

Médard's Journey



Reflections on the Via Podiensis
July 2014

Peter Sills

MÉDARD'S JOURNEY

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Cover: Pilgrims on the Camino to Santiago de Compostella
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MÉDARD'S JOURNEY

Many today are drawn to walk the ancient pilgrim routes, often using the journey as a time of personal spiritual reflection. Some will simply be curious about the churches and monasteries en route, others will find their interest engaged at a deeper level, and they will soon realise that the architecture and decoration of these religious places draws them into a different world, where religious concerns dominated life, and encounters with saints and demons were everyday experiences. In these reflections I follow the journey of a medieval wool merchant, Médard de la Chaise Dieu, along the *Via Podiensis* from Le Puy-en-Velay to St-Jean-Pied-de-Port across south west France, the first half of his pilgrimage to the shrine of St James at Santiago de Compostella in northern Spain. Médard is my creation, but there must have been many like him who made the pilgrimage to Santiago. He is quite a reflective pilgrim, and his story and the things he thinks about as he travels, have been chosen to help us enter his world, to reflect the preoccupations of medieval Christianity, and to provide a background to the architectural and decorative symbolism of the churches along the *Via Podiensis*.

These reflections were written for a pilgrimage I made with a group in July 2014 following the *Via Podiensis*, travelling in parallel with the Ely Cathedral Choir. They are inspired by the places which we visited – just a few, alas, of the many that provide hospitality for pilgrims. My principal source is Jonathan Sumption's book *Pilgrimage* (Faber: 1975), and unattributed page references are to his book. The biblical passages are those we used *en route*, and are taken from the New International Version (International Bible Society: 1982).

Peter Sills

Michaelmas 2014

MÉDARD DE LA CHAISE



Médard lived sometime early in the second millennium, C11th/C12th, the Great Age of Pilgrimage, but I have not been too specific about the date. All the events that he experiences are historical, but I've exercised a little creative licence in the way they are used; Médard will not have lived long enough to have experienced them all. As Eric Morecambe might have said, I've got all the right facts, but not necessarily in the right order!

There are two other caveats: Médard is more biblically literate than would have been usual at the time, 300 years or so before the invention of printing, and when the Church kept Bibles under lock and key. Secondly, thoughts and questions occur to Médard that are more common at the beginning of the third millennium than at the beginning of the second millennium. They serve to create a bridge between the medieval and modern worlds.

Médard was caught up in an age of extraordinary spiritual intensity. In southern France many of the new churches of the eleventh century still stand as witnesses to this new mood which, says Jonathan Sumption, 'manifested itself in the climax of monastic history, in the crusades in Spain and in the Middle East, and in the transformation of Christianity by a world of emotion and sentiment. In an age of religious sensitivity, pilgrimage fulfilled a real spiritual need. By inflicting severe physical hardship on the pilgrim, it satisfied a desire for the remission of his sins and opened up to him the prospect of a "second baptism". By showing him places associated with Christ and the saints, it gave him a more personal, more literal

understanding of his faith.' [114] In this first episode Médard introduces himself and explains his desire to make a pilgrimage.

My father was a shepherd, and so was his father, and his grandfather. We've always been shepherds in my family, and that's how I began. I was the second son, so my elder brother was destined to take over the farm. When the time came I could help him, or I could make my own way. I realise now that I was a bright child, probably the brightest in the family. The village priest recognised this and taught me to read and write, and also a little Latin. The others made fun of me – what use was reading and writing and Latin to shepherds? But it came in handy later on when I decided to make my own way.

We had a small flock. We made enough by selling our wool to keep body and soul together, but there was never any surplus, and often times of want. The problem was that individual shepherds never had enough wool to sell to be able to get a good price. I remember talking to my father about it one year, when for once we'd had a good year, and there was a bit of a surplus. 'You know,' I said, 'if we bought the wool from the other shepherds, and sold it all together we could get a better price and improve things for all of us.' My father thought it would never work, but the idea stayed with me, and that's how I became a wool merchant. It wasn't easy at first persuading the other shepherds to let me sell their wool, but gradually the idea caught on, and now this is how most wool is sold. It's been a good living for me. My family is now modestly well-off – I've been able to buy a house in La Chaise Dieu, rather than rent a cottage.

Apart from the wool trade, it's the Church that shapes our lives. The year takes its pattern from the seasons and from the Christian festivals. Life revolves around the parish. We go to Mass, honour the saints, make our confession and support the Abbey. Some people, like my wife Amélie, are very devout, but I struggle a bit. Sometimes the ritual washes over me, and some of the things that we're told in the sermons I find hard to believe – well, some of the stories of the miracles that occur at the shrines are just

beyond belief. Amélie accepts it all readily enough. I used to worry that my doubts would condemn me at the Judgement, but a year or two back I discovered that I'm not the only one who finds these stories incredible.

Bishops and other important people on their way to Rome often stay in the Abbey. My brother Norbert is one of the monks, and he told me that one of these visitors, Robert II, Count of Namur, caused a stir because of his views. (I know that monks aren't meant to talk outside the monastery, but these days that rule is honoured more in the breach than in the observance!) Apparently, Count Robert refused to believe the miracles attributed to a local saint, who, he said, was a pagan. He also said that some people refuse to believe in the miracles of St-Denis in Paris!

Becoming a merchant has opened my eyes a bit to how people behave, and how they will cut corners to get what they want. I don't think it's right, even if their aims are good, and it seems that the priests at some of the shrines have also stooped to a bit of trickery to attract pilgrims. We don't need this fraudulent stuff; it just cheapens the story of Jesus, which is powerful enough by itself. He died for us; he lives on in his saints; his holy Mother prays for us and watches over us; and at our death he will be our judge.

Actually, the reality of judgement is one of the things that bears down on us. And now we've reached the beginning of a new millennium, we hear about it all the time. Doesn't it say in the Apocalypse that Christ and his saints will reign for a thousand years, and then comes the end? This new millennium has brought with it a new religious fervour. Everywhere, especially here in France, new churches are being built – not that we needed them, but there is a great rush to build, and to improve even perfectly sound churches, as a testimony to faith. It feels as though the world itself has thrown aside its old rags and put on shining new robes. I was caught up in it all, and felt that it was time for me to put my life in order, to seek forgiveness for my sins, so that I would be among the chosen few: 'Many are called,' Jesus said, 'but few are chosen.'

My brother Norbert, who, since the visit of Count Robert, had become the Abbot at La Chaise Dieu, was preparing to make a pilgrimage to the

shrine of St James at Santiago. This, I realised, was the opportunity I'd been waiting for, and I decided to go with him.

This all happened at the beginning of Lent. To reach Santiago for the Feast of St-James at the end of July we would have to set off after Easter; it wasn't long, and I had my preparations to make. We would be away for the best part of a year, so you couldn't just set out, and in any event the Church prescribed what you had to do. As one preacher said, 'He that be a pilgrim oweth first to pay his debts, afterwards to set his house in governance, and after to array himself and take leave of his neighbours, and so go forth.' Paying my debts was easily done; setting my house in governance proved more difficult. My eldest son was to take care of the business in my absence – I noticed that he was clearly looking forward to it, but my dear wife Amélie was distressed at my decision to go, and pressed me to change my mind. The Church expects husbands to obtain their wife's permission to go on pilgrimage, and you have to obtain your Lord's permission too. It meant so much to me to become a pilgrim, that eventually Amélie agreed, but there were many tears. I made my will, as pilgrims have to, including some generous gifts to the Abbey and to the poor; I also stated that if I had not returned within a year and a day, Amélie might presume me dead and marry again.

The most difficult part was making amends to those I had wronged. If you didn't do this, you couldn't possibly make a sincere confession, and without a sincere confession, as everybody knows, your pilgrimage would be worthless. There was a story about Odo, Duke of Burgundy, who sought to make amends for the damage he had done, in a lifetime of violence, to the Abbey of St-Bénigne at Dijon. He begged forgiveness on his knees in the nave of the church for the trespass he had committed against the lands of the monastery, and for the insults he had heaped upon the heads of the monks! Well, I hadn't been violent, but I had treated some of the shepherds roughly, and sometimes I had been a bit rough and ready in my accounting. So, I visited those I had offended, and made my peace with them. It wasn't easy humbling myself.

