

## Article for Ripon Gazette etc. by the Very Reverend John Dobson, the Dean of Ripon

### The Dean's Reflection

January 2020

#### **Year of Cathedrals: Year of Pilgrimage**

This year, 2020, has been designated the Year of Cathedrals: Year of Pilgrimage for the cathedrals of the Church of England. This has been prompted by several cathedrals anticipating higher-than-usual visitor number because of significant anniversaries. Canterbury Cathedral, for example, is marking the 850<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the murder of the Archbishop, Thomas Becket, at the order of King Henry II. (It's interesting that the spate of church building that resulted from the king's subsequent penance provided some magnificent parts of Ripon Cathedral which locals and visitors alike still love to admire.) Lincoln is marking 800 years since St. Hugh, and Coventry 80 years since the blitz in which the old cathedral was destroyed.

Cathedrals naturally attract thousands of visitors each year. Some visits are motivated by religious convictions and interest, others by an appreciation of architecture and the beauty of these awesome structures, and yet others by some of the cultural events that cathedrals host. What often becomes obvious is that many of those who begin as 'secular' visitors find themselves turning into pilgrims before they leave. The beauty of the building begins to open their eyes to the beauty of holiness in the world.

There has been much interest shown in pilgrimage in modern times that goes way beyond sacred buildings and shrines. People plan all kinds of journeys, often involving walking, but not necessarily so, and regard them as pilgrimages. Perhaps you have done exactly that.

Television programmes enable us to accompany celebrities as they journey. Some walked to Rome. As for all pilgrims, they experienced the ups and downs of journeying. They discovered things about themselves, and those with whom they travelled. Their values and priorities slowly revealed themselves as they struggled towards their longed-for destination. And what a thrill it was to reach their destination and to be welcomed by the Pope, surpassing all their expectations.

In mediaeval times, it was common to take pilgrimages to sacred sites. These were often the shrines of saints. It was thought that some great spiritual benefit would be gained. The reformation put an end to all of that in this country: making a pilgrimage was outlawed. It's interesting, then, in these more liberal and enlightened days, with the freedom to travel extensively, people want to take journeys that have more depth and purpose than merely getting from 'a' to 'b'. Both the religious and non-religious choose to make pilgrimages.

We at Ripon Cathedral are joining in this national initiative, Year of Cathedral: Year of Pilgrimage with some enthusiasm. This ancient church, the crypt of which – the oldest built fabric of all England's cathedrals – dates back to 672AD, was itself an ancient centre of pilgrimage. This year helps us to celebrate the fact that it remains a popular pilgrimage

destination today. Throughout the year, but especially from May to early November, there will be a whole host of special events: services, pilgrim trails, art installations, exhibitions, talks and work shops, family days, music festivals, a son et Lumiere... and more. Details will soon be published.

Talking about pilgrimage in January makes me reflect on Epiphany which we celebrate at this time of year, following the twelve days of Christmas. The wise men (the magi) were led by a star to Jesus in Bethlehem. In reflecting on this in his poem, 'The Journey of the Magi', T. S. Eliot began,

'A cold coming we had of it,  
Just the worst time of the year  
For a journey, and such a long journey:  
The ways deep and the weather sharp,  
The very dead of winter'

In this poem, Eliot hinted at some of the experiences the magi might have had and the way in which their lives were changed for ever;

'We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,  
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation...'

This hints at some of the deep, life-transforming experiences that a pilgrimage might deliver. It might help us to see the world - or some dimension of it – in a very different way. It might just surpass all our expectations. Year of Cathedrals: Year of Pilgrimage helps us to see that we don't have to follow a star into the unknown for months, or even travel very far from home. A walk to, or visit to, one of our cathedrals might just open our eyes in new ways. At Ripon, we have developed pilgrim trails within the cathedral building that make a modern-day pilgrimage available to everyone.