

Why is pilgrimage significant for some Christians?

Ben: Hello and welcome to the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast. I'm your host Ben Hurst, I'm a journalist and broadcaster, and in this series we'll be exploring the key beliefs and practices of Christianity. And in this episode we're asking why is pilgrimage significant for some Christians?

Joining me is Reverend Pippa White. Hi Pippa. Tell us a bit about yourself!

Pippa: Hi Ben! Lovely to be here. I'm a priest in the Church of England, and today we're talking about something that goes right to the heart of a key experience for many Christians, pilgrimage, which is both a physical journey and a spiritual experience.

Ben: Pilgrimage can mean very different things for different Christian denominations, can't it?

Pippa: Yes, some Christians see pilgrimage as an important spiritual journey. Others see it as optional. And some Christian traditions don't really emphasise it at all.

Ben: So today's question is: Why is pilgrimage significant for some Christians? Now might be a good moment to grab a pen and paper or open your notes app because we'll be discussing key points that will help with your GCSE study.

Pippa: And there'll be a quick quiz at the end of the episode to help test what you've learnt.

Ben: Pippa you mentioned it briefly before but let's look now in more detail. What is a pilgrimage?

Pippa: It's a journey that has religious or spiritual significance and it's usually taken to a place that's considered religiously important. For Christians, that might be

somewhere that's connected to Jesus, the Bible, a saint, or it might be connected to a moment of spiritual history.

Ben: And the people who go on these journeys are called pilgrims, someone who travels for religious reasons.

Pippa: Exactly, pilgrims go on pilgrimage and for them it's both a physical journey and a spiritual experience.

Ben: And a pilgrimage is not a race to get to the destination, is it?

Pippa: Definitely not a race! For many Christians, the journey itself allows them to reflect. They might pray, and they'll meet people on their journey which is just as important as the destination they're heading to.

Ben: Have you been on pilgrimage Pippa?

Pippa: Yes I have - a couple of times actually. My most recent pilgrimage was in April 2025, when my Bishop spent about a week and a half walking through the diocese, and people were able to join him for different legs of the journey. For me, that was a full day's walking with lots of wonderful different people from the diocese and it ended at my parish church.

Ben: Sounds like a meaningful and very personal experience for you?

Pippa: Yes it was! We walked 13 miles in one day, so I was pretty tired by the end, but it was an amazing chance to get to know everyone I was walking with - there's something about being on a pilgrimage which makes you want to be really honest with each other. For Christians there might be lots of reasons to go on pilgrimage, they might be trying to feel closer to God, or they might want to take time away from daily life which can help Christians reflect and pray. Some Christians say pilgrimage also follows Jesus' example.

Ben: Ok that's interesting, why is that?

Pippa: There's a source of wisdom that comes from the Bible about this. The book of Luke chapter 2, verse 41 says: "Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover."

Ben: This shows that making religious journeys was part of life in the Jewish faith, which Jesus grew up in.

Pippa: Yeah. Some Christians might also go on Pilgrimage because they are looking for comfort or some form of healing. Or they might choose to go on this journey to deepen their faith or to feel part of a wider Christian community - just like I was saying with my experience. Meeting others is a big part of it too - it is often in these connections that pilgrims find renewed purpose, deep friendships and a sense of shared hope along the way.

Ben: And there's an important quote from the book of Psalms in the Bible that relates to pilgrimage isn't there?

Pippa: Yes, it's from Psalm 84, verse 5 and it reads: "Blessed are those... whose hearts are set on pilgrimage". This talks about the idea that travelling with a purpose can strengthen a Christian's spiritual life.

Ben: To learn more about pilgrimage, just search 'Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies, pilgrimage'.

Ben: Pippa, you've said that Christians might choose to go on pilgrimage to different places, can you tell me about some of the places that pilgrims go to?

Pippa: Yeah. My pilgrimage was for a day, and it was in my own diocese. Some people go much further afield! Two examples are Lourdes, in France, and Iona, an island off Scotland's west coast, which Christians might choose for quite different experiences of pilgrimage.

Ben: So, tell me about Lourdes?

Pippa: Yes, Lourdes is a small town in the south of France. And it's become an important place of pilgrimage for Catholic Christians because in the 1800s, a girl called Bernadette Soubirous said she saw visions of Mary, the mother of Jesus, there. Bernadette was just a regular girl at the time of her visions, but later she was recognised as a saint by the Catholic Church.

Ben: And that's why some Christians still visit Lourdes today?