All that remained was to array myself in the garb of a pilgrim. Putting aside my usual clothes, I put on a simple tunic (which one of the weavers who bought our wool had made), girded myself with a belt and fastened on my srip (my pilgrim's bag for food, money and other necessities), and the stoutest shoes that I had. Then to the Abbey with my brother and three other pilgrims where the Prior blessed us. He took our pilgrim staffs from the altar and presented them to us. I had now been clothed in the order of Pilgrims, and so we set out for Le Puy.

Le Puy-en-Velay

MARY

A great and wondrous sign appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of twelve stars on her head. She was pregnant and cried out in pain as she was about to give birth. Then another sign appeared in heaven: an enormous red dragon with seven heads and ten horns and seven crowns on his heads. His tail swept a third of the stars out of the sky and flung them to the earth. The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that he might devour her child the moment it was born. She gave birth to a son, a male child, who will rule all the nations with an iron scepter. And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. The woman fled into the desert to a place prepared for her by God, where she might be taken care of for 1,260 days.

Revelation 12.1–6

Le Puy was a Marian shrine at the time of Médard's visit, but it became a major Marian shrine in the mid thirteenth century when King Louis IX brought the Black Virgin of Le Puy back from Palestine. These holy images were widely venerated, and the arrival of La Vierge Noire transformed the fortunes of the city. The saints were believed to inhabit their shrines, and

visiting them and asking for their prayers was as normal as visiting family and friends. Médard would be astonished to know that in later centuries the Mother of Jesus became a source of controversy, so much so that in some traditions her place in God's plan is almost completely ignored. He would have echoed Ron Brownrigg's invitation to get to know her better (in his guide to the Holy Land, 'Come, See The Place'). As he says, it would be sad indeed, if, when we reach the pearly gates, Jesus has to say, 'I don't think you know my mother?'

I knew the route to Le Puy well, but now, walking it as a pilgrim, it seemed different. Looking at the familiar in a new light brings a new awareness, like seeing the look on my son's face when I left. He was now the wool merchant, and the knowledge brought out a confidence that I hadn't noticed in him before. I guess I had been a much stronger presence in his life than I had realised. And now as I walked, I saw the hills and the fields in a new way, speaking to me of the glory of God.

We think of God as a judge, the One we will meet at the Judgement. God is all-powerful; he controls everything; nothing happens without his command. His ways are beyond human knowing – doesn't it say in Isaac 'my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.' (*Isa 55.8*) That's true; God is beyond us; but the world is full of the signs. Illness, and the violence of the natural world, are signs of his displeasure; good harvests and good fortune are signs of his blessing. It says in the Bible that in the beginning the earth was without form and void, a chaos; it was God's Word that brought order to the chaos. We are his creatures. His will is the source of life. From wind and storm and harvest, to personal fortune, good and bad, God controls everything. Life is struggle against the forces of chaos, and its only by God's continual intervention that the chaos is prevented from overwhelming us.

God is to be feared, as it says in the Bible, but now as I walked, my fear became tinged with awe. Some other words of Isaac came to me: 'Do you not know, have you not heard that God sits enthroned upon the circle of the earth? He stretches out the skies like a curtain, spreads them out like a

tent to live in.' (*Isa 40.21-22*) The wild flowers by the path, and every common bush, spoke to me of God's power and glory. Seeing God as my creator was almost as overwhelming as facing him as my judge. I had caught a glimpse of another view of God, and it raised a disturbing question in my mind: Why are we taught more about his wrath than his love?

Its a good two days walk to Le Puy; three in bad weather. Norbert knew the priest at Monlet, and we stayed with him. My first night in a strange bed. It felt odd not having Amélie beside me; it was a feeling I'd have to get used to. I prayed for her, and for me, but was soon asleep.

We arrived in Le Puy at dusk on the next day and made our weary way up the hill dominated by the cathedral. We stayed at the pilgrim hostel run by the monks – they took Norbert and the knights to stay with the Abbot – I'll have to get used to my young brother being a person of importance!

Le Puy is one of the places where pilgrims gather, and at the hostel we met the others who were going to travel with us. Its said that a pilgrimage should be a solitary journey, but its too dangerous to travel alone these days. There's about fourteen of us making the journey together.

Le Puy has it has been specially blessed by Our Lady, and so it is a pilgrimage destination in its own right. Our Lady is our protector, who will rescue us from the Evil One. Have you heard the story of Theophilus, the steward of a bishop in Cicilia? He was anxious to succeed his master as bishop and, with the assistance of a Jewish sorcerer, sold his soul to Satan. A contract was drawn up, signed and sealed in front of witnesses, and from that moment he succeeded in all that he did. But he became stricken with remorse, and sought to rescind the contract. After several nights in prayer, Our Lady dramatically intervened, wresting the parchment from the hands of Satan and restoring it to Theophilus. Our Blessed Lady is the mother of mercy. She is the one who protects us; her prayers save those who by God's law are condemned to damnation and punishment. And so, as we begin our journey we come here to her shrine to ask for her prayers and protection.

We need her protection because Satan never stops trying to ensnare us, just as he ensnared Theophilus. There's a continuous battle between the forces of Evil and the angels of God. We were reminded of it when we went to Vespers on the Sunday. The reading was from the Apocalypse. St John tells us that at the very moment of our Saviour's birth, Satan, in the form of terrifying red dragon with seven heads and ten horns, tried to devour the Christ-child. But God is more powerful than Satan; he snatched the child away up to his throne in heaven, and our Blessed Lady was taken to a safe place that he had prepared for her. As God protected Our Lady, so she protects us. Norbert told me of the dying words of John, Abbot of Belleville to his monks: 'Only one thing you need to know from me; he who would be saved need only honour the Virgin.'

Holy Mary, mother of God,
pray for me, a sinner;
protect me from temptation,
and save me from the Evil One.

Aubrac

LA DANSE MACABRE

Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. While people are saying, 'Peace and safety,' destruction will come on them suddenly, as labour pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape. But you, brothers, are not in darkness so that this day should surprise you like a thief. You are all sons of the light and sons of the day. We do not belong to the night or to the darkness. So then, let us not be like others, who are asleep, but let us be alert and self-controlled. For

those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk, get drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, let us be self-controlled, putting on faith and love as a breastplate, and the hope of salvation as a helmet. For God did not appoint us to suffer wrath but to receive salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with him. Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.

1 Thessalonians 5.1–11

Nompar de Comment, a man of affairs, who set out for the Holy Land in 1418 with several servants and equerries, nevertheless shared the obsession of his more spiritual contemporaries with death and remission of sins. He wrote: 'Know then that death has no mercy on kings, princes, or lords, but takes them all with equal abandon. Every man must know that the world is but a temporary habitation, and that death, harsh and unpitiful, is imminent.' [264]

Médard knew all too well that life was precarious, and doubtless shared the sentiments of Nompar de Comment. He has left Le Puy and is on his way to Conques. The journey will take him five days. On his way, walking over the high plateau near Aubrac, he passes a wayside Calvary; it makes him think.

I've seen many wayside calvaries, but somehow this one stood out. It was as though Jesus was actually looking at me. I heard those words, which I've heard so often on Good Friday: 'Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? If only you would look and see if there is any agony like mine...!' (*Lam: 1.12*) Jesus died for me, and my sins help to keep him nailed to the cross. Lord, have mercy.

Although we're in a group, we tend to get strung out, and the stronger walkers like me find themselves alone at the front. I don't mind; it gives me time to think. Jesus died, and so will I. He was the Son of God; I am the son of a shepherd, actually the second son, so not so special; but death has no favourites, makes no exceptions. Whoever we are, high or low, rich or poor,

death is the one certainty that unites us. As St Paul says, you don't know the day or the hour. Who knows if I will return from this pilgrimage?

My thoughts turned to the others in our group. We're a mixed bunch, from different stations in life. There's another merchant who deals in hides; there are two knights travelling with their valets; there is a Reeve, two nuns, two other women, Marie and her sister Irene, Jean the blacksmith, and, of course, Abbot Norbert, my brother and another monk from the Abbey. Norbert was the youngest in our family, the tenth child. When he was eight my parents gave him to the Abbey. Among the knights and the nobility there is a custom of giving the tenth child to the local Abbey – its like tithing, I suppose. The idea appealed to my father, although it wasn't common among the ordinary folk, so he did the same. As it happened, Norbert really took to the religious life (which isn't true, alas, for all the brothers), and now he, the youngest, has become the greatest.

