

INTRODUCTION

MÉDARD'S JOURNEY



REFLECTIONS ON THE PILGRIM WAY
TO SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

PETER SILLS

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COVER

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MÉDARD'S JOURNEY

MANY today are drawn to walk the ancient pilgrim ways, 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.

By far the most popular pilgrim way today is the *Camino Francés*, the medieval path across northern Spain to the shrine of Saint James the Apostle at Santiago de Compostela. Several routes across France lead into this ancient way, and in these reflections I follow the journeys of two medieval pilgrims along two of these ways: Médard, a wool merchant from La Chaise Dieu, as he walks the *Via Podiensis* from Le Puy-en-Velay to Roncesvalles, and Robert le Chêne, understeward to the Vicomte Beaucaire, who follows the *Via Tolosana* from Arles to Puente La Reina. Here they meet and continue the journey together on the *Camino Francés*.

Médard and Robert are my creation, two among a host of people like them who made the pilgrimage to Santiago. I have placed them early in the second millennium, the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, the Great Age of pilgrimage, but I'm not specific about the date. All the events that they experience are historical, but I have exercised a little creative licence in the way they are used – Médard and Robert will not have lived long enough to have experienced them all. As Eric Morecambe might have said, I have got all the right facts,

but not necessarily in the right order! The principal sources on which I have drawn are listed after this introduction.

The two pilgrims are quite contrasted in character. Médard comes from a family of shepherds and has become a wool merchant, one of an emerging mercantile class in the early Middle Ages. He is married with a grown-up family. For him the journey is the realisation of a long-held personal desire, and to fulfil it he must leave his wife and family at home. Robert, the younger of the two by ten years, originally from a humble family, has risen to a position of responsibility in a noble household. He is unmarried, a man of practical affairs, making the journey to accompany his lord, rather than of his own volition. Many centuries later, Robert's aristocratic world would be threatened and surpassed by Médard's commercial successors.

Médard is the more reflective of the two, and more biblically literate than would have been usual at the time, three hundred years or so before the invention of printing, a time when access to the scriptures was effectively reserved to the clergy and religious. His story, and the things he thinks about in the first part, *Via Podiensis*, 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 Way. Robert's concerns are rather different, but he, too, finds himself confronting some basic questions about life which have a contemporary ring. He narrates the second part, *Via Tolosana*, where the focus is more on the personal response to God. In the third part, *Camino Francés*, another narrator, Aleyne de Bohun, a Benedictine nun, joins Médard and Robert, and the story moves on to consider how we can find depth in our spiritual quest.

These reflections were written for the journeys that I made with two groups of pilgrims, the first in July 2014 following the *Via Podiensis*, and the second in July 2019 following the *Via Tolosana* and the *Camino Francés*. They are inspired by the places which we visited – just a few,

alas, of the many that provide hospitality for pilgrims – and are offered to provide food for thought for contemporary pilgrims making the same journey, or who simply want to reflect on their spiritual life. The topics that I have chosen are those that commonly arise on the Christian spiritual journey today, and the thoughts and questions that occur to Médard and Robert are, therefore, more akin to those common at the beginning of the third millennium than at the beginning of the second millennium.

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Being a Pilgrim: Art and Ritual on the Medieval Routes to Santiago by Kathleen Ashley & Marilyn Deegan (Lund Humphries, 2009) [KA]

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Western Society and the Church in the Middle Ages by R. W. Southern (Pelican, 1970) [RWS]

Montaillou by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie (Penguin, 1980) [ERL]

Reaching Out by Henri J M Nouwen (Collins, Fount Paperbacks, 1980) [HN]

A Life-Giving Way by Esther de Waal (Continuum, 1995) [EW]

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The Bible readings are taken from the *Holy Bible New International Version* (International Bible Society, on-line edition)

ST JAMES AND THE PILGRIMAGE

Who was St James?

St James and his brother John were fishermen, two of the first to be called by Jesus together with Peter and Andrew. St Mark records that they were in a boat on the sea of Galilee mending their nets. As soon as Jesus called them they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him (*Mark 1.19–20*). The brothers were strong characters, nicknamed by Jesus *Boanerges*, meaning ‘sons of thunder’. Their self-confidence is demonstrated later in the gospel story, when, as Jesus approached Jerusalem, they asked him if they could have the places of honour, one on his right the other on his left, when he entered into glory. Jesus told them that they did not know what they were asking. He said, ‘Can you drink the cup that I drink, or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?’ Bravely, they said they could. That indeed will be your fate, Jesus replied, but to sit on his right or his left, was not an honour that he could grant (*Mark 10.35–40*). For James, Jesus’ prophecy was soon fulfilled: he was the first of the apostles to die for the faith, beheaded by King Herod during the first persecution of the Church (*Acts 12.1–2*). James is known as ‘James the Great’ to distinguish him from the other two James mentioned in the NT: James the Less (of the duo Philip and James), and James of Jerusalem, a brother of Jesus, head of the Church in Jerusalem who wrote the Letter of James, often wrongly ascribed (as by Briais and Paireault) to James the Great.

Origins of the Pilgrimage

According to legend, before his martyrdom, when the apostles were scattered across the world, James preached the gospel in Spain, and

after his death his disciples placed his body in a rudderless boat that was guided by the Spirit to the town of Iria Flavia (known today as Padrón) in Galicia. From there the body was taken for burial in what is now known as Compostela. From the first century until the ninth his body laid there unnoticed, when a hermit was led by a star to a field where the relics, believed to be those of St James, were discovered. 'Compostela' is generally said to mean 'field of the star', *campus stellae*, though most scholars agree that it is a version of the Latin word for burial, *compositum*; in other words, the field was a cemetery. A shrine was built there which became the centre of a small local cult until the tenth century when kings and eminent bishops began to recognise the political and religious importance of the shrine of St James. It would be fair to say, in modern terms, that the shrine was effectively marketed, and by the twelfth century Santiago de Compostela had become the third most important Christian pilgrimage destination.

It is hard today to take the legend literally, and, indeed, not all medieval pilgrims believed it. In the C16th Andrew Boorde said that in his opinion there was 'not one hair nor one bone of St James in Compostela.' [KA 235] Nevertheless, the legend has inspired a depth of devotion to St James that lasts until this day. Santiago de Compostela is where this close companion of Jesus – one, with Peter and John, of the inner three disciples, and the first to be martyred for his faith – is commemorated, and it is the prayers and devotion of the faithful that have given Santiago its special sanctity.

However, the legend also inspired the rulers of Spain to conscript St James to their cause – one of the countless examples of the faith and its saints being used as a badge of national and political identity – and his aid was believed to have been decisive in the success of the Christian campaign to drive the Moors from Spain, and he is hailed as St James Matamoros, St James the Moor-slayer. This aspect of the legend had real power, but lost contact with reality. For example,

although the battle of Roncevaux was fought by Basque mountain fighters who resented the Frankish incursion into their land, in popular piety they became transformed into Moors who were the enemy of the Christians, assisted by St James Matamoros. According to legend Charlemagne converted Spain under the patronage of St James, and as the emperor lay dying St James rescued his soul from a hoard of black devils, the colour being significant. As the shrine of St James, Santiago became identified with the battle against the Moors.

Companions on the Way

Whatever the historical reality may be, it is the devotion of the faithful that has made Santiago and its pilgrimage what it is, and the first time that I made this journey I felt the same sense of arrival as when I first looked upon Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives. The Camino is a Holy Way, hallowed by the prayers and devotion of the faithful, and that is why so many people are drawn to follow it.