Pippa: Yes. Many Christians, especially Catholic Christians, visit Lourdes because for them it's a place focused on prayer and healing. It's seen as a place where Christians can reflect on their faith and feel closer to God.

Ben: And some Christians bathe in or collect water from the spring there, don't they?

Pippa: They do, and some believe the water can help heal or cure them of illness. But not all Christians believe the water itself has special powers, many say just the experience of being in Lourdes where they pray and are part of a bigger community, brings them emotional or spiritual healing.

Ben: So, it's significant in many ways?

Pippa: That's right. For many pilgrims, Lourdes is significant because it helps strengthen their faith, especially if they have been through difficult times, maybe they have been ill or someone they are close to has died.

Ben: And some Christians go there to volunteer?

Pippa: Yes. Some people visit to help sick or disabled pilgrims, and I think that also reflects key Christian beliefs about compassion, service, and caring for others.

Ben: Another significant place of pilgrimage is called Iona and this place is very different from Lourdes.

Pippa: Yes. Iona is a small island off the west coast of Scotland. It became an important place for Christianity in the 6th century, when Christian missionaries lived

and taught there. Still today, many Christians go on pilgrimage to Iona because of its history as a place of peace, prayer, and reflection.

Ben: What do pilgrims do on Iona?

Pippa: People might walk around the island or join daily prayers at the abbey, or they take part in workshops on justice, peace, or caring for creation. Iona is referred to as a 'thin place', where the physical and spiritual feels close, and where people feel very close to God.

Ben: Lourdes and Iona are examples that show how people go on Pilgrimage for different reasons and to focus on different things. Lourdes is known for healing. Iona is known for reflection and learning.

Ben: For Christians going on pilgrimage is a voluntary act. It's something people choose to do, but it's not mandatory, is that right?

Pippa: Absolutely, us Christians don't all think the same way about pilgrimage. Some say it matters even more because we live in a hectic world, and pilgrimage gives people space to step away from everyday life, to pray and reflect on life. It can help them realise that material things won't necessarily make them happy. And it can be a time free from stress.

Ben: But not all Christians agree?

Pippa: No. Some believe pilgrimage is not necessary, and some Christians think it's actually wrong, because in the Bible it says God isn't more present in one place than another - he's omnipresent, he's everywhere. For them the most important journey is an internal one. They believe God can be encountered anywhere, not just in special or holy places.

Ben: Sounds like there's a range of views?

Pippa: Exactly. For many Christians, pilgrimage is a powerful spiritual experience. For others, it isn't needed at all.

Ben: So Pippa let's recap why Christians still go on pilgrimage today.

Pippa: There are five main reasons why some Christians choose to go on pilgrimage. This is not in order of importance, but for some Christians, pilgrimage gives them:

- Time away from their usual routines
- A chance to think about big questions
- Helps them connect with God
- It can also provide a sense of community and...
- And a space for spiritual reflection.

Ben: And Pippa, remind us of the source of wisdom that supports these reasons.

Pippa: Of course, let me read it to you, it's from Psalm 84, Verse 5 and says "Blessed are those... whose hearts are set on pilgrimage."

Ben: Pilgrimage isn't just about travelling to a special place. It's also about why that journey matters to each individual?

Pippa: Exactly!

Pippa: Are you ready for a quiz Ben?

Ben: Go on! I'm ready. Test me!

Pippa: Ok here's a few quick-fire questions.

Ben: Go for it!

Pippa: What is a pilgrimage?

Ben: A pilgrimage is a journey that has religious or spiritual significance, and the journey is usually taken to an important religious place.

Pippa: Name one Christian pilgrimage site and why is it important?

Ben: Iona - an island off the west coast of Scotland - it's known for reflection and learning.

Pippa: Yes Ben! And we also talked about Lourdes which many Christians believe is a place focused on prayer, healing, and comfort.

Ben: To give them a chance to think about big questions?

Pippa: Yes! And finally Ben, which quote from Psalm 84 relates to Pilgrimage?

Ben: Psalm 84, verse 5 reads "Blessed are those... whose hearts are set on pilgrimage"

Pippa: Yes, a really good one to remember for questions on pilgrimage.

Ben: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Bitesize GCSE Religious Studies podcast.

Pippa: In the next episode we'll look at exam skills, where we'll pull together everything we've covered in the first 4 episodes.

Ben: Don't forget there are other GCSE Revision podcasts on subjects including Science and History. Just search 'Bitesize GCSE' on BBC Sounds to find them. Thanks for listening!