

Christian pilgrimage

In his lifetime, Jesus was quite a traveller, and he wore out sandals way quicker than the average Judean.

Early Christians would retrace Jesus' steps in Bethlehem, Nazareth and Jerusalem - the Holy Land. And so started the tradition of pilgrimage - making a journey to a sacred place as an act of worship or devotion.

And as Christianity became more widespread, new pilgrimage destinations sprang up all over the place. Sites were considered holy because, perhaps a miracle had occurred there, or a saint had lived or died there, or even if someone had seen a divine image in their cheese sandwich.

Pilgrimage is a lot more than just spiritual tourism. It's a way of deepening devotion, and getting away from all the distractions of normal life. Slowly plodding away the miles gives a lot of time for reflection, prayer, and empathy.

It's still practised today, and Wales has its share of pilgrimage sites, like St David's Cathedral, where St David's remains were buried. He was famous for a number of miracles, such as when he was preaching the gospel in the village of Llanddewi Brefi, to a crowd that was so big, a lot of people couldn't hear him. He didn't need a sound system though, because a dove landed on his shoulder and a hill rose up under his feet.

The redeeming power of pilgrimages used to be carefully calculated, and it was thought that three pilgrimages to St David's were about as potent as one to Jerusalem.

St David is not just the patron saint of Wales, he is also the son of a saint. His mother is known as St Non, and the site of David's birth is marked by an ancient chapel. A well is said to have sprung up when David was born, and it was an important pilgrimage destination throughout the Middle Ages, due to the powerful healing properties of its water. This was a very sensible idea, because doctors at that time were more likely to kill you than diseases.

And no Welsh pilgrimage route would be complete without a visit to the remote Bardsey Island. It's such a holy place that it was thought that if you died there, you'd definitely gain entrance to Heaven. It's known as the isle of 20,000 saints, as over the centuries so many saints have been buried there. Also around 1,500 years ago, St Cadfan founded a Christian monastery on the island, which is believed to be the first monastery in Britain.

Bitesize

But pilgrimages aren't actually about getting to a destination. They're about the experience of the journey. Something that's particularly important to remember when your donkey breaks down.