You see in the Abbey the memorials to those who were considered great in this life. Some of them are very grand, grander in death than in life, I often think, as though they want you to know how important they were. They don't seem to recall the words of the psalm:

He shall save the poor when they cry
and the needy who are helpless.
He will have pity on the weak
and save the lives of the poor.
From oppression he will rescue their lives,
to him their blood is dear. (Ps 72.12-14)

In the Abbey there is another memorial designed to remind all, especially the high and mighty, in Church and in State, that the same fate awaits us all. We call it *La Danse Macabre*, or the Dance of Death. There they are, painted on the wall, a long procession of popes, bishops and abbots, lords and ladies, the great and the good – all those who have oppressed the poor – and death dances among them, mocking their pretences, leading them to judgement. In the sight of God we are all equal,

and we will all have to give an account of our lives. Norbert said that this has weighed upon him especially since he became the Abbot. St Benedict says in his Rule that at the judgement the Abbot will have to give an account both of his own life and also of those in his charge. I think this is true of all in positions of power, but they don't think about it until its too late.

That Calvary I saw this morning summed it all up. We are destined not for retribution, but for the full attainment of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ. That's why he died. There was no suffering like his; his death atones for us all. He died for us, as St Paul says, so that awake or asleep, we might live in company with him, but mostly we just pass by.

Help me Lord to walk with you,
And when I come to stand before you
give death no cause to dance and mock.

L'Eglise de Perse

THE GOAL

Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider

myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus. *Philippians 3.10–14*

L'Église de Perse is situated just outside Espalion on the river Lot. I imagine Médard visiting it not long after it was built. He would have seen the paintings in all their original brightness, the carvings sharp with detail. And as he entered he would have noticed that the scene depicted in the tympanum (the triangular panel over the door) was not the usual scene of the Last Judgement, but the much more joyful Pentecost. It comes as a bit of shock, and he thinks about it.

For most humble folk life is more or less confined to your village and the fields around it. We go to the local town once a week for the market, but otherwise work and family restricts your life. The Church expects you to worship only in your parish church where you are known to the priest – he is actually expected to turn away anyone he doesn't know, and you have to make your confession to him, and to him alone. Being a merchant I have to travel around, but its not really liked. The gentry are more free, but ordinary folk are wary of strangers, and suspicious of those who move around. But at the same time they chafe against the confinements of the village and the parish, and escaping them is actually one of the attractions of making a pilgrimage – and, of course, making your confession to a different priest! For most people, pilgrimage is the only legitimate opportunity to travel.

Over the years I have got to know the hills of the Aubrey well, visiting the shepherds and their flocks, but this is the first time I've come over to this valley and seen the river Lot. Making this pilgrimage has already broadened my horizons!

This must be one of the new churches I've heard about – all over France, new churches springing up and old churches are being torn down and rebuilt. It may be new, but its style is familiar, and sitting here in the silence I feel the companionship of those who have walked this way before me,

whose prayers have already been absorbed by the very stones of the building. They sat here too, looking at these paintings, remembering the stories that they tell.

Its good to have a rest after the day's walk, but I enjoy the walking, it gives you time to think – and to get to know your companions. Conversation often turns to why we're making this pilgrimage. We're all over thirty – so we are in the second half of life – and, of course, we're all seeking forgiveness. We live with this pervading sense of guilt; for a few it is rooted in serious sin and wrongdoing – some people are actually made to go on pilgrimage by the magistrates as a punishment for their crimes – but for most of us the feelings of guilt come from a general sense of inadequacy, failing to live by the Commandments – you know, the usual stuff.

We're taught that sinners go to Hell. You're reminded of this every time you enter a church with the Last Judgement over the door, but this one is different. Judgement is there on the lintel all right, but above it is Pentecost; that lifted my heart. The gift of the Spirit is raised above Judgement. In fact the thought was so astonishing that I was quite taken aback, winded; I had to sit down. I know that God will be our judge, and the torments of Hell are real enough, but sometimes I wonder how it can be that God is so unmerciful that most of us will perish in Hell. I can't quite square that with the story of Jesus who forgave people their sins, like the woman taken in adultery. All she had to do was repent, and forgiveness was instant. No purgatory for her! Well, who am I to know about these things? Even so, whoever carved that scene of Pentecost may have shared my thoughts.

I am seeking forgiveness, but what's beyond that? Once you're forgiven, what's your goal? Well, thinking about it, St Paul gave the answer in his letter to the Philippians. He says his one desire is to know Christ, to attain the same perfection that he did. He counted all that he had done as just so much rubbish compared with being with Jesus and becoming like Jesus. He too was on a journey, and he presses on towards his goal: 'forgetting what lies behind and straining towards what lies ahead, I press towards the

finishing line, to win the heavenly prize to which God has called me in Christ Jesus.' (*Phil 3.13b-14*) O Lord, let that be my goal too!

The beauty of this ceiling, with its gracious arches and rich colours, draws our eyes upward, towards heaven, where our hopes are placed. We're all so burdened with guilt we look down, not up. This church is a gateway, a threshold where heaven comes down to earth. Heaven is where I want to be, not in the other place; that's my goal beyond forgiveness. Judgement may come first, and penance, but so does Pentecost!

Lord give me a double portion of your Spirit.
 Help me to let go of all that drags me down,
 and leave it behind.
 Raise my eyes, lift my heart,
 so may I win the heavenly prize
 to which you have called me in Christ.

Conques

SAINTS & RELICS

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. *Romans 8.35-39*

Jesus said, If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you

belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me. *John 15.18–21*

Conques has long been the site of a monastery, but its fortunes were transformed when the relics of Sainte-Foy, a 3rd century child martyr were translated (moved) from Agen. Jerome records her death, so its likely that she actually existed, and before the translation of her relics she had a reputation as a miracle worker. The re-allocation of relics quite normal; Jonathan Sumption records many examples, like the abduction by the monks of Ely of the relics of St Withburga from Dereham to Ely. Generally, the saints seem to have accepted being moved; if they objected they made their wishes known, like St Swithun who objected to being moved at Winchester. On the other hand, St Nicholas was believed to have approved his move from Myra to Bari because he raised no objection. The monks of Myra took it as an indictment of their poor care of their saint!

To the modern mind seizing relics is theft, but it appears that in the Middle Ages theft did not apply to relics, and there was nothing that those who have lost them could do about it, except try and get them back!

Relics were much prized. This may seem strange to us, but its not much different from the modern desire to own the personal possessions of historical figures, e.g. the pen with which an author wrote, the sword of a famous general, or the dresses of Princess Diana. Items that have been owned by the great or the heroic are much prized and fetch a premium in the antiques market. They are the relics of our day. Owning them brings a sense of connection with the person concerned, as it was with the medieval saints.

In Médard's day, popular piety went ahead of 'official' ideas about relics, and endowed them with intrinsic powers. Church did not have resources to teach the laity; the clergy from same stock as people, sharing popular ideas

and misconceptions, and their simplified view of life. The Church followed the crowd. At Conques Médard recalls the story of Sainte-Foy, and the power of her relics.

Its a week since we left Le-Puy, and now we've arrived at Conques, the shrine of Ste-Foy. Norbert said that Conques is one of the most important abbeys; he's looking forward to meeting the Abbot – and to staying with him! Everybody's heard about Ste-Foy and the miracles at her shrine; I've long wanted to come here, and at last I've arrived!

Foy (or Faith) was a young girl who lived at Agen towards the end of the third century. Being a Christian in those days was to put your life on the line. Faith was arrested and tortured as part of the Roman persecution of Christians, but even under torture she refused to forswear her faith, and she was martyred by being burnt on a griddle. The cruelty was appalling. Jesus warned us that if the pagans persecuted him, they would persecute his followers: 'If the world hates you, it hated me first... If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you...'. (*John 15.18, 20*) Those days are now, mercifully, long gone, but when persecution was rife, not even a twelve year old girl was spared.

After her death, miracles began to occur, and pilgrims were attracted to Agen. Several centuries later one of the monks from Conques went to Agen and removed the relics of Ste-Foy and brought them here. It sounds like theft, but the lawyers say that doesn't apply to relics, and in fact the 're-allocation' of relics is quite usual. Oddly the monks of Agen did not complain, and I think its more likely that Faith was moved deliberately for her protection, because at that time this region was suffering from devastating raids by the Vikings, and she was just never returned. Whatever the reason, her move changed the fortunes of Conques. A shrine stands or falls by the importance of its relics, and in Ste- Foy, Conques was now the home of a major saint.