With the huge growth in travel over the last quarter-century pilgrimage can seem like another form of tourism, but there is a difference in the way that pilgrims and tourists travel. Tourism tends to put the desires and needs of the tourist first; the traveller is the subject of the journey, the places and people on the way the object. The pilgrim seeks to reverse this, allowing the places and people that are encountered to be the subject, and he or she comes to learn from them. A pilgrimage also differs from tourism in the way the journey is made. Pilgrims are companions (from the Latin *com panis*) on the way; that is, they share bread together. The bread that we share is both the bread of our daily meals and the bread of the Eucharist. Pilgrims also travel prayerfully, observing the Prayer of the Church day by day, asking God to bless them on their journey and to deepen their faith.

VIA PODIENSIS

LE PUY-EN-VELAY TO RONCESVALLES

MÉDARD DE LA CHAISE DIEU

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.’ [JS 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. Its 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, its 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 simply 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 Saint-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 its 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 need 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, which was late that year. We didn't have long, only six weeks, and I had my preparations to make. We would be away for around half 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 scrip (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 sceptre. 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.

Revelation 12.1–6

Le Puy was already a Marian shrine at the time of Médard's visit, but its importance increased 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, in his guide to the Holy Land, to get to know her better. 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?' (Ron Brownrigg, Come, See The Place)

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 Isaiah 'my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.' (*Isa 55.8*) That's true enough; God is beyond us; but the world is full of the signs of his presence. 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 Isaiah 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 hills and the fields, 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 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. It is 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. They're not people I knew; you travel with whoever is ready and waiting.

Le Puy is a holy place; it has been specially blessed by Our Lady, and so it is a pilgrimage destination in its own right. Our Blessed Lady is the mother of mercy. She is our protector; her prayers save those who by God's law are condemned to damnation and punishment. She will rescue us from the Evil One – just like she rescued Theophilus – my brother had told me the story. He was the steward of a bishop in Cicilia, and was anxious to succeed his master

as bishop. With the assistance of a Jewish sorcerer, he 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. 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 unpitying, is imminent.' [JS 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...' (*Lamentation 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, Dame Aleyne and Sister Thérèse, 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, and he did the same. As it happened, Norbert really took to the religious life (which isn't true, alas, for all the monks), and now he, the youngest, has become the greatest.

In the Abbey you see 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'Eglise 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. The interior is bright with colour, the beautifully decorated vault leading the eye upward to heaven. And as he entered Médard would have noticed that the

scene depicted in the tympanum (the semi-circular panel over the entrance, shown above) was not the usual scene of the Last Judgement, but a much more joyful depiction of Pentecost. It comes as a surprise, 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 Aubrac 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, old churches 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, although 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. God's gift of the Spirit is raised above his 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 one of his letters. 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.' (*Philippians 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 AND 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, i.e. moved, from Agen several centuries later. Jerome records her death, so it is likely that she actually existed, and before the translation of her relics she had a reputation as a miracle worker. The translation of relics was 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. (He made his views known by the forty days of rain that followed!) 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 a dress worn by 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 relics of the saints.

In Médard's day, popular piety went ahead of 'official' ideas about relics, endowing them with intrinsic powers. Many of the local clergy believed this too; they came from same stock as the people, sharing popular ideas and misconceptions, and a simplified view of life. Even though some senior clergy thought differently, The Church simply followed the crowd. At Conques Médard recalls the story of Sainte-Foy, and the power of her relics.

IT'S A week since we left Le-Puy, and now we've arrived at Conques, the shrine of Sainte-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 Sainte-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. Foy 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, mercifully, are now 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 Sainte-Foy and brought them here. It sounds like theft, but the lawyers say that 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 Sainte-Foy was moved deliberately for her protection (at that time this region was suffering from devastating raids by the

Vikings), and she was never returned. Whatever the reason, her move changed the fortunes of Conques. A shrine stands or falls by the importance of its relics, and with Sainte-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. Sainte-Foy 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 Sainte-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 Sainte-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 Sainte-Foy!

I was talking to Sister Thérèse, 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 Sainte Foy. 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, the saints 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 severe picture of the Last Judgement given by St Matthew would have rung true to Médard. It was depicted in the tympanum above the entrance to most churches in graphic detail, as at Conques, with the clear warning to all that that's how it would be. The central part of the the tympanum at Conques shows Christ welcoming the blessed to heaven on the left, and on the right, the devil despatching the damned to hell, symbolised by the jaws of a huge monster. As Médard travelled on this scene stayed with him.

WE SPENT two days at 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 its 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 scenes 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 village of Aubin where there was a hostelry, and there we stayed 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. I was condemned...

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... I fell, down, down, down... the fall seemed endless...

I awoke, terrified, shaking, 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 so 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 from the depths of my heart. ‘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!*

Postscript

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 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 not only to getting into the medieval mind, but, more importantly, to dealing effectively with many modern failings like the ethical deficit revealed by banking crisis, and the abuse of children and vulnerable adults.

Cahors

SATAN AND 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 where 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 most 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 (part of the reading at Le Puy). 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, and extended conversations are unusual. As

the Abbot, Norbert was allowed to 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.’

‘Yes. 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? Of the time when shall men hear 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, and in the Apocalypse of Blessed John, 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. Satan knows that our Lady appeared to you, and immediately he came to you to test you. Brother, do not be deceived.'

'I know that the tester will come. As our Lord said 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, but there was no temptation. Nothing was expected of me; no bargain was offered; it was a message, a revelation. 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 the vision 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 new-born 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. As I said above, 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.' [JS 135]

Lauzerte

MUSIC AND WINE

There in heaven stood a throne. On it sat One whose appearance was like jasper or cornelian, and around it was a rainbow, bright as an emerald. In a circle about this throne were twenty-four other thrones, and on them were seated twenty-four elders, robed in white and wearing gold crowns. From the throne came flashes of lightning and peals of thunder.... In the centre, round the throne itself, were four living creatures... each had six wings, and eyes all round and inside them. Day and night unceasingly they sing:

Holy, holy, holy is God the sovereign Lord of all,
who was, and is, and is to come!

Whenever the living creatures give glory and honour and thanks to the One who sits on the throne, who lives for ever and ever, the twenty-four elders prostrate themselves before the One who sits upon the throne and they worship him who lives for ever and ever. As they lay their crowns before the throne they cry:

You are worthy, O Lord our God,
to receive glory and honour and power,
because you created all things;
by your will they were created and have their being.

I saw in the right hand of the One who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides, and sealed with seven seals. ...Then I saw a Lamb with the marks of sacrifice on him. ...When he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures, and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God's people. And they sang a new song, saying:

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals,
because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.
You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth.

Then I looked and heard the voice of many angels, numbering thousands upon thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand. They encircled the throne and the living creatures and the elders. In a loud voice they were saying:

Worthy is the Lamb, who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and strength
and glory and honour and praise.

Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, saying:

To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honour and glory and power for ever and ever!

The four living creatures said, 'Amen', and the elders fell down and worshipped.

Revelation 4.5 – 5.14

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.' The medieval Church disliked popular music, and to this day musicians and clergy don't always see eye to eye. Of course, there was music in churches in the Middle Ages; plainsong was sung in monasteries and in the great churches, though probably not in the parish churches. Outside the Church the popular songs were often pretty ribald in character. Music has always been a way of saying the unsayable, and of commenting on the affairs of the high and mighty, and because of this it is something, together with the theatre, that the Church, until relatively recently, sought to control.

