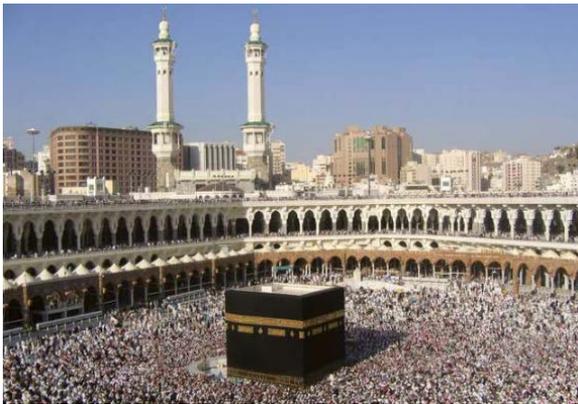


St. Thomas of Canterbury Anniversary 2020

Martyrdom □ 29 December 1170 (850 years)
Translation of relics to shrine □ 7 July 1220 (800 years)

To be a Pilgrim

Until the Covid-19 lockdown, C21 pilgrims were travelling the ancient pilgrim routes in the British Isles and throughout the world, making journeys to sacred places and following the age-old traditions that stretch back through the history of nearly every major religion.



Muslims journeyed to the Kaaba, Mecca



Jews to Jerusalem's Western (Wailing) Wall



Hindus travelled to Benares, to bathe in the Ganges



Buddhists to Tibet, where the 52-kilometre walk around the sacred Mount Kailash has been popular with Tibetans for 15,000 years

While we wait to be able to travel freely again, the British Pilgrimage Trust is encouraging would-be pilgrims to make plans for the future and meantime to participate in their weekly virtual pilgrimages as an antidote to effects of Covid-19 on our physical, emotional and spiritual health:

<https://britishpilgrimage.org/pilgrimage-and-the-coronavirus/>

Advertising 2020 as the year of Cathedrals, Year of Pilgrimage, the Association of English Cathedrals also offers similar online pilgrimage opportunities at:

<https://www.englishcathedrals.co.uk/latest-news/online-pilgrimage/>

There are numerous other online suggestions, including the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Birmingham's virtual pilgrimage to Walsingham:

<https://www.birminghamdiocese.org.uk/news/a-virtual-visit-to-walsingham>

Some people who go on pilgrimage have no religious faith. They go for a multitude of reasons, perhaps because they are at a crossroads in their lives or relationships and so take the opportunity to leave behind the busyness of the world, to seek a time of quiet and reflection, when they can ‘walk through’ the issues on their minds, and find peace. Pilgrims seek simply ‘being’ rather than always ‘doing’, to focus on ‘what really matters’ and to rediscover the joy of giving and generosity.



1. The poet Chaucer

Geoffrey Chaucer reminds us in his *Canterbury Tales* (c.1387-1400) that pilgrimage can also be a highly sociable activity, allowing pilgrims to enjoy the company of others they meet on the road. His pilgrims, travelling from the Tabard Inn in Southwark on the road to Canterbury, give us an insight into the variety of medieval people who made such journeys.

He brings together a diverse group of people that represent a wide spectrum of society with various ranks and occupations. We encounter the distinguished and noble Knight, and descend through the pious abbess (the Prioress), the honourable Clerk, the rich landowner (the Franklin), the worldly and crude Wyfe of Bath, and on down the scale to the low, vulgar Miller and Carpenter, and the corrupt Pardoner.

Chaucer also testifies to the distances medieval pilgrims were prepared to travel, despite considerable hazards. Although fictional, Alisoun, his doughty Wyfe of Bath, shows us how important pilgrimage was then, as now. She’s on her way to Canterbury with her companions to visit the shrine of St. Thomas, but this five-times widowed, bawdy, irrepressible character is also an extensively travelled international pilgrim:

*And thryes hadde she been at Jerusalem
At Rome she hadde been, and at Boloigne,
In Galice at Seint-Jame, and at Coloigne.
She koude muchel of wandrynge by the weye.*

(General Prologue, I.464-67)



2. The Wyfe of Bath



3. Chaucer’s pilgrims, depicted by Blake

Medieval art and literature demonstrate the central role of pilgrimage in the lives of ordinary Christians; these two C15 pilgrims sport their pilgrim badges from previous travels: ⁴