St Paul says that nothing in all creation can separate us from the love of Christ, not persecution, nor famine, nor the sword, not even death. There is no great gulf between this life and the life to come, they are both points on

a continuum along the line of time. The saints live on with us; they are physically present: Faith inhabits her shrine here at Conques, and people come here to ask for her help, especially prisoners. They ask her to set them free. Those sent on pilgrimage as a punishment often have to walk shackled in their chains, and as a result of the prayers of St-Foy their chains simply fall off! Jesus is true to his word: 'I came to set the prisoner free.' (*Luke 4.18*) You often see the chains left hanging at the shrine – at one shrine there were so many chains that the bishop had them melted down and made into candlesticks!

Relics are tangible reminders of the presence and the power of the saint. When someone we love has died we often want to have something that they owned or touched near to us as a tangible reminder of them and their place in our lives. Its the same with the saints; their relics bring us near to them and we feel their presence. Its the same as wanting to be near the king, or the Pope, or a charismatic teacher or the celebrities of the age. We hope that by being in their physical presence some of the stardust will rub off on to us, and if it doesn't, it still makes us feel special to have been near them. So at the shrines of the saints we are touched by the aura of holiness of those who are dear to God. Rarely, if ever, do we actually see or touch the relics; they are kept safe in a reliquary, like the magnificent jewelled reliquary of Ste-Foy here at Conques, and, people being people, we think that the more magnificent the reliquary, the more wonderful the saint. Well, on that basis, few saints are more celebrated than Ste-Foy.

I was talking to Sr Agnes, one of the nuns in our group. 'Why,' I asked her, 'do we venerate the saints?' 'Well,' she replied, 'because they gave their lives to God, literally for those who are martyrs, like St Faith. Jesus said, "Follow me," and that's what they did. We celebrate their lives because they show us what it means to follow Jesus. He also said that those who follow him will do even greater works than he did. So if we ask them, they will help us by their prayers, and through them God will work miracles, healing the sick, setting prisoners free, and opening the gateway to heaven.' 'Amen, to that,' I said.

Sainte Foy, child of God, who gave your life for Christ,
 Hear me, a sinner, who kneels at your shrine, and help me.
 Take away my chains, and all that keeps me bound;
 Show me the way of faith, and guide me in the path of life.

La Chartreuse Saint-Sauveur

JUDGEMENT

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, he will sit on his throne in heavenly glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will put the sheep on his right and the goats on his left. "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' "Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' "The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.' "They also will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "He will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.' "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life." *Matthew 25.31-46*

The terrifying picture of the Last Judgement given by Matthew would have rung true to Médard. It was depicted above the entrance to most churches in graphic detail, as at Conques, with the clear warning that that's how it would be. The whole point of medieval piety was to prepare oneself for judgement, and to reduce as far as possible the time of punishment.

If judgement was overdone in the medieval Church, today the pendulum has swung right the other way, sin and judgement have no place in popular thought, and are not much emphasised by the Church either – and the lack of them is a real barrier to dealing effectively with many modern failings like the banking crisis and phone hacking; it is also a real barrier to getting into the medieval mind. As Médard travelled on, the scene in the tympanum at Conques stayed with him.

We spent two days on Conques and then set out for Villefranche-de-Rouergue. Before we left one of the monks offered to explain the scene in the tympanum. Who on earth does he think we are? You must be blind if you need it explaining; there's no doubting what it's about; the same scene greets you at every church!

These clerics never miss a chance, do they? I've heard about sin and judgement and hell from the pulpit for as long as I can remember. Some preachers seem to take a positive delight in describing the pains of hell, assuming do doubt that they will be spared them. More fool them! No one escapes; God has no favourites; and those who teach others face the sternest test!

Explanation or no explanation, I couldn't get that scene of the Last Judgement out of my mind. I've seen similar carvings before, but few as graphic as Conques. The stern face of Christ determining our eternal destiny; the cruel delight of the devils as they punish the condemned and feed them into the mouth of Hell; and the grotesque, evil grimace on the face of Satan as he presides over the scene. The image was still haunting me

when we reached the next village and found a place to stay the night. And that night I had a dream.

I was walking alone along a path I knew near my home, when it opened out into a vast hall. As I looked thrones were set in place, and one Ancient in Days took his seat; the court was in session and the books were put in place, great books such that no man could carry, and in which were written the deeds of men. As I looked, one with the appearance of a man, opened the book and began to read aloud...

The scene changed: I was standing before the Ancient of Days; his countenance was like fire, his voice deep, like thunder, his beard as white as snow; his throne was made of jasper and cornelian, and from it came forth rays of light. As I stood in awe I heard my name. The One who was reading from the book was reading the story of my life, all that I had done, good and bad. In panic I threw myself down before the throne, and heard myself cry for mercy. And then I heard another voice condemning me for my sins. Judgement was given...

The scene changed: I was on the edge of a great chasm in the earth; fire and rocks and sulphur spewed forth from the chasm, and the air was foul with its stench and was rent with cries of torment... I looked, and coming out of the chasm was the great monster that I had seen on the church at Conques, its mouth wide open, its jaws full of teeth, the mouth of Hell itself! I turned away in panic, but there behind me was the devil with the great club about to push me into the jaws of the monster. He lifted his club and swung it towards me... I was lifted off my feet, thrown into the chasm... As I fell, down, down, down... I awoke, terrified, bathed in sweat.

As I lay, trying to calm myself, in my mind I saw Our Blessed Lady, our Mother and protector. She said to me, 'Médard, I heard your prayer at Le Puy, and I will watch over you. But all will be judged, and this dream has been given to you as a warning. Amend your ways, look only to God and not to worldly advantage, and you will be saved. Now bless yourself and take your rest.'

So I blessed myself, and fell into a deep sleep.

A few days after this, in the Chartreuse St-Sauveur at Villefranche, as I was praying I was transported, I know not where, except that it was many aeons in the future. The world as we know it had passed away, and men are wise and good, with a more perfect understanding of the purposes of God. The same voice that I had heard reading the book of my life was speaking to me. He said, 'The time will come, Médard, when men will hear again the words of Jesus, and understand their meaning: "Come to me, all who are burdened and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. For I came not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved, and men come to eternal life." (Cf. *Matt 11.28; John 3.16*) Médard, it is given to you to know that God never ceases to work, calling men back to him that they might be saved.' Then I saw that God judges us that we might see ourselves as we truly are and repent, not so that he might punish us and condemn us to eternal damnation. 'Amen,' I replied. 'Amen!'

Great and wonderful are your deeds, O Lord God, the Almighty.
 Just and true are your ways, O king of the ages.
 In your justice we shall know your love,
 and find our true selves. Alleluia! Amen!

Cahors

SATAN & EVIL

Jesus said, You are those who have stood by me in my trials. And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me, so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom and sit on thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. 'Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen

your brothers.' But he replied, 'Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death.' Jesus answered, 'I tell you, Peter, before the cock crows today, you will deny three times that you know me.'

Luke 22.28–34

Médard lived in a world when both the saints and Satan were understood entirely in personal terms: they were physically present, even if unseen. Devils and demons abounded, and took many forms; the most sinister was a deformed, distorted human being, as seen in French Romanesque churches! The Apocalypse (or Revelation of John) was read as a literal description of how things would end, and its images of the devil, as in the rest of the Bible, were taken at face value. One of these images is the red dragon waiting to devour the Christ child. He may have been thwarted on that occasion, but Satan never gives up. Médard, like his contemporaries, believed this; however, in his vision at the Chartreuse, he glimpsed a different future; he talks about it with his brother, Abbot Norbert.

One of the good things about this pilgrimage is that I can talk to my brother. The Rule of St Benedict prohibits conversations outside the monastery, and it restricts them inside. Although the Rule is not enforced today with the same rigour as in earlier times, the monks still live a cloistered life. As Abbot, Norbert could be freer than the other monks, but he takes his duty to lead by example seriously, and so generally we see him only at Sunday Mass, and then not to talk to. As we made our way to Cahors he came to walk with me.