AT THE end of a long day's walk from Cahors we reached Lauzerte, a pretty village set on a hill with its houses clustered around a welcoming square. On one side opposite the church there was an inn where some of us hoped to stay – Norbert and his close companions headed for the presbytery where they were to lodge with the local priest. When Norbert invited me to join the pilgrimage I'd seen it as a time to get to know my brother better – with him being in the monastery since he was eight we hadn't grown up together, and I've never really got to know him – but, although we have spoken more than usual, that's not how it has worked out. Norbert remains a bit of a stranger, like a distant cousin, and becoming the Abbot has removed him further from us. It feels odd; and I'm disappointed; but there's nothing I can do about it. I just have to accept that that's the way it is. In some ways Norbert's elevation is unfortunate as, staying with the local clergy or gentry, he and his companions are a bit cut off from the way some of the other pilgrims behave. That evening at Lauzerte was a good example.

When we arrive at a town or village, we go first to the church or shrine, where we say our prayers. If there are several churches, we visit them all – you soon catch on to the local circuit. After that you find your lodging and supper, and spend the evening as you wish. That night a group of troubadours were singing and entertaining the

villagers and pilgrims, and I and some of the others went to join them.

I've become accustomed to the coarse songs that come with ale and wine, when men have drunk well, but that pilgrims should sing these songs disquiets my soul. I've often heard my brother say that the only song pleasing to God is the chant of the monks. Their plainsong, with its gentle rhythms that rise and fall, echoing the natural rhythm of the words, conjures a different spirit. Sometimes I felt that the Church was too hard in its criticism of popular ballads, but that night I had to admit the criticism was valid.

There were two groups of pilgrims in Lauzerte that evening: us and a group from the Cévennes. By the time we arrived the Cévennois had already well drunk, and they seemed to resent our presence. I don't know why, exactly, but there was an edge in the atmosphere. They are a bit 'different' in the Cévennes, and it seems they resented the presence of an Abbot and gentry in our group. The troubadours, sensing their taste for coarse songs, were happy to oblige. After listening to one or two songs, our group turned away. Noticing this, one of the Cévennois came over and challenged us. 'What's the matter with you lot,' he said, 'can't you take a bit of earthy humour? You're with that Abbot from Le Puy, aren't you? Too damn pious for your own good!' We tried to ignore him, but, emboldened by the wine, he came closer, repeating an insulting line from the troubadour's song.

It all felt quite threatening, and Hubert, one of the valets in our group, a large man, who had been to war, stood up to restrain the drunkard. Fortunately, two other Cévennois, seeing how things could get out of hand, hurried over to rescue their friend, and it all passed off without incident. Some people, like Hubert, seem to take aggression in their stride, but it really shakes me up. The incident left me a bit shocked and shaken; this was a face of pilgrimage that I had not anticipated.

The effect of drink that night was only too apparent – according to Norbert, even St Benedict had to warn his monks against it. In his Rule he says that wine is not an appropriate drink for monks, but because they could not be persuaded of this, they should ‘drink sparingly and not to satiety, because wine makes even the wise fall away.’ (*RSB 41*) But wine was not the only thing with power that night; the music and the songs had their own power, for good and for evil. I hadn’t really thought about this before – another thing that this pilgrimage has done for me. Songs were songs as far as I was concerned. People sang them; you enjoyed them; maybe you were moved by them; but then you forgot about them. They were in the background of life. But that evening opened my eyes to the power of songs. They can do more than move you at the moment; they can also motivate you, affect your attitudes and the way you look at other people. The troubadour had a drummer with him that night; and there was an energy coming from the drum-beat. It must have been like that when Joshua surrounded the walls of Jericho, and the trumpeters and the musicians went before him. There must have been a huge energy in the air; no wonder the walls came tumbling down! I’m beginning to realise the power of music. You can see why the Church insists that our voices are properly employed when lifted up in praise to God, and not lowered to celebrate the lust of men.

As I sat there in the warm evening my mind ran on. I had a kind of waking dream... I was transported to the heavenly court – not the court of judgement, as at Villefranche, but the court of praise. I was again in the vast hall, but this time the throne was the throne of grace. Before it were the twenty-four elders with their golden crowns, and around it were the four great, winged creatures, covered with eyes... I saw the flashes of lightning and I heard the peals of thunder that came from the throne, but I wasn’t afraid, for they were part of the great hymn of praise that the creatures sing unceasingly:

Holy, holy, holy is God the sovereign Lord of all,

who was, and is, and is to come!

And then it seemed as though the whole of creation joined in the song of praise, every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing with joy:

To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb
be praise and honour and glory and power for ever and ever!

The dream faded, but its images remained with me. And the meaning of what I had been shown dawned on me: God is enthroned on our song. I don't think I have ever heard about this. All we hear about from the Apocalypse are the violent images of judgement and catastrophe; but it also paints the most beautiful pictures of heaven – that's where our pictures of heaven come from! – and music is one of their constant themes. I'd seen it all along, but not noticed it – in the arches over countless church doorways we see the heavenly host with all kinds of musical instruments singing in praise of God.

Heaven is unimaginable without music; worship is impossible without songs of praise. 'Holy, holy, holy...' we sing. We take these words on to our lips in the Holy Mass; our songs are the songs of heaven. 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.

I hadn't noticed, but everyone else had gone; the quarrel over, and forgotten. And so, with the songs of heaven echoing in my mind, I took my rest.

*Lord, help me to lift up my voice
and to join the worship of heaven,
for into your hands I commend my spirit.*

Moissac

ST BENEDICT AND 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 chief among the many orders and communities was the Order of Saint Benedict, founded by Benedict of Nursia in the sixth century, who is generally regarded as the father of western monasticism.

Benedictine monasteries like the one at Moissac – noted for the Romanesque carvings in its cloister – were established along the main pilgrim routes, and provided food and lodging to pilgrims free of charge. The Benedictine life is ordered by the Rule that St Benedict wrote for his monastery at Monte Cassino in Italy, and his description of the Abbot's rôle 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 a monk who has joined 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, sometime before us, but had fallen ill and had to

rest at Cahors. Now recovered, he asked to 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 St 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.

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

'He said it was about acknowledging our dependence on God. You know a bit of Latin. Humility comes from the Latin word *humus*, meaning earth. So humility is about being earthed, being in touch with the source of our being, in touch with what is real.'

'Oh... ' I hesitated, sorting out my thoughts. '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.'

'That's true. But always wanting to have your own way shows a 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.'

'It sounds, from what you're saying, that humility is actually a tough call ... a sort of 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. D’you remember the words of St Paul: “He did not snatch at equality with God, but humbled himself, assuming the form of a slave.”’ (*Phil. 2.6,7*)

‘Yes – I’ve often wondered what he meant.’

‘Well, its what you’ve just said: giving up your own will. 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. I heard a wise Abbot put it this way: “Humility,” he said, “helps us to achieve an inner freedom that frees us from selfish impulses and allows us to be shaped by other people’s lives.”’ [*CJ*]

‘That’s rather like being on this pilgrimage. You have to fit in with others; 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 whatever happens to you. Even when status is taken away the humble person can live fruitfully and happily.’

‘I hadn’t thought of contentment like that. That’s something else 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, absolutely. 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 St 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 how is working out my own salvation different from insisting on my own way? Should I, in humility, heed Norbert’s warning that Satan is trying to lead me astray?

I had no idea that this pilgrimage would give me so much heart-searching!

*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 AND 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

Although miracles did occur in the Middle Ages (as they do today), they did not do so on the same scale as in the Bible, and one of the questions facing the medieval Church was why this was so. 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 this did not satisfy the ordinary people. Pagan beliefs persisted; miracles were 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 or her 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 saint to increase his or her glory by recording his/her 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 Czech 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 where the people led; the critics were ignored. In some cases the 'cure' was undoubtedly faked, but there were also many that were not.

