



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for Saint James the Great (25th July) 2024

As some of you will know well, crowds have gathered today at Saint James the Great's shrine in Compostella. One of the highlights of their visit will be to see the swinging of the *Botafumeiro* - a huge thurible suspended from the ceiling of the cathedral and swung across the transepts by half a dozen men. There is a member of our congregation, who dreams enviously of us having something similar swaying in front of the chancel wall past the pulpit and the shrine of our Lady. For my own part, such a prospect is akin to a nightmare, since I would be terrified either that it would lose its way and crash into the masonry or that the roof would fail to support the considerable forces applied to it.

Part of me also wonders what on earth inspired someone to commission such a thing. At the same time, it is not so surprising, since many pilgrimage destinations have something of the Disney-esque about them. There was strong competition between the carious shrines and their custodians - usually monastic foundations - were keen to make their venue stand out. One of Ellis Peter's *Cadfael* novels describes the disreputable determination of the Prior of Shrewsbury Abbey to secure the relics of Saint Winifred, confident that the considerable effort would secure a healthy return on investment. This account might be fictional, but it is not fantastical and it would not take much research to unearth historical parallels.

Relics were a big draw, but there were other rather more dubious accoutrements: the Boxley Rood and the Holy Blood of Hailes furnished Thomas Cromwell with conveniently egregious instances of monkish fraud when he was dissolving English monasteries; and lest it seems that all the castigation is heaped up on the clergy, we should remember that, as Chaucer describes, the pilgrimage experience often had something of an uproarious package tour about it.

It is easy to find things to criticise in the pilgrimage trade. Yet, for all the venality swirling around the experience, whilst some were and are doubtless more tourists than devout, many undertook often arduous journeys with pious motivation and intent, strengthening their Faith and faithfulness in the process. In this fact, we can see that the habit of pilgrimage is, indeed, what many claim for it: the Christian life in microcosm.

The life of discipleship is sometimes characterised as a pilgrimage through life with the hope of Heaven as, so to speak, the shrine to which our journey is headed. At times the going is arduous and we are surrounded by venality as we travel onwards. Frequently, our own motivations are mixed in the same way that pilgrimage often includes an element of tourism about it.

The challenge for us on that journey is, of course, to see through the layers of worldly frailty to the Presence of God in our midst; and to train ourselves to brush aside the lures of earthly enchantments and fix our sights every more single-mindedly on the goal of our sanctification and preparation for when we shall arrive at our life's true destination.

Saint James the Great, whose feast we celebrate today, is designated the patron saint of pilgrims. In the past and sometimes today, pilgrims attach the image of a shell to their attire; the shell being the symbol often used of Saint James in Christian art. As I remarked a few months ago, at Baptisms a shell is used to pour the water over candidates to remind us that the Christian life is in some ways one long pilgrimage. In a sense, that makes Saint James the patron saint of all Christians seeking their way through the life of this world.