'Bless you, brother,' he said. 'You seem strangely changed after our stay at the Chartreuse. What happened? Are you troubled in your spirit?'

And so I told him about my nightmare, and also how I had been transported to the future in the vision that I had a few days later.

He focussed first on the dream. Several times I have heard Norbert preach about hell, and the scenes of my dream were familiar to him. He listened intently, and then he said:

God has been good to you Médard, he has warned you.

I know, brother, and not only God, but our Lady also.

She is our protectress; she has seen into your heart and knows that you truly desire to repent; her prayers never fail. You will be tested, as we all shall be, but your time in purgatory will be cut short. Our Lady has assured you of her prayers; she will watch over you.

But what of the vision, brother? When shall men hear again the words of Jesus with a more perfect understanding?

Be careful, Médard, Satan is continually waiting to trap us. He can take many forms, he can come even as an angel. He comes to us especially when God has been merciful, as he has been to you, or when we have done a good deed, and we are less alert. These can be times of spiritual pride, and that opens the way for Satan. He has his angels too, remember, who report to him just as God's angels tell Him all that we do. That's how the Great Book that you saw is written.

I know, but there was no pride. I was reflecting on Our Lady's words, that all will be judged. She may protect us, as you say, but she cannot save us from judgement. I was praying for strength to live the good life, as you do, brother, in the monastery. The vision came when I was lamenting my sins, and asking for mercy.

Even so, you must test your vision by the teachings of Holy Church. The future is closed off from mortal men; it is not ours to see; what will be, will be, and God decides.

But did he not reveal his Will to the prophets of old? Do we not read in Isaiah, and Jeremiah, and Daniel what the future holds? Does God do that no more?

God has no need of prophets now that he has the Church. He has revealed what will be in the Apocalypse. It is the Holy Father, who is the Vicar of Christ on earth, who makes known to us God's Will.

So, will the future time of which the angel spoke come to pass?

No, Médard. We are living in the end time. Does scripture not say that a thousand years must pass before the End will come? Those thousand years have passed; the End is upon us, and Satan is released to test the hearts of men. Do you remember the story of Job? How God gave Satan permission

to test the heart of Job? In these times Satan is allowed by God to test the souls of the righteous. He knows our Lady appeared to you, and immediately he came to you to test you, brother; do not be deceived.

I know the tester will come. Did not our Lord say to Peter, 'Take heed: Satan has been given leave to sift you like wheat; but I have prayed for you Simon that your faith may not fail.'

Yes, even the Apostle Peter was tested – and failed. Salvation is a nothing less than a miracle; no one is worthy, only by the mercy of God are we saved. Our blessed Lady has assured you that she will pray for you as our Lord prayed for Peter. Do not let your vision lead you astray. As our Lord said to the disciples, Stay awake!

And with that he left me.

He left me confused. I don't think the vision was Satan's deception. Satan tests you by tempting you; there was no temptation. Nothing was expected of me; no bargain was offered; it was a revelation, a message. It had no special relevance for me, although I did find it strangely comforting, even if I didn't really comprehend what it was about. Questions raced through my mind: If it was true, then how can we be living in the end times? And if we're not, how are we to understand the Apocalypse? How can we be sure that these are the end times? Who am I to argue with Holy Church?

Lord, have mercy, for the waters are deep, and rise about me.
Was it your messenger who came to to me,
or was it an angel of Satan?
Do not let the waters overwhelm me;
Save me for the sake of your love.

Postscript

Today we may understand The Apocalypse more symbolically, but its images remain powerful. The great red dragon waiting to devour the newborn child, is a picture of collective evil, the summation of all that is

opposed to God. As John the Divine sees it, the forces of evil wait to devour the Saviour of the world, the One alone who has the power to dethrone them. In the end, says St John, he will be thrown down, but now he is active. Recent times, we may feel, have been good for the dragon, with the banking system brought almost to collapse, appalling revelations of child abuse, routine phone-tapping by the press, and so on... We may feel that evil and Satan figure too strongly in the medieval mind; but recent events suggest to me that we sit too light to the reality of evil; there are powerful forces behind events in the world that can only be described as Satanic.

If the medieval church emphasised judgement over forgiveness, we do the opposite. We need to be more real about judgement. Its a consistent theme of Jesus' preaching: Repent for you do not know the day or the hour.

During the time that Médard lived a change began in the way Jesus was understood. More emphasis was given to the humanity of Christ, and this was reflected in church decoration, as Jonathan Sumption explains. 'The infinitely distant God of the Moissac tympanum gave way to the human God of Chartres. But this Christ who took on the weakness and vulnerability of manhood was also the terrible judge portrayed with frightening realism at Conques and Autun. ... Here indeed, carved in stone, was the rex tremenda majestatis whom the pilgrim sought to appease with his prayers. ... Only by imitating Christ the man could one placate Christ the judge.' [135]

Lauzerte

MUSIC, PRAISE & DEVOTION

Revelation 5.8b–14 / Matthew 5.14–16

Writing about the popularity of festivals in the Middle Ages, Jonathan Sumption says: 'Every major shrine was perpetually besieged by a motley crowd of pilgrims, hawkers, musicians, beggars and idlers whose appetite for new wonders was insatiable.'

Musicians and clergy haven't always seen eye to eye.

Of course, there was music in churches in the Middle Ages; plainsong was sung in monasteries and the great churches, but probably not elsewhere. The power of music power to move people, to create atmosphere, to say things that can't be said in words, was well understood; what the clergy disapproved was popular music, and all musicians were lumped together as a suspect category. The Medieval Church feared people would be led astray by musicians, e.g. by drinking songs.

The fear was real. At Santiago de Compostella, on the eve of St James day one year in the fourteenth century one of the clergy noted disparagingly, 'the barbarous singing in German, English, Greek, and every other language under the sun.' These worldly songs were a feature of medieval celebration, and infuriated the clergy. 'At Conques the litany was drowned out by "rustic songs".' [213]

We are, of course, a long way from that, and the music we have enjoyed is of quite another order.

As we've travelled we've been thinking about some of the images from the Book of Revelation, apocalyptic images of judgement and catastrophe, but it is also from this disturbing book that we have the most beautiful images of heaven; music is one of their constant themes, as in today's reading. Heaven is unimaginable without music; worship is impossible without songs of praise. Our music on earth joins with that of the angels in an endless song of praise:

Praise and honour and glory and might, to him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb for ever and ever! Amen.

It would be nice to think that the music of heaven was also one of the wonders for which the medieval pilgrim had an insatiable appetite.

Its always struck me as remarkable that it is England, and, more specifically, the Church of England, that has kept this great choral tradition alive. It is a precious heritage.

Joanna Trollope, in her book *The Choir*, has the Dean in conflict with the Headmaster of the Choir School. The Dean wants to economise by disbanding the choir. On prize-giving day the Headmaster fights back. In his speech he thunders, 'The Cathedrals of France are silent ...' He might have added that they are silent in Italy too, the land of Palestrina and countless other composers of heavenly music. [Choir tour in Italy – packed church at Vercelli.]

Tragic that these great houses of prayer no longer echo with the glory of the great music written for God's praise.

When Jesus spoke about his followers being a light for the world, he did not have cathedral choirs in mind, but his words are appropriate none the less. This English choral tradition is a light for the world, and should be put on a lamp-stand where it gives light to everyone. (*Matt 5.15*)

Bless you, and thank you for the music!

Moissac

ST BENEDICT & THE MONASTIC IDEAL

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings

and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers--not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. *1 Peter 5.1-4*

St Hugh, Abbot of Cluny thought the best way to gain remission of sins was to become a monk. If this wasn't possible, then the next best thing was to go on pilgrimage. The Middle Ages were the time of the monastic ideal, and today we celebrate the father of western monasticism, Saint Benedict of Nursia.

Benedictine monasteries sprung up along the main pilgrim routes, and provided food and lodging to pilgrims free of charge. The Benedictine life is ordered by the Rule that Benedict wrote in the 6th century, and his description of the Abbot's role reflects the words of St Peter: 'look after the flock of God...not under compulsion, but willingly as God would have it; not for gain but out of sheer devotion; not lording it over your charges, but setting an example to the flock.' (1 Peter 5.2-3.) Benedict translates this into the virtue of humility, which Médard discusses with another monk in the group.