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 him- 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.

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.

AS WE travelled, I realised that many of those who make pilgrimages are looking for healing, like some 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 wild-fire, and brings crowds of sick people in its train.

At supper the other day I was sitting with one of the knights, Guy d'Ambert. He said he'd made many pilgrimages, 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 much 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 a

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, or Evesham, and didn’t know what had happened to the man. But he’d heard of a lady, who similarly had been told to go to the Abbey of St. James at Reading; she did so and was healed! I must have looked a bit incredulous, because Guy earnestly assured me it was all true.

En-route to Condom we passed near the village of Saint-Mezard, named after a local saint, and his shrine was in the church. Guy said Saint-Mezard 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 be to God – and Saint-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 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.)

Abbaye de Flaran

PRAYER

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.

MY 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 called *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, Gérard said, monks 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 – needless to say, I hadn't heard of them.

'There are four stages,' he said. '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 absorbing the rhythm of 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 to God 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.

'Médard, you remember that 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 the Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.' (*Matt. 6.6*) I believe your vision came from God, not Satan. As you said, no reward was promised, no bargain offered. Although the Church is a fellowship, following the way of faith is in a real way something we do alone. As Jesus said, its between you and God. You have to depend on your prayer and on 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.' (Cf. 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 teach me to pray.*

Col d'Osquich

INDULGENCES

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

After Condom the route turns south-west towards the foothills of the Pyrenees. The Col d'Osquich is one of the crossing points of these hills, and, tired after making the ascent, Médard reflects on a conversation he had had with Oderic, the Reeve of the Vicomte du Puy, who is making the pilgrimage to increase his tally of indulgences.

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 penance, 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 incapable 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.' [JS 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 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, who is making the pilgrimage with precisely that intention in mind

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 Vicomte du Puy, he was a man of some authority. He supervised the Vicomte's estates, and managed his tenants and his workmen. I was surprised that the Vicomte 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 Vicomte, I suppose.

Serious religion? Oderic's idea 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 twenty years off purgatory, but this 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 Vicomte, 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.' [JS 141.]

St-Jean-Pied-de-Port

FAITH

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; I wanted to gain 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. Gérard said that judgement and salvation are two sides of the same coin. I now see all our penitential practices as being part of helping us to live according to God's ways, not 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, he does not require any 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 (*Heb 11*). They trusted in God; faith is taking God at his word, 'being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.' (*Heb 11.1*)

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. Hosea felt very deeply the anguish of God at Israel's faith-

lessness, and was unsparing in his condemnation of her. Even so, he sees that although Israel had turned away from God, God 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

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

From St-Jean Pied-de-Port the pilgrim way makes a steep ascent through the foothills of the Pyrenees, over the border into Spain, to Roncesvalles where there is a large monastery and pilgrim hostel. For many in the Middle Ages, like Médard, it will be their first real experience of mountains, and the climb will have exhausted them. Roncesvalles is famous in history as the site of the Battle of Roncevaux in 778 when the rearguard of Charlemagne's army was wiped out by the Basques. Among those killed was a relatively obscure Frankish commander called Roland, whose death elevated him into legend. The battle is celebrated in The Song of Roland, the oldest surviving work of French literature.

IT WAS a hard climb up to here – and my first experience of the mountains. As we climbed higher and higher, we kept catching sight, through the trees, of the mountain tops in the distance. I felt quite overawed, and isolated. No one lives up here, except the wild animals. If hadn't been in a group I would have been really scared! The view was astonishing. Looking up at the peaks towering above me, I wondered what the view was like from up 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.

It is 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.*

VIA TOLOSANA

ARLES TO PUENTA LA REINA

ROBERT LE CHÊNE

Robert le Chêne (Robert the Oak) lived in the same age of spiritual intensity as Médard. It was a time when the Church was identified with the whole of organised society. According to Richard Southern, 'It was the whole of human society subject to the will of God. It was the ark of salvation in a sea of destruction.' [RWS 22] The purpose of human government was to direct men and women into a single Christian path: 'There was no liberalism in the Middle Ages.' [RWS 21] Médard and Robert also lived at a time of great social change, spurred by an acceleration in economic development, marked by a considerable increase in the urban population, which in turn gave rise to new ideas. It took over two centuries for these ideas seriously to challenge the authority of the Church, but they were nascent in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, and Robert's questions reflect them.

As Under-Steward to Edouard, Vicomte Beaucaire, Robert is part of a lesser aristocratic household. In the early Middle Ages kings appointed Counts to administer provinces, or counties, as governors and military commanders, and Viscounts were appointed to assist them, often taking on judicial responsibility. Originally neither of these positions were hereditary, in order to limit the chance of them becoming a rival source of power to the king, however, in the Norman period this changed, and counts and viscounts became hereditary nobility.

The Beaucaire family take their name from a small town to the east of Nîmes, and the Vicomte administers the lands and estates of the Comte de Nîmes. The Vicomte's household is modest compared with that of the Comte, but still large enough to require a sizeable staff. Overseeing the Vicomte's affairs, and doing much of his work, is his Steward, Hermand. He and Robert are both practical men, able to get things done. Robert introduces himself.

MY FATHER died young, and I cared for my mother who called me her 'oak' – because I am tall and broad-shouldered, she said – and the

name stuck. When I was born, Henri Beaucaire was the Vicomte. The eldest of seven children, two boys and five girls, he was a large man of charm and vigour, and I remember him with gratitude – well... to be honest, with affection. My father worked for Vicomte Henri as an ostler, and everybody expected that I would follow him into the Vicomte's service in the same occupation, but that's not how it turned out – the reasons are all too common in noble households. Vicomte Henri and his wife were childless, but, like so many of the nobility, Henri was not chaste, and I grew up aware of the gossip that I bore more than a passing resemblance to his lordship. It was true; I did look like him, but I never felt able to talk to my mother about it. My father died when he was thirty-two – he died of his injuries after being kicked by a horse – and I was, in effect, adopted by Vicomte Henri. Not that anything changed formally, I continued to live in our cottage with my mother, but I was aware that I was treated differently to the children of other servants. For example, Vicomte Henri was an enlightened man, and he sent me to his chaplain to be taught to read and write.

It could have been difficult for me when I grew up, but fortune smiled upon me. I have inherited my mother's easy way with people, and this made it easier when it became clear that I was earmarked for higher service in the household. I began by assisting the steward, Hermand, for a few years before Vicomte Henri appointed me his under-steward. I only served him briefly; he died three years later and was succeeded by his much younger brother, Edouard, the youngest of Henri's siblings – the 'Benjamin' of the family, as we say. Vicomte Edouard is a rather pious man, and he doesn't have his brother's personal warmth. I would say that he's a bit too conscious of his noble rank, but, fortunately for me, he is also an enlightened man and without animosity, and he has been content to leave me in my position.

I haven't married. The Beaucaire family, like many of the nobility, prefer their senior servants to be unattached so that their loyalty is not divided. Some servants find this quite an imposition, and informal attachments, shall we say, are not uncommon, but it did not bother me. I am happy with my celibate state. Although women find me attractive – as my mother was fond of pointing out – I have never felt drawn to intimacy with women. I'm much more at ease in male company, and the all-male environment in which I work, suits me well. To be honest, its a bit more than that; I do find myself drawn to other men. When I first became aware of these feelings they scared me, and I have learned to suppress them. I wouldn't say my feelings were strong, but strong or weak, they are condemned by the Church as sinful, and any hint of them would compromise my position in the Vicomte's household. The last thing I wanted was to lose my good fortune and security – that's more important to me by far. My work is my life, and the fact that I am left to get on with it tells me that Vicomte Edouard feels he is well-served. I am responsible for dealing with the merchants and traders who supply the household, and for overseeing the artisans and other workmen employed on the estate.

