

Talk for Evening Prayer, All Saints' Cottenham with Rampton on Zoom

Miracles and Pilgrimage 22 November 2020, Alison Wedgbury

Readings: Psalm 121 and Ecclesiasticus 51.13a,13c-17,20,21a,22b

As we are finding with these Evening Prayer talks, miracles as signs and wonders of God's action take many forms. Tonight I'll look at two types of miracle connected with Christian pilgrimage: the miracles associated with holy places and the miracles that happen to people who go on pilgrimage to those places. Just a brief health warning: like the other talks in this series, this is not about telling you what to believe. It all is about exploring the diversity of experience of miracles. There are many pilgrimage routes in Christianity. I've chosen two modern examples that attract thousands if not millions of people each year (well, far fewer during the 2020 pandemic of course!). Firstly the pilgrimage to the Sanctuary of our Lady at Lourdes in south-west France. Secondly, the pilgrimage experience I and my walking boots know personally; the Camino, the journey to the Cathedral of St James in Santiago de Compostela in north-west Spain. It's not a coincidence that both places are situated on or near mountains. There's an echo there of Psalm 121. *"I look up to the mountains and hills, longing for God's help"*.

Firstly Lourdes. In February 1858 a young girl called Bernadette saw a vision of the Virgin Mary at the Massabielle caves. This vision also told her to dig for water and a spring bubbled up which started to give people healing from all kinds of illnesses. Today thousands of gallons of water gush from the source of the spring, and pilgrims from all over the world are able to bathe in it. Some of the women and girls from the Irish Catholic Travellers in Smithy Fen, Cottenham, told me about going there regularly. Some of my relatives went to Lourdes once, hoping to get healing for the father's lung cancer. It gave them comfort, even though he died soon afterwards. They went back to Lourdes the next year to take his ashes. It's clear that all pilgrims to Lourdes gain something from being part of a wider community.

So to the Camino de Santiago, in English the 'Way of St James'. In the Middle Ages many thousands would make the very long journey from England and elsewhere, some of them on their way to Jerusalem. Imagine the months of walking and then all the way back too! Numbers dropped during the Reformation and European wars. Pilgrimages started again in earnest in the 19th to 20th century. Now over one million people go every year, on foot, on bicycles or on horseback to achieve their 'Compostela' or certificate of pilgrimage. The Bible tells us that St James and St John, the disciples that Jesus called 'Sons of Thunder', built up the 1st century church in Jerusalem. Tradition says that St James went to preach in Spain, returned to Jerusalem, then was beheaded. His body miraculously sailed to north-west Spain in a stone boat. Another miracle was that the body rose from the sea, undamaged, covered in scallop shells. Much later in the Middle Ages, the Cathedral in Santiago was built to house the tomb and head of the saint. St James is widely portrayed in amazing art, sculpture and stained glass. In UK cathedrals and churches he is nearly always a pilgrim, with a staff for walking and a scallop shell for drinking from fountains. In Spain, he is often on horseback with a sword, a different kind of religious miracle that is much more controversial. I've walked sections of the Camino with a group for one week at a time, covering a total of over 500 kilometres. Every time there was a breakthrough moment of insight, a sign and wonder of God in action. In 2012 it was after the end of a difficult marriage and treatment for breast cancer and the Camino illuminated the future. In 2014 I got further insights into ministry life and spirituality. In 2015 it was just after my mother's funeral and the walking gave me time to grieve. In 2017 the route was up from the Portuguese Coast and the drama of the wild sea and rivers helped me consider lay ministry. In 2019 the route from Ourense in the south came midway in Year 1 of my LLM training, a time of consolidating and expanding. I have to say also that the miracle of the Camino was that I could actually keep walking every day in challenging terrain. The delicious Galician food and wine in the evening did help too!

Today in the Fens, the walking is different but the miracle is the same. It's the realisation that, in the words of Psalm 121, "our true help and protection come only from the Lord, our Creator who made the heavens and the earth". "He will guard and guide me, never letting me stumble or fall".