My conversation with my brother left me feeling disturbed, and him too, I think, as he seemed to avoid opportunities to talk further. At Cahors we were joined by another monk, Brother Gérard. He'd also set off from Le Puy, a bit earlier than us, but had fallen ill and had to rest at Cahors. Now recovered, he continued his journey with us, and we became companions. It turned out that he was the Prior of his monastery and quite knowledgeable about the Rule of St Benedict. I asked him if he had to pick one quality that marked out St Benedict what would it be? Without hesitation he said, 'humility'. When I asked why, he said that humility stood out as the foundation of Benedict's spiritual teaching; the chapter dealing with it was the longest one in the Rule, and it under-girded other basic ideas, like obedience.

'Yes,' I said, 'you can't be obedient if you think you are the greatest. What did Benedict say was the essence of humility?'

*Well, you know a bit of Latin; it comes from the Latin word *humus*, meaning earth. Humility is about being earthed, being in touch with the source of our being, with what is real.*

Well... that's rather different from the popular idea! Most people think of humility as a weak thing, doing yourself down. What they look up to is the man who always gets his own way.

Too true! But always wanting to have your own way shows weakness of character; it cuts you off from other people, and it also cuts you off from God. People who have risen in the world by treating other people as though they don't count – like that knight in our group, Raymond de l' Aubrac – have lost sight of God. He may seem strong on the outside, but talking to him the other day I realised he didn't have much moral strength, and that's often the case. The path of humility helps us to see ourselves clearly and know where we stand in God's sight.

So, you're saying humility is actually its a tough call. Its an inner strength that means that you don't have to have your own way all the time.

Exactly that. Humility is what we see in Jesus. He 'did not snatch at equality with God, but humbled himself, assuming the form of a slave.' (Phil. 2.6,7) Humility is what we see on the Cross; its the foundation of love, the willingness to put the needs of others first, to learn from them and to suffer for them. 'Humility helps us to achieve an inner freedom that frees us from selfish impulses and allows us to be shaped by other people's lives.' [Christopher Jamison]

That's rather like being on this pilgrimage. You have to be flexible; you can't just do your own thing.

Indeed you can't, and that's something Sir Raymond is having to learn. St Benedict would say its all about learning to be content. Being able to be content whatever happens to you is the fruit of great self-awareness. Even when status is taken away the humble person can live fruitfully and happily. [Christopher Jamison]

I hadn't thought of contentment like that. Again that stands popular ideas on their head, like Jesus' saying: 'Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.' (*Luke 18.14*)

Yes. And that, actually, is Benedict's starting point. (RSB 7.1) Humility is turning the other cheek, going the second mile, giving your coat as well as your shirt. (Matthew 5.39-41) Doing this voluntarily, with good grace, requires inner strength, not weakness. Its all part of seeking the Will of God for your life.

Our conversation continued, but when Gérard mentioned seeking God's will, my thoughts moved back to my vision. It had caused me much heart-searching: How does one know God's will? Did Benedict say that only the Church could tell you, or did he allow a place for individual insight? Well, St Paul did, I think. 'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,' he advised the Philippians. (*Phil. 2.12*) We don't hear much about that from Holy Church! But is that insisting on my own way? Should I, in humility, heed Norbert's warning that Satan is trying to lead me astray? After all he is an abbot.

I had no idea that this pilgrimage would give me so much grief!

Father, lead me in the way of humility,
 and if I am to work out my own salvation,
 teach me to recognise your voice and to know your will;
 calm my fears, and quieten my trembling spirit.

Condom

MIRACLES & HEALING

A man with leprosy came to Jesus and begged him on his knees, 'If you are willing, you can make me clean.' Filled with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. 'I am willing,' he said. 'Be clean!' Immediately the leprosy left him and he was cured. Jesus sent him away at once with a strong warning: 'See that you don't tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your cleansing, as a testimony to them.' Instead he went out and began to talk freely, spreading the news. As a result, Jesus could no longer enter a town openly but stayed outside in lonely places. Yet the people still came to him from everywhere.

Mark 1.40–45

One of the questions facing the medieval Church was why miracles occurred. The answer was that miracles were for the age of unbelief, and that in the age of faith the need for them had gone. But pagan beliefs persisted: pagans saw miracles as proof of the power of the gods, so Christianity had to supply them in order to make its claims convincing. In the medieval mind sanctity was inextricably linked with the miraculous. Miracles were what the people wanted, and they were regarded as a normal, even if remarkable, part of life. By far the most effective advertisement for a saint were his miracles, and the clergy of the major sanctuaries kept detailed records of the miracles that occurred. Miracles added to the prestige of a shrine, and the clergy conceived that they had a duty to their patron saint to increase his glory by writing down his miracles.

It was on the feast days of saints that people came in great numbers to be healed, and the shrine would take on a carnival atmosphere, crowded with pilgrims, hawkers, musicians, beggars and idlers. News of the more spectacular miracles spread quickly without any assistance from the clergy, but even so the clergy went to considerable lengths to publicise them, although as the public became more astute, the clergy began to examine miracles more carefully before they did so.

Some of the better educated churchmen were critical of widespread claims of the miraculous, like the reformer Jan Hus, but it was the laity who

led the way in the matter of miracles. Popular piety triumphed easily over more educated views, and the clergy followed; the critics were ignored. In some cases the 'cure' was undoubtedly faked, but there were also many that were genuine.

A miracle might be the result of prayer to the saint. Formally, the saint is being asked to pray for the petitioner, and it is the prayer of the saint that brings about the cure, but popularly many believed it was the saint himself or herself who worked the miracle. Many, if not most miracles, were attributed to the power of the saint's relics, and this reinforced popular beliefs about the personal power of the saint. Only rarely, however, was there physical contact with the actual relics; generally the cure was through contact with a cloth, or other object that had touched the relics, or by drinking water in which the relics had been immersed, or even that had been used to wash the shrine. [Cf. homeopathic medicine today.]

Not everyone was healed; probably most were not; either they displeased the saint in some way – maybe their offering was not generous enough, or their sins were too great and their repentance too weak. But, nothing daunted, they simply went to another shrine!

Médard, you may remember, has his doubts about miracles; at supper he talks to Guy of Ambert, one of the knights in the group.

Many of those who make pilgrimages are looking for healing, like some of those in our group. There's the blacksmith, Jean, his back bent with pain, and Marie a needle-woman. She has arthritis in her hands which makes needlework difficult. Physicians, she says, are useless; you can spend a fortune on them, and have nothing to show for it. No wonder people come to the saints for healing. Seeking a cure for illness is the main reasons why people visit their local shrines. News of a miracle cure spreads like wildfire, and brings crowds of sick people in its train.

At supper the other day I was sitting with one of the knights, Guy of Ambert. He'd made many pilgrimages, he said, to atone for a life of violence and slaughter, as he put it. Knights are expected to ensure the peace, punish offenders and defend the honour of the king; battle and

bloodshed is their trade, and not all of it is holy war. Guy had killed many people. In expiation he has made many pilgrimages since he laid down his sword – one every other year, he said. He's visited many shrines and witnessed many wonders.

He personally had seen men like Jean stand fully upright without pain after drinking holy water that had been touched by the relics of the saint. He had seen evil spirits driven out and people restored to their right minds, broken limbs healed, chronic conditions cured – just about every ailment healed. Many people, he said, went from shrine to shrine; sometimes the saint himself told them to go elsewhere. When in Rome Guy met an Englishman who had heard a mysterious voice say to him, 'Why are you wasting your time here? Go back home to England and make your offering at the monastery of St. Egwin at Evesham, for there alone you will be healed.' He'd never heard of St Egwin, and didn't know what happened to the man, but a lady, who similarly was told to go to the Abbey of St. James at Reading, did so and was healed! I must have looked a bit incredulous, because Guy earnestly assured me it was true.

En-route to Condom we passed near the village of Saint-Mezard; a local shrine. Guy said the saint had a reputation for healing arthritis. The next day was the saint's feast day: Why didn't I take Marie and her sister?

The small village was very crowded; wading our way through the crowds, we reached the church; Marie explained her need to the priest. He washed her hands with holy water and then wrapped them in a cloth that had touched the relics. He held her wrapped hands in his and prayed for them to become straight again. Marie said that as he did this, she felt a wonderful warmth suffuse her hands, and when the cloth was removed she was able to stretch them out. I was astounded. We were speechless. All of us wept for joy.

