

## Pilgrimage to the Agen

In Sundays in Lent I'm talking a little about Pilgrimage. Last week we thought about the pilgrimage people made to the Promised Land and this week, the Pilgrimage to Agen. Pilgrimage to Agen? Where's that? And why?

A quick resumé of the significance of the city of Agen in the south west of France where St Faith, our saint, was martyred. There are variations of the story but it goes something like this. In the year 304, Roman soldiers entered the town of Agen and gave Christians a choice. Give up Christianity and follow the Roman way – or be killed. Amongst those who refused was a little girl we now remember by the name of Faith. Faith is remembered today because she said 'no' to the mighty Roman Empire and 'yes' to Christianity. So she was burnt on an iron griddle and then beheaded.

The strength of her faith however was an inspiration to the Christian community, even the local Bishop followed her example, as did many others. But that was 1700 years ago. Today Agen is a modern busy city, about the size of Winchester, and on the one occasion when I have been there, I was quite moved when I could look down on the sprawl of modern offices, shops, roads and railways from the hill outside the city and to think that all those years ago this was a place of religious repression and extreme violence. There was a freedom to choose – but if you made the wrong choice, you were killed. Which of course is no freedom at all.

And when it was all over, when the Romans had gone, those who were left remembered her bravery. In death, along with many others, she became something of a celebrity. The bones of martyrs were venerated for all sorts of reasons. Some people believed that they had the power to heal. For some they had the power to encourage. For others, in a violent world, they were the means of making sure people didn't forget – they were like our war memorials. But they were also good for business. In the days before Planned Giving, Standing Orders and Gift Aid, before Summer, Spring and Christmas Fayres, Christian Communities could secure their finances by acquiring the relics of martyrs. Their task wasn't to pay parish share but to build new churches and develop the faith and what better way than to build a church around the remains of a Christian hero. And with that came the nastier side of religion, the business opportunities that go with selling souvenirs and much later on, indulgences. But the intentions were good, building churches not just around the bones of martyrs, but on the example of Christians who had lead the way.

Hundreds of years later, the bones of St Faith were taken by Benedictine monks to a monastery at a place called Conques. There's quite a mystery

surrounding their pilgrimage to Agen but clearly they wanted relics for their new abbey. There was a pilgrimage to collect the relics of St Faith for the abbey in Conques – which is where they have been ever since.

Their goal was to get their hands on something holy for their monastery. It helped to make a church special, it worked with the medieval psyche and whilst we might find the whole thing rather vulgar it's a good idea to try and think what might be the similar thing that makes a church special today. The equivalent here might be the sense of warmth, welcome and friendliness that you engender. In other churches it might be the style of worship, the music or the architecture. In other churches it could be to do with their focus of ministry in very particular areas, the churches for example which give emphasis to healing or to the arts, or to particular communities, to gay people, to retired people, to military or whatever. All Churches have their relics, the things that make them distinctive – in mediaeval Europe those relics were genuine.

The pilgrimages in this story was of the little group of monks who sneaked off from Conques to Agen to acquire the relics of St Faith and it's not really certain if they acquired them legitimately or not. But it was, for them, a long and difficult walk, a good hundred miles each way, but if they were good Benedictine monks they would on their journey have continued to sing and say their psalms. It is what members of monastic communities have always done, every day, sing or say the psalms. I wonder if they sang Psalm 53. And if they did I wonder if they connected parts of it with the Romans who massacred that small child.

Have they no knowledge, those evildoers,  
who eat up my people as if they ate bread,  
and do not call upon God?

I wonder, if they thought of what they were carrying when they sang the words,

God will scatter the bones of the ungodly.

That would have seen nothing at all vulgar or distasteful about what they were doing; that instead of the bones of the ungodly being scattered, here the bones of the holy were being venerated and brought to one place, quite probably in readiness for the Second Coming of Christ and the resurrection of the faithful when they believed they would all rise up together, more triumphant than any Roman Empire had ever been.

But since the Reformation, we have on the whole been very uncomfortable with the idea of relics and for good reason – the idea was often, and still is, abused. But I think the original intention was noble because whilst the relics of a saint certainly had economic value to a church, for ordinary people they were also a pointer to the essential truths of what it means to be a Christian.

I wonder if you remember that photograph which became an icon for the Vietnam War. The photo of the little girl running naked along an open road, her body badly burned from a napalm attack. That picture for me is one which makes me think of St Faith - but with one huge difference. The picture of the little girl in Vietnam understandably shows her running away from the violence. The image we are left with of St Faith is of her running towards the violence, content and confident enough in faith to take on an empire which knew nothing of human rights. This morning's little pilgrimage to Agen confronts us with the opportunity to ask of ourselves: how strong is my faith and am I doing enough to grow in faith?

Agen today is more famous for its prunes than its martyrs and many people there would have no idea at all who that little girl was. But the story lives on in Conques and in Churches like ours that are dedicated to her.

The Romans wanted Faith to say 'there is no God' – and instead, to sign up and believe in the gods that they had inherited and invented. So this pilgrimage today is intended to give us the opportunity to confront ourselves with what we believe. According to the Psalm:

The fool has said in his heart, 'there is no God'

which is what the Romans believed – they had lots of gods just as our world does today. They had then great names and narratives for their gods where as we have concepts like money, shopping, sport, hobbies, music, travel, television, celebrity and with so many gods it is easy to say: 'there is no God'. So what is that what we believe? If those monks had sung this psalm they would have used the words:

'God has looked down from heaven upon the children of earth to see if there is anyone who is wise and seeks after God'

and they remembered a child who did seek after God until the second she died. Which I think should make us think about our own pilgrimage of faith and where it's going. What do we need to do to strengthen our journey and to become the people God hopes we might become.