In the stunningly beautiful C15 Ghent altarpiece St. Christopher, patron saint of pilgrims (a giant, according to legend) leads a band of pilgrims; the one at his side, wearing a hat with pilgrim badges is thought to be Jodocus, the donor of the altarpiece. The badges in his hat represent pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela, Rome and Jerusalem: ⁵



The Ghent altarpiece



Detail of pilgrim and his hat

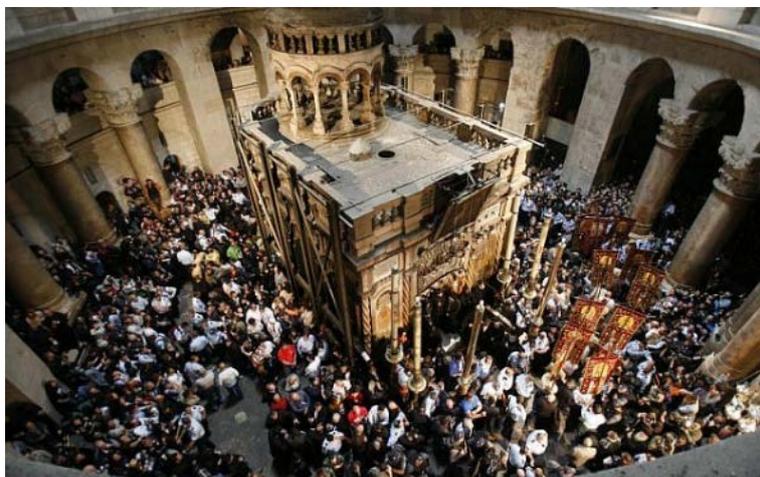
In today's troubled world Jerusalem continues to be a flash point of conflict between Jews and Muslims, but it also continues to be a site of pilgrimage for both faiths as well as for Christians:



Jewish pilgrims at the Sukkot (Feast of Tabernacles)



Muslim pilgrims on Temple Mount

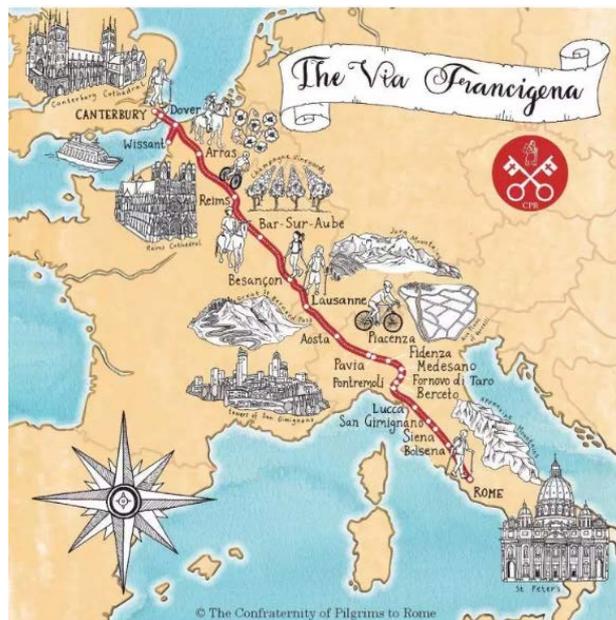


*Orthodox Christian pilgrims round the Edicule
(site of Christ's burial) Church of the Holy Sepulchre*

Like the Wyfe of Bath, pilgrims have long travelled to Rome from across the western Christian world as demonstrated by this late C12 carved relief in Fidenza Cathedral, Parma, Italy:



From England they made their way to Rome, along the *Via Francigena*, the 2000-kilometre pilgrim route from Canterbury to Rome:



It remains a popular destination, as with these Roman Catholic pilgrims in St. Peter's Square:



Likewise, the shrine of St. James at Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, Spain, is an ancient pilgrimage destination, with well-trodden routes from across Christian Europe including England:



Before Covid-19, daily Roman Catholic pilgrim masses were held in the cathedral there:



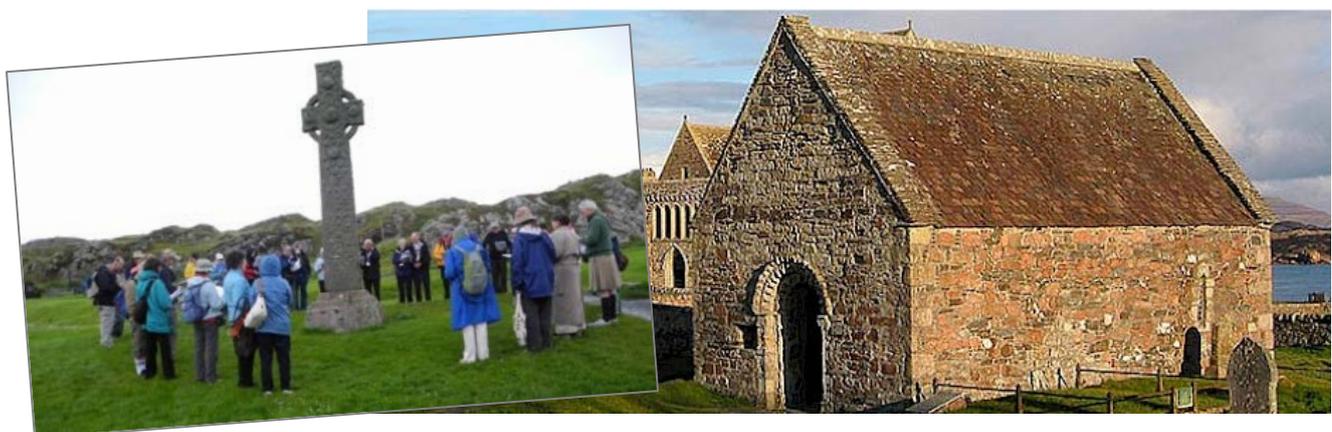
In the British Isles, Christian pilgrimage destinations abound, among them:



Walsingham Priory – Anglian pilgrimage 2018



Lindisfarne Holy Island – pilgrims Revs. Patrick Taylor & Dr. Paul Edmondson, Lindisfarne Priory, 2019



Island of Iona Abbey – pilgrims at St. Martin's Cross, 2012

Canterbury remains a focus of pilgrimage in Britain, and without the scourge of Covid-19 the Cathedral would have attracted many Christian pilgrims in 2020, the 850th anniversary year of the martyrdom of St Thomas Becket on 29 December, 1170 and the 800th of the translation (relocation) of his relics from the cathedral crypt to the magnificent shrine in the Trinity Chapel on 7 July, 1220. All the Cathedral's commemorative activities have been postponed, the hope being that they might begin with a Martyrdom of Thomas Becket choral evensong on 29 December, continuing into 2021. Becket, his martyrdom and miracles are depicted in the Cathedral's stained-glass windows:



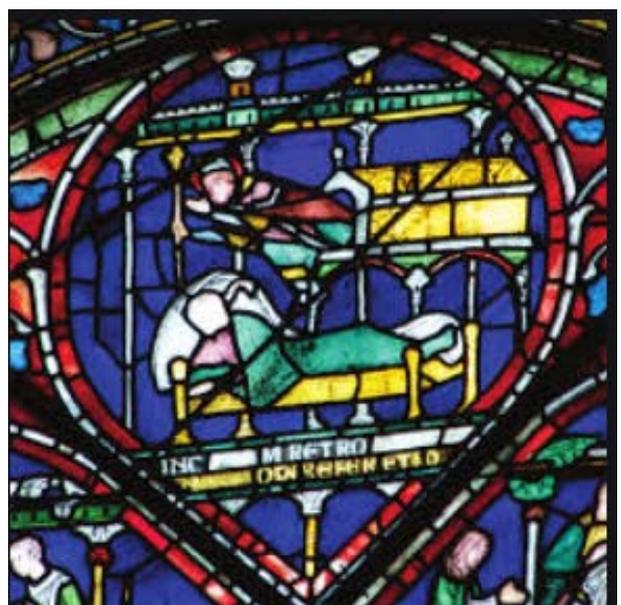
6. St. Thomas Becket



7. Murder of Archbishop Becket



8. Miracle cure of bleeding monk



9. Becket emerging from shrine to perform miracle cure



10. C12 Pilgrims to the Canterbury c.1180



11. C13 Pilgrims to Becket's shrine

En route, medieval pilgrims to holy sites carried passports to give them safe passage, often through hostile terrain; C21 pilgrims continue this tradition, having their passports stamped as a memento of their journeys:



Canterbury Pilgrims' Way passport, July 2017

Like the Van Eyck traveller, medieval pilgrims to Canterbury sported pilgrim badges on their journeys home, and often returned with a precious vial of Canterbury (or St. Thomas's) water – the diluted spilled blood of the saint thought to have miraculous healing properties:



12. Badge showing Becket's murder



13. Pilgrim badges with Archbishop Thomas's head



14. Ampulla for holding Canterbury Water

This medieval tradition of Christian pilgrimage to Canterbury has been thriving for over eight centuries and will survive Covid-19:



15. C19 tinted photo of Canterbury Cathedral



16. C19 watercolour of pilgrims in the Cathedral



Archbishop Justin Welby walking the final mile to the Cathedral with pilgrims, 2014



Roman Catholic Society of St. Pius X pilgrimage, 2016



British Pilgrimage Trust pilgrims, 2017

What is less well known is that we have our own Becket chapel in the south aisle of the nave at Holy Trinity. In 1331, John de Stratford, at that time Bishop of Winchester, but former Rector of Holy Trinity, built a chantry chapel there, where masses were conducted for the safety of de Stratford's soul and the souls of his family. Dedicated to St. Thomas of Canterbury, it became a site of pilgrimage, attracting many pilgrims from the locality and much further afield. Like Becket before him, de Stratford became Archbishop of Canterbury in 1333, and is buried at the Cathedral:



17. Holy Trinity parishioners visiting John de Stratford's tomb on a pilgrimage to Canterbury in 2015

St. Thomas continued to be venerated at Holy Trinity until the November 1538 proclamation of Henry VIII ordered the destruction of all references to the saint. It is a wonder that, despite this, the wall painting depicting his murder seems to have survived intact in the nearby Guild Chapel until early C19.

At a time of religious turmoil, those dismantling our Becket chapel at some time after 1538 had the foresight to bury the massive and extremely valuable marble *mensa* or altar table top under the floor nearby, where it was rediscovered in 1888 during the installation of the new organ. This *mensa* is now once again a focus of worship at Holy Trinity positioned as it is on the high altar in the chancel sanctuary.

Because of our special association with St Thomas through the medieval chantry chapel dedicated to him, Holy Trinity also had plans to commemorate the anniversaries this year, with, among other activities, a choral evensong to celebrate the Translation in July, attended by Canterbury Cathedral's Canon Librarian, Rev. Dr. Tim Naish, and a children's pilgrimages from the Guild Chapel to the Becket Chapel in the church. It remains to be seen whether any of our plans will be realised, but at least we can mark the occasions through our displays, and, who knows, we may yet see Trinity Players in T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* in November and be able to attend a commemorative evensong on 29 December? Only time will tell.

Sandra MacDonald, September 2020

Illustrations

1. Chaucer depicted in the poets' window, west wall, Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon (C19/20)
2. Wife of Bath, MS Cambridge GG.4.27@Winthrop University
3. William Blake, *The Canterbury Pilgrims*, 1810, The Art Institute of Chicago (Ref 1991.63 CCO)
4. Detail from illustration in *Le Livre des faiz Monseigneur saint Loys* (C15: Bibliothèque Française)
5. Detail from Hubert & Jan van Eyck polyptych altarpiece (1432) in St Bavo's Cathedral, Ghent, Belgium
6. Thomas Becket window Trinity Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral (1919 from fragments of C13 glass)
7. Murder of Thomas Becket, C13 window, Trinity Chapel Canterbury Cathedral
8. Hugh of Jervaulx, north ambulatory window, Trinity Chapel, photo: Miyagisan, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0
9. Becket emerging from shrine to heal sick man, Trinity Chapel miracle window [nIII 45]
10. Pilgrims to Canterbury, miracle window, Trinity Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral c. 1185
11. Pilgrims travelling to Canterbury, C13 Quire window, Canterbury Cathedral
12. C14 Pilgrim badge from the shrine of St Thomas at Canterbury Cathedral (Museum of London)
13. Collection of pilgrim badges (Canterbury Museums and Galleries)
14. C12-13 St. Thomas Becket pewter ampulla (Museum of London)
15. *Canterbury Cathedral c.1895* (print uploaded on Granger Fine Art America, November 25th, 2019)
16. Joseph Nash, *Pilgrims, Canterbury Cathedral*, 1848 (watercolour, detail)
17. Photographs courtesy of Ursula Russell