A lot of the time, I think people believe that a miracle has occurred because they passionately want to believe in them – if there are no miracles for people like Marie, then hope is snuffed out. But there could be no doubt about Marie's cure. She had given me her hand to hold when she first told

me about her condition, and she could not open it fully; but now she can. Praise God – and St-Mezard!

Marie and her sister and me moved to a quieter place to give thanks, and as I prayed what I can only describe as an echo of my vision came to me. My prayers had been heard. I was to take heart. Then I knew that there would come a time when men not only understood truly the words of Jesus, but also the causes of pain and illness and their cures. I was overwhelmed.

Why, O Lord, is this being revealed to me?

I am just a humble man, a sinner.

Who am I to know your ways, to see your vast designs?

This knowledge is too wonderful for me, too deep for me to bear.

Examine me, O God, and test my heart,

See if there is any way of wickedness in me

and lead me in the path of life eternal.

Cf. Psalm 139

Postscript

In the medieval church, as now, there was a tension between the views of the church hierarchy and those of the people, and, again like today, the views of educated opinion generally differed from both. In this situation it was popular piety that was the most powerful force, in part because the hierarchy and the scholars lacked any means of mass communication. So, if the hierarchy was to retain its authority, it had to accommodate popular views. But the effect of doing so was to sow its own demise, because this accommodation just waters down the content of the faith, and it loses its cutting edge. Everyone is diminished: the leaders lose authority because they are just seen as courting popularity and the people are not fed. (You can see the same effect in the way political leaders trim to popular pressure, and lose their vision and authority.)

Auch

PRAYER & THE SAINTS

The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.

Romans 8.26–30

Médard's experience at Saint-Mezard, confirming his earlier vision, makes him wonder about prayer. He is familiar with intercession, and with praying to the saints, both prayers of asking, but he is aware from what he has learned about the monastic life from his brother Norbert, that there are other ways of praying. As they walk together towards the Abbey at Flaran, Médard asks Gérard what the monks do in their long times of prayer.

These two mystical experiences – I suppose that's what they are – prompted me to talk to Gérard about prayer. I knew from Norbert that the monks spent two long periods each day in private prayer, What did they do? I asked him.

For Benedict, he said, prayer and study were linked. He taught a method of sacred reading, *lectio divina*. It is a slow, meditative way of reading; its object is to enable the reader to absorb the spirit of the text, and not just its meaning, so that the text forms us, rather than simply informs us.

Generally we use the Bible, but any inspired text can be used, like the *Lives of the Fathers*, the *Conferences* and *Institutes of Cassian*, and so on.

There are four stages. You begin with *Lectio*: reading the chosen passage quietly but audibly to yourself. When you come across a word or phrase that arrests your attention, you stop.

The second stage is *Meditatio*: mulling the word or phrase over in your mind, again speaking the words quietly, but audibly. *Meditatio* is done with the mouth. You savour the words, repeating them to yourself, sometimes just a few, sometimes the whole phrase, and leaving silences after each repetition. Its like striking a bell and listening to the echo. Its a way of getting on the same wavelength as God, of letting the scripture get from your head to your heart.

When you feel ready you move to the third stage, *Oratio*: you offer a brief prayer that arises out of your meditation.

The final stage is *Contemplatio*: you rest in the presence of God, finding depth in a shared silence. When this stage reaches a natural conclusion, you take up the book, and the process starts again.

I said I'd like to learn to pray that way; maybe he would guide me. He readily agreed, and this gave me the courage to mention my visions. To my joy, Gérard recognised the experience. He was familiar with mystical prayer, and encouraged me to open my heart to God. Had not Jesus said that when we pray we should do so alone and with the door closed, and pray to the Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you? (*Matt. 6.6*) He believed my vision came from God, not Satan: no material reward was promised, no bargain offered. But, he said, you have to depend on your prayer and your conscience. He advised me to pray as he had taught me using the passage in St Paul's letter to the Romans where he talks about the Spirit praying within us with sighs too deep for words. 'Open yourself to the Spirit,' he said. 'God who searches our inmost being, knows what the Spirit means, because he pleads for God's people, as God himself wills.' (*Rom 8.27*)

I knew I had found my spiritual guide, and I went to pray.

Be with me, O God,

let your Spirit come to the aid of my weakness,
and each me to pray.

Col d'Osquich

INDULGENCES & CORRUPTION

Jesus said, Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? No servant can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, 'You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.' *Luke 16.10–15*

Indulgences grew up in a world obsessed with sin and guilt, and the fear of eternal damnation. Sin creates a separation between us and God, cutting us off from heaven. The problem is that sin is inevitable because no one is perfect. Even in a virtuous life sins mount up; how do you clear them away and restore communion with God? Repentance and forgiveness removes guilt, but not the penalty that has to be paid for the wrongdoing. In the tenth century it became possible for penitents to redeem their penances by payment if they were physically capable of performing them, and from this grew the practice of granting indulgences. An indulgence is a formal act of the Church by which a penance imposed on a penitent is remitted. It did not free the penitent from guilt, only confession and absolution could do

that, but, as one thirteenth century schoolman explained, it 'excused him from suffering the temporal punishment due for his sins.' [141]

In the medieval understanding some, at least, of this punishment would be suffered after death in purgatory, and this applied particularly to sins that had not been confessed. Purgatory was also the place of purification through which all the departed must pass. It came to be the practice that indulgences granted the remission of a stated number of years that the sinner would otherwise have to spend in purgatory. The practice gradually arose of attaching indulgences to specific acts, like visiting a named shrine, or going on pilgrimage, and, in time, people began to do this in a routine way to reduce their time in Purgatory. All this is will have been very familiar to Médard, who finds himself talking to Oderic, the Reeve of the Vicompte du Puy, who is making the pilgrimage to increase his tally of indulgences.

I wondered why Oderic was making this pilgrimage. He didn't mix much with the other pilgrims, never stayed long in Church, and at the towns where we stayed a few days, he was always off on some sort of business. As the Reeve of the Vicompte du Puy, he was a man of some authority. He supervised the Vicompte's estates, and managed his tenants and his workmen. I was surprised that the Vicompte had let him come, but then his lordship is a pious man and a noted benefactor of the Church. But it did cross my mind that he might have agreed to Oderic's participation on condition that he mixed piety with business as he went.

I'd exchanged a few words with Oderic at Le Puy. He knew I was a merchant, a practical man like himself, accustomed to dealing with money and people, and to calculating profit and loss, so I wasn't entirely surprised when, as we approached Aire-sur-l'Adour, he asked if there was an indulgence attached to visiting the church there, where the relics of Sainte-Quitterie were kept. (She was martyred in the reign of the Emperor Commodus in the third century.)

'Not so far as I know,' I replied.

Oh, well, he said, no point in visiting it, then.

There was a silence, so I asked, 'How many years have you got?'

Getting on for a hundred – that's my goal for this pilgrimage: to complete my first hundred years. That should bring salvation a bit nearer! You know, I heard of a man who went to Rome and gathered a hundred years in a month – there are so many shrines with indulgences of several years apiece. He just went from shrine to shrine, attending Mass until he'd reached his century. Now that's serious religion!

Serious religion...?

Yes, taking what the Church says seriously. Had I been able, I would have gone on the crusade and got the plenary indulgence. Think about it: all the penance due for the sins of a lifetime erased. Salvation guaranteed! And you didn't have to get to Jerusalem; setting out with the intention of going there was enough.

And with that he hurried off – another errand to make for the Vicompte, I suppose.

Serious religion? It wasn't what I was coming to understand as serious religion. But many people thought like Oderic, and, given the way indulgences were multiplied, it seemed as if the Church thought like that too. I used to think like that. I reckon I have knocked 20 years off purgatory, but this mathematical, calculating approach to salvation no longer rings true for me. It just reduces your spiritual life to performing a series of rituals, just like Oderic is doing. That's not serious religion.

What happens when Oderic gets to the gates of heaven? Does St Peter inspect his certificates and wave him through irrespective of the moral quality of his life, and the depth of his faith? If its taken to extremes, this practice of granting indulgences for undertaking certain ritual acts will simply become a licence to sin.

