

## **A pilgrimage during lockdown**

*By the Revd Heather Smith*

### **Friday 1<sup>st</sup> May**

Last Saturday I went on a pilgrimage. It was inspired by a book I was reading about holy mountains. It would have been nice to set off for Santiago de Compostela, or even Salisbury, but I settled for a destination of St Nicholas, Bromham. Santiago is a Spanish version of St James, and I had always believed that Compostela meant 'field of stars' but a little research suggests it may have other, much less inspiring meanings. I think I'll stick with the stars - and it fits with St Nicholas, Bromham, among the fields - even if they're vegetables rather than stars!

Setting off from my house on the corner of Greystones, which is in the Old Rectory grounds, I mused on how the path I was about to take was well worn by priests. You might describe the road from Greystones to the church as the main artery of the village. Usually the 'blood' flowing through it is principally cars and other vehicles, but now walkers, cyclists and horse riders, although common before, are at least equal in number - very fitting modes of transport for a pilgrimage. I had no companions and I left my phone behind, taking only what I needed for the journey: my keys and a small bottle of hand sanitiser, a sign of these troubled times. I was determined to pay attention to what was around me and to hear what God might have to say.

Spring is a great time to find God in nature. My journey was a riot of colour. On the corner of Greystones I found tiny white flowers in abundant bunches. Looking closely, they are exquisite, perfect in their beauty. Next to them are equally abundant orange flowers tinged with red. A nun I used to visit, on seeing a leaf shot through with red veins exclaimed, 'truly we have a cosmic Christ, whose blood is represented in so many places in nature.' Christ is risen and new life bursts forth to greet him.

### **Monday 4<sup>th</sup> May**

Although we are physically separated, human contact was not lacking on the pilgrimage I made from my house to St Nicholas, Bromham a week ago. Before I reached Minty's Top, just a few short yards from Greystones, I met two walkers who smiled and said 'hello', and my neighbour who stopped to chat at a safe distance.

As I reached Minty's Top I could hear the sound of children playing in the sunshine. Cyclists and car drivers waved to acknowledge me. Although we cannot fall in together as pilgrims might on the Santiago route, it is good to know they make their own journeys through our village, whatever their reasons.

It is not only human life that shares the walk with me. A bird eats from Barbara's bird table and Olive's small dog runs towards me to see who this latest passer-by might be. God's creatures all. At number 29, several statues of the Buddha watch as I walk past and then, as I go on, the Rectory comes into view on the left. I'm reminded of human spirituality in all the religious forms it takes. For Muslims, this lockdown is complicated by the beginning of Ramadan (24<sup>th</sup> April). I'm not sure I could fast during daylight hours on top of all the other constraints we live under.

Further on, a rainbow painted on bright red paper adorns a window. These signs of hope are everywhere and I love the fact that in our secular society the sign of the rainbow that God gave to Noah is still recognised. They are often painted by children and, as if to emphasise that fact, two children come running along, out exercising their small dog, skipping home into Breach Close. Life feels full of joy.

### **Wednesday 6<sup>th</sup> May**

I made my pilgrimage from Greystones to St Nicholas church, Bromham a week and half ago now, but it still remains fresh in my mind. It was not a journey of many days or weeks, as you might expect of a pilgrimage, but it took an hour to walk the short distance - much longer than my usual brisk walk to church. The difference between a pilgrimage and a normal journey is about more than just the destination. It is also, perhaps, about attitude - openness to hear and see in a different way.

It was late afternoon on a sunny day. The shadows of trees and fences fell across the road, indicating the time of day - time, which has taken on such a different meaning these days. Passing a small, fenced-off wilderness on the right, I looked closely at the wisteria which has wound its way up the temporary metal fence, like a brownish-grey coil. How quickly it has claimed the fence as its

own. We humans need only leave nature to itself for a very short time before the other parts of God's creation take over and claim God's world for themselves. We share it with them, and their voracious growth, when given the chance, proves that we are not as strong as we think – something that has always been clear if we took time to consider, even before this terrible virus took hold. But God loves us, along with all creation, and we too have our place.

The shade of the long red-brick wall envelops the whole road as I reach the weathered wooden gate at this end of Battle House. This shade is welcome as the day is rather hot. On the left is the Greyhound. It should be a place for a weary pilgrim to find rest and refreshment, and the notice advertising lunch still stands at the side of the road, but the door is firmly closed. A notice explains that they are devastated that they cannot offer the usual hospitality. For the present, a vocation to hospitality is thwarted. But there are rainbows in the window. In a video I watched, the US Chief Rabbi said that optimism is a passive virtue while hope is an active one. These rainbows, and the help that villagers in our benefice are giving to one another, demonstrate hope. Despite it all, hope is everywhere.

### **Friday 8<sup>th</sup> May**

Walking on my pilgrimage to St Nicholas, I passed by the noticeboard at the Greyhound carpark. There are fewer notices on it now, and those there are relate to the virus. But a small piece of cloth hanging there catches my attention. It is a homemade mask, accompanied by a note, 'please take, wash with soap and use to protect yourself'. As I move nearer the church I find another one hanging on the tree beside the trough. It makes me smile.

On the door of number 18 is a beautiful wreath. 'Keep smiling Bromham,' it says. And once again, I do.

The sun pours out across the road through the gate into the churchyard. I enter and am surrounded by the crowd of saints who have gone before. 'What trials and joys have these lived through?' I wonder.

If you step behind the memorial seat you can see into the church through the window. All is well. The colourful kneelers, the prayer tree, wait for us to return. The virus, if it ever lay on the pews, is long gone now, but the prayers said down the ages rest at the altar, still filling the mind of God in eternity where they dwell.

And round the corner, two lambs, one black one white, grazing in the churchyard, run to greet me. 'Behold the lamb of God.' No priest can fling the doors open yet, but Christ is not imprisoned by locked doors.

Little Lamb who made thee?  
Dost thou know who made thee?  
Gave thee life and bid thee feed.  
By the stream and o'er the mead;  
Gave thee clothing of delight,  
Softest clothing woolly bright;  
Gave thee such a tender voice,  
Making all the vales rejoice!  
Little Lamb who made thee?  
Dost thou know who made thee?

Little Lamb I'll tell thee,  
Little Lamb I'll tell thee!  
He is called by thy name,  
For he calls himself a Lamb:  
He is meek and he is mild,  
He became a little child:  
I a child and thou a lamb,  
We are called by his name.  
Little Lamb God bless thee.  
Little Lamb God bless thee.

*Watch Tenebrae Choir's beautiful 'The Lamb' [here](#).*