyday lives. Like Abraham, there may be some fruits which are not immediately obvious, so continuous pray is always needed. Hopefully, by making the journey, we will find ourselves forever changed. And lastly, like St Paul who set out on his journey with his own goals and intentions only to discover that the Lord different plans for him, as we set out on pilgrimage, we might find that although we set out with a particular objective, our objective may change or take a new direction as God's will is revealed to us.

In 2025, we embark upon a Jubilee Year entitled, 'Pilgrims of Hope.' As a universal church we will find ourselves journeying together throughout this year. In the Old Testament, every fifty years a Jubilee was marked. This was a time for the people renew their relationship with God, to pardon debts, to fallow the fields and return misappropriated land.³ Throughout this year we too are given the same opportunity as Jubilees of old to renew our relationship with God, with each other and the whole of creation. As a local church, the Catholic Diocese of Portsmouth, we have recently begun the implementation of our ten-year mission plan "You will be my witnesses." We hope that this plan will also bring about a great renewal as we not only begin the process of structural change, but even more importantly, as we begin the process of exploring and committing ourselves to being more missionary focused disciples. In the diocese we also have a dedicated pilgrim way called St Joseph's Way. The route begins at St John's Cathedral, makes its way through St Coleman's, Cosham, through the Meon Valley towards Roley and then up to St Mary's, Alton, and across to St Joseph's, Aldershot, the Cathedral of St Michael and St George, and finally finishes at the shrine of St Joseph, Farnborough Abbey. This pilgrim route is not only a great way to get know some of the churches in our diocese, but it is also a great opportunity to walk with St Joseph's who journeyed with Mary and Jesus to Bethlehem, and who also led them to safety in Egypt after Herod massacred the innocents of Bethlehem hoping to target Jesus. Throughout the Jubilee Year, why not visit one of our Jubilee Shrine churches where one can receive a plenary indulgence. If you have been away from the church or fallen away from faith, this is also great opportunity to be reconciled with God, to experience his mercy and his great love for you.

Lastly, although the church is one, it exists in different states also known as the 'communion of Saints.' These states are known as Church Militant, Church Suffering, and Church Triumphant. Church Militant refers to the Church on earth. The Church on earth is journey towards heaven where we must overcome sin and imperfection. The Church Suffering refers to the church in purgatory where the journey to overcome sin and imperfection continues as this was not fully achieved on earth. The Church Triumphant refers to the church in heaven who is adorned with the glory of God. In the church in heaven all sin and imperfection has been transformed, and there is no more suffering and death.⁴ As we look forward to the Jubilee year, as pilgrims of hope, let's also remember to pray for the souls in purgatory, that through our prayers, they too may reach the gates of heaven. In turn, they also help us on the journey of faith by praying for us. And lastly, let's remember, that on this pilgrimage journey and on every pilgrimage

³ "What is a Jubilee" Catholic Bishop's Conference England and Wales Accessed: 30/06/2024
<https://www.cbcew.org.uk/what-is-a-jubilee-1/>

⁴ "The Church: Triumphant, Militant and Suffering" Simply Catholic Accessed: 30/06/2024
<https://www.simplycatholic.com/the-church-triumphant-militant-and-suffering/>

journey, to ask the saints to intercede for us so that every pilgrimage maybe a great time of renewal in our lives and we may join them in basking in the glory of God when our earthly pilgrimage comes to an end and God calls us to himself.

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