Gérard has been guiding me in my prayers, and gave me a passage from St Luke for *lectio divina* – the one where Jesus says you can't serve two masters. As I prayed, God showed me that he sees beyond the ritual to the spirit in which it is performed. Ritual expresses meaning, but meaning comes from intentions, from my spirit, and where it is focussed. God's spirit searches our spirit. And I saw that our spirit needs to be pure; just doing something like a pilgrimage, or visiting a shrine, or gaining an indulgence,

does not automatically change you; Salvation is not accounting or putting money in the bank. I hope Oderic learns this, and even the pious Vicompte, who seems to think, with all the errands that he's given Oderic while he's on pilgrimage, that you can serve God and Mammon, just so long as you keep them in different compartments.

Father, help me to be trustworthy with the wealth of this world,
 so that I may be trusted by you with the wealth of what is real.
 Let my spirit be formed by your Holy Spirit,
 for it is not my merits, nor the indulgences of Holy Church,
 that will bring me to heaven,
 but only the love of your Son, Jesus, our Lord and saviour.

Postscript

Pope Urban II proclaimed the first plenary indulgence when he called for a crusade to restore Jerusalem to Christianity. At the Council of Clermont (1095) he declared that 'every man who sets out for Jerusalem with the army to liberate the Church of God shall have the entire penance for his sins remitted.' [141.]

St-Jean-Pied-de-Port

FAITH

Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for. By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible. By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later

receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. By faith Abraham, even though he was past age – and Sarah herself was barren – was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

Hebrews 11.1–3, 8–16

One day as Jesus was teaching, Pharisees and teachers of the law, who had come from every village of Galilee and from Judea and Jerusalem, were sitting there. And the power of the Lord was present for him to heal the sick. Some men came carrying a paralysed man on a mat and tried to take him into the house to lay him before Jesus. When they could not find a way to do this because of the crowd, they went up on the roof and lowered him on his mat through the tiles into the middle of the crowd, right in front of Jesus. When Jesus saw their faith, he said, "Friend, your sins are forgiven."

Luke 5.17–20

I'm not sure what I expected, but walking through the Porte Saint-Jacques and along the rue de la Citadelle winding down the hill to the river, I had a real sense of arrival, even though we are only half-way through our pilgrimage. I think it has something to do with this being the place where three of the French pilgrim paths converge. From all over France we have come together for the second part of our journey. We'll spend a few days here before we make the long climb over the mountains into Spain. It will be the first time that I've left France, or indeed seen a proper mountain!

Half-way – if not physically, then certainly mentally – and time to take stock.

This journey has not been what I expected. What did I expect? Well, tiring days, sore feet, hardship, strange beds, beautiful churches, new companions – its been all that and more. The outward journey has been more or less what I expected, but its the inward journey that has been quite unexpected. I hadn't thought of this when I set out, but I've been on two journeys at the same time. In both journeys I've been to new places; I had some idea about the new towns and churches we would see, after all France is France, but the new places on my spiritual journey have taken me to an unknown place, and I still don't know quite what to make of it.

I've been lucky since we left Cahors to have Gérard to guide me. He's been like a guardian angel. The way he was delayed at Cahors, and then decided to join our group seem to be more than a coincidence; its as though he was given to me just at the time I needed him. God be praised!

I suppose what I feel is that Gérard has opened my eyes to a new dimension, a new depth of faith. Before I set out my faith was quite formal; I never thought much about what faith was. I sought forgiveness in the accepted ways: confession and absolution, gaining indulgences by visiting shrines and making this pilgrimage; faith was doing what Holy Church prescribed in order to gain salvation. We were taught that salvation was nothing less than a miracle. Well, none of this has changed; confession, indulgences, pilgrimage..., all remain important, but now I see them in a new light. Gérard has guided me to see that in my vision God has shown me that he is love before he is judgement, and that we are meant to walk before him knowing we are loved; and knowing also that we are judged so that we may amend, not so that we are condemned. Judgement and salvation are two sides of the same coin. I now see all our penitential practices as being part of getting us on to God's wavelength, not as a way of appeasing God in his wrath.

And it has come as a revelation to me to realise that this is what Jesus was about. Take the story of the men who brought their paralysed friend to Jesus. Jesus saw their faith and he said to the man, 'Your sins are forgiven

you'. He imposes no penance, no elaborate rituals; faith is enough. Salvation may be a miracle, but it comes to all who put their trust in God in faith. Just like the great roll-call of heroes of faith in the Letter to Hebrews. They trusted in God; faith is taking God at his word.

But what is still a mystery to me is why God sent *me* the vision in the first place. I'm not a holy man; I'm not a Church leader like my brother Norbert; I'm just a wool merchant, an ordinary man, a sinner. Well, as Gérard said, the ways of God are a mystery, to be experienced rather than understood. We have to give ourselves to them, and let them lead us. He told me about a lovely passage in the Prophet Hosea: although Israel had turned away from God, and he had punished her for her faithlessness, he will not let her go. He says, 'But now I shall woo her, lead her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her.' Gérard likened my pilgrimage to being led into the wilderness so that God might speak tenderly to me. 'But,' he said, 'God does not do this as a favour to you Médard; he does it because, as with Israel, he has a purpose for you to fulfil. Pray that on the second part of our journey he may make that purpose clear to you.'

Amen, Lord.

Let it be to me as you will.

Speak, for your servant is listening.

Roncesvalles

JOURNEY'S END : HEAVEN

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully

dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.' He who was seated on the throne said, 'I am making everything new!' Then he said, 'Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.' He said to me: 'It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life. He who overcomes will inherit all this, and I will be his God and he will be my son.'

Revelation 21.1-7

It was a hard climb up to here – and my first experience of the mountains. And what a breath-taking view! I look up at the peaks towering above me, wondering what the view is like from there. Can you see God?

Its like I felt as we set off from Le Puy, and walked over the hills to Conques: the same intense feeling of newness, of wonder and of beauty, but only much more so. Is this the wilderness where God will speak tenderly to me? It has a beauty and an energy that makes me feel close to heaven. Its all full to bursting with newness. Is this what it will be like when God's purposes are finally achieved? Doesn't it say in the Apocalypse, after all the trials and tribulations that will come upon the earth, that God will make all things new? There will be a new heaven and a new earth, and God will dwell among us. We shall be his people, and God himself will be with us.

Its the same vision of newness as in the prophecy from Hosea that Gérard told me about. It has stayed with me – I've thought about little else since I spoke with him. What is the purpose that God has for me? What will be revealed on the second part of our journey? As I look around me, I wonder if it will be about helping people to see God in a new way, as I have done, so that their lives are formed by the desire of heaven rather than the fear of hell. God longs to speak tenderly to us all, and to wipe away every tear from our eyes. He longs to refresh us, and make us new.

Lord, help me open my heart to you.

Refresh me with your love,
as you refresh the earth with your goodness.

Esterénçuby

FAREWELL

I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Ephesians 3.14b–21

What did people do at the end of a pilgrimage in Médard's day? Some entered a monastery, a sign of renouncing the world, and the best way to live a devout and holy life. [126] That, probably, is not what we shall do, nor I think, did Médard. The rest of his story remains to be written, but my guess is that he returned to his beloved wife Amélie, who was overjoyed to see him safely return. He is likely to have left his business in the capable hands of his son, and to have begun a new life, perhaps as the almoner at the Abbey.

Médard made two journeys, the outward physical journey and the inward spiritual journey. He sought forgiveness and salvation, and found it through his prayers. We now live in the future time that Médard foresaw,

when the causes of illness are better understood and when our understandings about God, we believe, are truer to the Biblical revelation. But with all our scientific advances, we seem to have forgotten the need for the double journey, and modern life does not feed our spirits. Pilgrimage remains an important way of making the double journey, allowing the outward physical journey to enable an inward spiritual journey.

I think we still seek forgiveness and salvation, although we give them different names. There is a human need to be rooted in what is real, and to find our true selves. Whether we travel at the beginning of the second millennium, or at the beginning of the third millennium, the goal is the same, and the story of Médard reminds us that we do not make that journey alone. He saw himself as living in a world populated with saints, and where the miraculous is a normal part of life. Roman Catholic spirituality has kept hold of that better than Reformed spirituality, and the more I follow these ancient spiritual paths, the more it makes sense to me. The saints are there, praying for us, and I hope that among them St Paul prays for us the prayer that he prayed for the Christians at Ephesus, that God may grant us inward strength and power through his Spirit, and that in Christ our faith may have deep roots and firm foundations. (*Eph. 3.16-17*)