Looking back on my life, I can't say that I have been a really devout Christian. Like everyone else, I was born into the faith, baptised at birth, and confirmed. Mass is celebrated daily in the chapel by the Vicomte's chaplain, Père Arnaud. Everyone is expected to attend – at least on Sundays, but like most lay people, I receive Holy Communion only at major festivals. I make my confession as required by the Church, and I say my rosary which my mother taught me as a child. The importance of the Church is that it provides the framework on which the whole of life hangs, and working on the estate, I like the way the festivals mark the seasons and the turning of the year. It was at Candlemas, two years after he inherited the title, that Vicomte Edouard, who has a particular devotion to St James, decided to make the pilgrimage to Santiago.

I can't say that it came as a surprise when he summoned me and told me of his decision, although I was taken aback when it became clear how deeply I would be involved. 'Obviously, a man in my position can't go alone,' he said, 'and in any event, it would not be prudent to do so, but I don't want to take a large party. Six or seven, I would think – enough to provide protection, but not so many as to slow us down. I don't want to be away too long, so we will use the horses. Père Arnaud tried to persuade me otherwise – he says a real pilgrimage has to be made on foot – but I don't have enough time. You, Robert, will make the arrangements – and, of course, you will be one of the party. I need your dependability. You fancy making a pilgrimage?'

Of course I answered, 'Yes, my lord,' though in truth the idea had never occurred to me. He mentioned that he had informed Père Arnaud of his decision, who, as I remembered, had made the pilgrimage himself some years ago, but now he was too infirm to go again. He would be praying for us. And with that he dismissed me. I knew a little about the pilgrimage, but I needed to know more, so I went in search of Père Arnaud, who, when a young priest, had taught me to read and write, and was now a venerable old man. I found him reading; graciously, he put his book aside, and we settled down to talk.

Arles

PÈRE ARNAUD

Be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armour of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests. With this in mind, be alert and always keep on praying for all the Lord's people.

Ephesians 6.10-18

MY CONVERSATION with Père Arnaud lasted most of the afternoon as he told me about his own pilgrimage which had not been without incident. He said straight away that he'd advised Vicomte Edouard against going by horse. He felt strongly about it. Pilgrims rode on horseback at their peril, he said. Not only do they incur the displeasure of the Church, but they risk divine chastisement. He had met a canon of Dol who began to feel ill as he rode along, and decided to dismount and continue on foot. Even King John of England, he said, found his horse unusually restless as he rode to Canterbury, and took it as a divine warning to dismount. I was a bit alarmed to hear this, but even I knew of other pilgrims who had travelled on horseback without incident. There was something about Père

Arnaud's manner that told me that the real issue for him was that the faithful should do as the Church bid. As politely as I could, I said I had to do as Vicomte Edouard wished, and managed to change the subject.

'How long did it take you?' I asked.

'Well,' he said, 'it took us about six or seven months there and back – I can't remember exactly – something like that. Before we went we were told that once you get to the Spanish border allow one to two months to get to Santiago depending on how much rest you need, so adding on the journey from here to Spain, it must have been around three months to get there, so double it for the whole journey. Some people do it much quicker. I heard of a man from le Grand-Pressigny, in Poitou, who left there on 3 April and was back home by 5 June!'

'That's unbelievable!' I exclaimed, 'doing that distance in two months – there and back!'

Père Arnaud agreed: 'He can't have slept, and he must have had tough feet – like a bear. There were some days when our feet were so sore, we couldn't walk another step. We met a man called Guillaume, who was suffering like us. His feet were so bad that he had to stay behind while his companions went on. A knight on his way back, advised him to massage his feet with a mixture of candle wax, eau de vie, and olive oil. It sounds odd, but he said it worked!'

Père Arnaud's stories gave me some idea of how long we'd need. It would be quicker going on horseback; I reckoned about 80 days, there and back, God willing. I knew that we needed some documents to carry with us, so I asked him about that too.

'Yes,' he said. 'You need a letter from your parish priest to say that you are from his parish, a good catholic and a genuine pilgrim. And it's as well to have one from your lord, or master, to show that you have permission to be away – you know, some people have used the pilgrimage as a way of escaping their duties. I've advised Vicomte

Edouard to ask the Count for a letter, and the Bishop, of course. He'd already thought of that and Hermand has it in hand – a letter for each of you... just in case you get separated. You never know...'

I moved on to the next thing on my list: 'What about the path?' I asked. 'Is it well marked?'

'In parts. The main problem is finding your way through forests, and making sure you leave the towns by the right gate. Usually, there are people to ask, though some of them are difficult to understand, especially in the Pays d'Oc, and in Spain, of course. We got lost several times – one or two locals deliberately misled us. Be careful. The Spanish can be quite hostile towards the French.'

We talked about other things too, like food and lodging. There were, he said, many hospices and monasteries that offered food and shelter to pilgrims, often without expecting payment. Travelling light, pilgrims were largely dependent on charity – in other words on the generosity of the local people, who often gave free lodging for the night. 'Look out,' he said, 'for the coquille St-Jacques over the door; that tells you that pilgrims will find shelter there.' It hadn't been difficult for him to find a place to stay, though I guess no one would turn away a priest. I think Vicomte Edouard was counting on the generosity of his fellow nobility – we'd need somewhere that could stable our horses.

We would, of course, all have to dress in the pilgrim habit, with *scrip* and *bourdon*, the pilgrim's knapsack and staff, and I'd need to arrange that. There were other matters also to be arranged, like paying one's debts and being reconciled with those whom you have wronged. Père Arnaud urged me to take these things seriously – not everyone did, he added sternly. Some were unscrupulous, using the pilgrims' immunity from having their property confiscated to evade their obligations. He'd overheard the twenty-two year old Guillaume of the sore feet, telling another pilgrim who'd run out of money, that

he'd sold several fields and used the proceeds, some 45 livres – a small fortune – not to settle his debts, but to fund his journey and lodge comfortably. 'Good Heavens!' I said, 'Wasn't he taking a big risk in carrying so much money with him?'

Arnaud agreed: 'Yes, a huge risk. And what a fool to tell someone else! And to what avail, Robert? If a pilgrim does not settle his debts, his pilgrimage will not count to him for salvation. A pilgrim must travel free of obligation, single-minded for God and St James.'

'Tell me about St James,' I asked. 'Vicomte Edouard has a special devotion to him, doesn't he? And that's why we're going to his shrine at Santiago.'

So he told me the story of how St James' relics were miraculously translated to Santiago, and about all the spiritual benefits of making the pilgrimage, like the indulgences we would receive, and the way St James travelled with us. 'You don't go alone, Robert. St James goes with you. At the Mass before you depart, we will pray that he will protect you and give courage to the faint-hearted.'

We'd reached the end of all that I'd thought to ask, and I made as though to leave, but Père Arnaud had more to say. He motioned me to stay. He asked if I remembered the story of Jesus sending out seventy disciples to spread the Gospel.

'He's sending you on a journey too,' he said. 'It's through making a journey that the faith is discovered – the journey we make in our hearts. Robert, why are you making this journey?'

I thought that was clear. 'Because Vicomte Edouard wishes it.' I replied.

He must have picked up something from the tone of my reply, because he leaned towards me, in a manner that I remembered well from my lessons with him, when he had something important to say.

‘Well, Robert,’ he said, ‘if that is your only reason, you’re likely to become resentful, and you will have problems – maybe not with the organisation, but in your own heart. I don’t want you to come back with a hard heart. Robert, look into your heart, and discover a reason for doing this for you, as well as for the Vicomte. Ask yourself: What would I like to receive from the journey?’

At that point, we were summoned for supper. I was grateful as I had no ready answer to his question, although I don’t think he expected a reply.

SOME weeks later Vicomte Edouard, myself and the rest of the group made our way to Arles, the traditional starting point of the pilgrimage. The Bishop celebrated Mass for us in the cathedral. He reminded us that Satan is on the watch for those who set out to follow Christ, especially pilgrims, placing all kinds of obstacles in their path, tempting them to give up, and turn away from the way of faith. ‘So,’ he said, ‘listen to St Paul and arm yourselves as he advised, with the full armour of God. “Take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.” And may St James go with you and watch over you.’ At the end of the Mass he gave us our pilgrim staffs, which I’d had specially made. Holding them, we knelt before him and he blessed us. As he did so, Père Arnaud’s question came back to me: What would I like to receive from the journey on which I had now embarked? His question remained with me, hanging in the air.

Postscript

The documents that pilgrims were required to carry were to prove that they were genuine pilgrims, and entitled them to the protection of the 'aides' provided for the pilgrims en route. It was in effect a passport, which asked that the bearer be allowed to go and return without hindrance, and to render aid where needed. Typically it would be a letter written by the curé certifying that the bearer was from his parish, a good catholic and a genuine pilgrim. This document would be certified by the bishop and the mayor (the Comte de Nîmes in Vicomte Edouard's case).

False pilgrims became a real problem in later centuries. In 1600 the Sub-Prior of Roncevaux denounced 'the vagabonds, vagrants and enemies of work, most of whom,' he said, 'are condemned and exiled from their homes, and to hide their bad way of life they adopt the habit of a pilgrim, with false papers; thus they run throughout Spain, where they find more charitable people, and other Christian lands, never ending their peregrinations nor returning to their homeland.'

The problem became worse, and in 1688 Louis XIV, 'le Roi-Soleil', issued a new edict regarding pilgrimages to foreign countries: 'The abuses which are slipping in to our kingdom, under the false pretext of devotion and pilgrimage are becoming such an excess that many of our subjects have left their parents contrary to their wish, or have left their wives and children without any help, flee from their masters and abandon their apprenticeships in order to live a life of continual debauchery; even, in some cases, establishing themselves in foreign lands where they marry, even though they have legitimate wives in France...' The edict required prospective pilgrims, before receiving their passport, to appear before the bishop of the diocese who was required to examine their reasons for making the pilgrimage. There were heavy penalties for contravening the decree, but these measure were ineffective, and in 1763 an official at Dax reported that most pilgrims, even though they had passports, were little less than brigands, and this was confirmed by his colleague at Pau. [BB 34–38]

The pilgrim staffs that Robert had had made had an iron tip, and a pommel on top. As well as providing support, they also served as a defensive weapon against wolves, bears, stray dogs and robbers, and as a defence against other pilgrims – brawls among pilgrims were not unknown.

Saint-Gilles du Gard

JACOPO

Jesus went out as usual to the Mount of Olives, and his disciples followed him. On reaching the place, he said to them, "Pray that you will not fall into temptation." He withdrew about a stone's throw beyond them, knelt down and prayed, "Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." An angel from heaven appeared to him and strengthened him. And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. When he rose from prayer and went back to the disciples, he found them asleep, exhausted from sorrow. "Why are you sleeping?" he asked them. "Get up and pray so that you will not fall into temptation."

While he was still speaking a crowd came up, and the man who was called Judas, one of the Twelve, was leading them. He approached Jesus to kiss him, but Jesus asked him, "Judas, are you betraying the Son of Man with a kiss?" When Jesus' followers saw what was going to happen, they said, "Lord, should we strike with our swords?" And one of them struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his right ear. But Jesus answered, "No more of this!" And he touched the man's ear and healed him. Then Jesus said to the chief priests, the officers of the temple guard, and the elders, who had come for him, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come with swords and clubs? Every day I was with you in the temple courts, and you did not lay a hand on me. But this is your hour—when darkness reigns." Then seizing him, they led him away and took him into the house of the high priest. Peter followed at a distance.

Luke 22.39–54

Saint-Gilles du Gard, the first stop on the Via Tolosana, was also a pilgrimage destination in its own right. The Benedictine Abbey, founded in the seventh century, was the resting place of Saint-Gilles, and many pilgrims visited his tomb. Born in Athens around 640, as a young boy Gilles showed great piety, and performed miraculous cures. On the death of his parents he renounced his worldly goods and made for the coast where he saved a ship by calming a

storm. In gratitude the sailors took him on board and he sailed with them to Arles, where later he was ordained priest by Bishop Césaire. His miracles attracted crowds, but he withdrew to a hermitage where a doe fed him with her milk. One day, some of the king's men out hunting scared the doe who sought protection from Gilles. They tried to kill the doe, but the arrow missed and wounded Gilles instead. As an act of pardon, the king built an abbey, and Gilles became the Abbot. He died in 720. Towards the end of the eleventh century, work began to rebuild the Abbey on a much larger scale. Construction began at the east end – the altar was consecrated by Pope Urban II in July 1096 – and continued for many years afterwards.

Nearby, in 1208, Peter of Castelnau, the legate of Pope Innocent III, was assassinated on the banks of the Rhône after a stormy meeting with Count Raymond VI of Toulouse. His death was the spark that ignited the crusade against the Albigensians, or Cathars. In later centuries much of the Abbey was destroyed during the Wars of Religion and the Revolution. I imagine Robert coming to Saint-Gilles when the building work was still at an early stage. His visit was the occasion of a significant encounter.

WE SET off from Arles after mass, and made it here easily by the afternoon. We were greeted by a great scene of activity. There were masons everywhere, some erecting the finished stonework as the nave took shape, others under a large shelter nearby shaping and carving the stones that would be the next to be put in place. The outer walls were rising and the unskilled men were filling in the cavity between the inner and outer skins of the walls, using the chippings from the prepared stones, and whatever rubble they could find, beating it firmly down. It was hard, back-breaking work.

The really skilled men were the stone-carvers. Over the years we'd had them working on the Vicomte's house, so I'd been able to get to know a bit about them. They came from many countries, France, England, Italy... moving to wherever their skills were needed. One in particular caught my eye, and I went over to say 'Hello.' Jacopo was from Genoa, but it was a long time since he'd seen his home city. He

was carving the scene when Jesus was kissed by Judas in the Garden of Gethsemane. He said it was part of the frieze that was to go above the main door. There was something about the way that he was working that had drawn me, almost caressing the stone rather than carving it, carefully brushing away the dust. 'You seem very close to your work,' I said. 'I guess it means a lot to you.'

'Yes, it does.' He replied. 'It means a lot to me that I can bring this story alive for others – and this part of the story really speaks to me. Carving the face of the Lord Jesus – that's the highest honour a mason can have – and when I think about what happened next, I'm close to tears. When I carve the crucifixion the horror of what they did to Jesus really comes home to me. I try to put the feelings in his face.'

I looked at the figure he had carved. It might have been stone, but there were feelings there. It made me realise that to do what Jacopo was doing you had to know the story, not just in terms of what happened, but why – and then not just the reasons of state, but the feelings, hopes and ambitions of the people involved. I'd never thought of the story of Jesus in that way before. Sensing his personal involvement, I asked Jacopo if he had a model in mind when he carved Jesus' face.

'Yes, I do.' He spoke slowly, and there was pain in his voice. 'I see myself looking at my friend Nicola. He saved my life. We were working together in a quarry, when a rock above us became dislodged. He saw it falling and pushed me out of the way. But doing so he lost his balance; he fell and was crushed to death. I loved him as a brother. He gave his life for me, just like Jesus. ...You're looking at him now.'

'I'm so sorry,' I said, hesitantly. My words seemed quite inadequate. I began to add something, but it trailed away into silence. Jacopo returned to his work – he was working on the figure of Judas. 'What about him,' I asked, 'is he based on someone real?'

‘Yes, the owner of the quarry. He had no feeling. He didn’t care. He said all the right things about safety and that, but when it came to it, he did nothing. That’s Judas, isn’t it? Saying one thing, and doing another. He comes up to Jesus and says “Master”, and kisses him, but its not what it seems. Its betrayal wearing the mask of love.’

‘I know what you mean,’ I said, ‘I get it all the time. The high and mighty say one thing and do the opposite.’

Jacopo replied with feeling: ‘But, Robert, its not just them, its the lowly folk too. Judas is all of us, I reckon – me, you, everyone who hasn’t been true to their word.’

At that point, Jean-Philippe, the Vicomte’s secretary, came to find me – I was needed. So I bade farewell to Jacopo and left him to his sermon in stone. I’d learned more from him than I had from a hundred spoken sermons. Its not that he said anything new, but it was the way that he said it. It came from the heart.

Postscript

The popularity of St-Gilles’ shrine became so great that by the twelfth century one-hundred-and-thirty money-changers were required to meet the needs of pilgrims. A pilgrim’s guide of the same date comments ‘that after the prophets and apostles, none among the other saints is more worthy than he, none more holy, none more glorious, none more speedy in giving help. For he is accustomed to come more quickly to aid the poor and the afflicted and the anguished who call upon him than all the other saints.’ [KA 110]

Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert

SIX COMPANIONS

It is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (which is done in the body by human hands) – remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Ephesians 2.8–18

Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert was the site of a hermitage founded by William of Aquitaine, a member of the aristocratic warrior class, noted for his valour, who was believed to have brought the wood of the Cross to the Gellone valley. The site became the locus of a popular cult, and the Abbey, consecrated originally in 1076, was rebuilt and enlarged in the 12th and 13th centuries, and the village grew up around it. The journey from St-Gilles du Gard to St-Guilhem-le-Désert took several days, and gave Robert time to reflect on his encounter with Jacopo.

WE WERE accommodated comfortably enough in the guesthouse of the old Abbey at Saint-Gilles, but I spent a restless night. My conversation with Jacopo gave me a new perspective on stone-carvers and their work. We'd had many of them work at Beaucaire, but working on a house is not the same as building an abbey. I'd thought of them simply as workmen, skilled men with a job to do; I'd not thought of what the job might mean to them. And I found myself wondering how the others in our small group would have responded to what he had said.

In the event there were just five of us accompanying the Vicomte. We rode in three pairs. Paul, who took care of the horses, and myself rode at the back. Out in front, were two knights, Hughes and Étienne, from the entourage of the Count of Nîmes. They were members of a brotherhood who provided protection for pilgrims. Attired in their distinctive tunics with a large red cross back and front, they seemed good, honest men, and we were grateful for their protection, but as yet they were strangers. How would they have responded to Jacopo's testimony? Clearly the faith meant a lot to them. Both of them had fought in the Crusade against the Saracens, so they were prepared to defend it with their lives, but was it truth or power that they were defending? A bit of both, I guess.

Vicomte Edouard, riding directly in front of me would have had the humility to listen to Jacopo, but would, I feel, have responded a bit piously rather than let Jacopo's feelings touch him. It was a way he had of keeping things at a distance. Riding next to him was Jean-Philippe, his personal secretary; lean, intelligent, ascetic and formal – you never know what he's thinking. I don't think he does feelings, and I doubt that Jacopo's words would have touched him, and if they did, you'd never know. And what about Paul, riding comfortably beside me? Down to earth, practical, bit of a rough diamond. His life has been touched with tragedy – his wife died young in childbirth; he never remarried. I don't think he'd appear moved, but you can tell

from the way he treats the horses that there's more to him than meets the eye. Jacopo's grief would have touched his heart.

We reached a fork in the path. We stopped; Hughes and Étienne checked with the rest of us on the directions we had been given. We were all of one mind, and fortunately made the right choice. But I noticed how the knights and Vicomte Edouard reflected a different sense of purpose in the discussion, and it wasn't just a matter of social status. They are the three making this journey of their own choice; we other three have had that choice made for us. I'm not sure whether that makes me a pilgrim or not. I am clothed as a pilgrim, with my srip and my staff, but it has to be more than that.

We rode on in silence, enjoying the late spring air and the sunshine as it filtered through the trees. The tranquility of the place prompted reflection, and I realised that I hadn't thought any more about Père Arnaud's question: What would you like to receive from this journey? I asked myself, 'What's in it for you, Robert, you personally, not just for the Under-Steward? Do *you* want to be a pilgrim?

Jacopo words came back to me – not so much what he'd said as the way that he'd said it. The faith had got inside him in a way that it had not with me. I found myself reliving a conversation I'd had with Père Arnaud years ago. I'd asked him why it was that the Christian faith had spread and taken over the Roman world. 'Because it offered something real,' he replied. Religion in ancient Rome, he explained, was about honouring the gods as a matter of civic duty, part of the total package of being a citizen. There was no inner life of prayer and personal devotion. And the gods were a capricious lot, so there was no moral aspect to Roman religion either. A person's inner life and personal morality, the things that form character, had to come from elsewhere, if they came at all. It was different for Christians. In Christ worship, prayer and morality are brought together. We follow a real person, not a family of mythical figures. St Paul said in one of his letters that the pagan world was without hope and without God. The

Christians gave them both, creating nothing less than a new humanity in which all differences are reconciled.

What Père Arnaud said about Roman religion more or less described me. I do all the right things simply as part of life, almost as a civic duty, part of the total package, a kind of insurance, and without any particular feelings of personal devotion. That's where Jacopo had touched me. He had a depth that for all my education, talents and strength, I lacked. We moved out of the wood, and the landscape opened before us; my spirit lifted, and I realised that what Jacopo had is what I wanted. 'That's what I want to receive from this pilgrimage, Lord,' I said in my heart; 'a more personal faith with something of Jacopo's depth of devotion.' At that moment I knew that I did want to be a pilgrim.

Postscript

I imagine the brotherhood to which the two knights, Hughes and Étienne, belonged as a precursor to the Knights Templar, a military order founded in 1119 to provide protection for pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. The Templars' distinctive attire comprised a white mantle with a red cross; they were one of the most skilled fighting forces in the Crusades, attracting wide support in gifts and legacies. As in monastic orders, individual members took vows of poverty, but the order itself became very wealthy. Most of its members (up to 90%) were non-combatants, who managed a large commercial infrastructure throughout Christendom, making loans to kings and others, and developing ways of managing and safeguarding the wealth of pilgrims, that were an early form of banking – their Letters of Credit anticipated the modern cheque. The Templars built a network of nearly 1000 commanderies and forts across Europe and the Middle East becoming, in effect, the first multi-national corporation. With the end of the Crusades they declined in importance, and the order was disbanded by Pope Clement V in 1312 under pressure from King Philip of France, who was deeply indebted to the order. Its suppression conveniently erased his debt.

En Calcat

JEAN-PHILIPPE

Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can recognise the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognise the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

1 John 4.1-6

From Saint-Guilhem the main route of the Via Tolosana continues west to Lodève and Castres; some pilgrims, however, preferred to head south-west to Béziers, re-joining the northern route at Toulouse. Another option on the lower route was to turn off at Carcassonne and continue via Foix. After a discussion with the Abbot of Saint-Guilhem, Vicomte Edouard decided to follow the main route to Castres, partly because it was the most direct route to Toulouse, where he hoped to meet Count Raymond, but also because he wished to avoid Béziers which was a Cathar stronghold. Just south of Castres is the Benedictine monastery of St-Benoit d'En Calcat where the group stayed.

I LEFT Saint-Guilhem with new sense of purpose, and with a new interest in the stories of the saints who had founded the monasteries that were giving us hospitality, like Guillaume after whom Saint-

Guilhem is named, and who had been Count of Toulouse. I wondered if our two knights took soldier-saints like him as their inspiration. It also made me wonder if any of the great saints had been simple servants like me – after all, St Peter and St James had been fisherman.

It had been decided that we would head for Castres, a city, we were told, that had grown up around a monastery founded two-and-a-half centuries ago by another soldier-saint, St Benoît d’Aniane. Here, I thought, was another wealthy man, like Saint-Gilles, who had enough of a fortune to be able to renounce it. I’m sure it was done for good and holy reasons, but that kind of sacrificial act is not available to folk like me. What had I to renounce? Nothing really; only my position in the Beaucaire household. I knew these weren’t really worthy thoughts – we should be grateful for the example of the saints – but try as I could, I found that they stayed in my mind. The questions were beginning to accumulate, and I could do with someone to talk to, but there was no one among the other five with whom I could share these things. And so we rode on until we came to a river, where we paused to water the horses.

The banks were steep, and the path down to the water was narrow and precipitous. We led our horses down one at a time. When it was Jean-Philippe’s turn, his horse lost its foothold and knocked him over. He fell awkwardly, turning over his foot and spraining his ankle badly. As quick as I could I made my way down to help him. At first he waved me away and tried to get up unaided, but could not, and fell back. I reached him, and managed to get my arms around him and raised him up. A look passed between us, that I can describe only as a moment of recognition. We have never spoken about it, although many years later, he did say that that was the first time in his life that he felt safe. He was in a lot of pain; fortunately he was not a heavy man, and I and Paul were able to carry him up the bank, where we bandaged his ankle and sat him on his horse. We rode either side of him, and the Vicomte joined the knights. We were not far from the

monastery at En Calcat, and we decided to go there rather than continue to Castres. It was clear that we would have to stay there for a day or two; hopefully the infirmarian of the monastery would be able to take care of him.

Our hopes were not in vain. Jean-Philippe was taken into the infirmary, and the next day I called to see him. He was full of thanks, and I noticed that there was something different about him; still correct and formal, but not so distant. I asked him if there was anything he needed, 'No,' he said, 'I'm well cared for.' And then, to my surprise, he added: 'Robert, we've known each other for a few years, but not well. Like me, you had no choice about making this journey. How are you finding it?'

So I told him about my meeting with Jacopo, and how it had affected me, and how through it I had found my own reason for making the journey. He listened carefully, more sympathetically than I had imagined he would, and when I had finished, we sat for a while with our own thoughts. Jean-Philippe broke the silence, 'May I tell you something about myself?' he asked. And so I learned that he'd come from a good family, an only child – there had been a complication with his birth that meant that his mother could not have further children. In his youth he'd been sent to Paris to study, where he had come across the great teacher Peter Abelard. Largely under his influence, he had tried his vocation as a monk, but it hadn't worked out. The reality of the vow of obedience, at least as his Abbot had interpreted it, was that any form of individual spiritual quest was discouraged. It was one thing to obey in practical matters, and Jean-Philippe had been happy to observe the Rule, but being told what to think was too much. And so, with some difficulty, he had left. His mother's brother, also of an independent mind, had taken him in. And not only that. His uncle was a good acquaintance of Vicomte Edouard, and knew that he was looking for a secretary. It was an extraordinary piece of good fortune – his uncle's kindness and the

Vicomte's willingness to take him on. Indeed it was, I thought. Vicomte Edouard had taken a risk, and it put him in a new light.

As Jean-Phillipe spoke it was though a burden was lifting; it was more than his ankle that was being healed. As our conversation progressed, he mentioned that when he was studying in Paris he had been warned against the kind of emotional devotion in religion that so attracted me to Jacopo. 'Why?' I asked.

'Well, feelings can so easily lead us astray. And when people are carried away they begin to believe the most extraordinary things – like the Cathars here in the Pays d'Oc. And before you know it they are being condemned as heretics and excommunicated, or worse.'

'But don't they have a point?' I objected. 'The first Christians were uneducated fishermen, not clever intellectuals like your teachers in Paris. They had a strong personal devotion to Jesus, and they led simple, moral lives – just like Jacopo. Isn't that what we should be getting back to?'

He paused. 'Of course that's true. And its attractive. And the lack of it was part of the reason why I left the monastery. I don't think its depth of devotion that is the problem; its the strange ideas that it can lead to. Jesus warned that many false prophets would come in his name (*Mark 13.5*), and as St John says, spirits have to be tested. Faith is more than a personal thing; its also something we have in common, and the believer must remain within the fold, otherwise being a Christian would be whatever each individual felt was right.'

'I can see that, but what if the Church gets it wrong?'

'The Church believes that she is divinely guided against error...'
His voice trailed off. We could both see where that argument led. 'Perhaps we'd better not go there,' he said. 'There's no easy answer. We have to find a balance between personal devotion to Jesus, and what the Church teaches about him as the Christ. Let's leave it at that. I only mentioned it, because the climate in which we live today is not

sympathetic to religious emotion, and I don't want the man who rescued me to come to grief. Be careful, Robert; be careful.'

Postscript

Heresy was a major concern of the medieval Church. Although there are no creeds in the NT, St Paul is concerned that his converts should be rightly taught, and offers himself as a standard both in belief and behaviour (Phil. 3.15–17). The Letters to Timothy (which although ascribed to Paul, come from another hand and a later date) show a concern for sound doctrine. Referring to what he has written, the author exhorts Timothy: 'This is what you are to teach and preach. Anyone who teaches otherwise, and does not devote himself to sound precepts – that is, those of our Lord Jesus Christ – and to good religious teaching, is a pompous ignoramus with a morbid enthusiasm for mere speculations and quibbles.' (1 Tim. 6.3) The author's emphasis, one feels, was on 'good religious teaching'. 'Mere speculations and quibbles,' particularly concerning the so-called hidden years of Jesus' life (and later about how his divinity and humanity were combined in his person) became an increasing problem, and the Church had to define its beliefs in creeds and other doctrinal statements. Heresy is any departure from the beliefs thus defined. Bishop Richard Hanson described heresy as a 'self-opinionated refusal to believe and worship with the Church,' but by the Middle Ages it had become more than that. Accusations of heresy had become a means of political control, an exercise of ecclesiastical power, rather than a matter of spiritual discipline. Legitimate and reasoned debate was stifled. Teachers like Peter Abelard, whose ideas challenged accepted dogma, were accused of heresy and excommunicated – though often the penalty was later lifted. In the later Middle Ages, heretics were routinely executed, like Thomas Cranmer, who was burnt at the stake.

Many of the dissenters, disgusted by the corruption and hypocrisy of the Church's leaders, sought a purer expression of Christianity, more akin to the spirit of the gospels, e.g. the Bogomils, a Bulgarian neo-gnostic sect of the C10th. Dissent, though, was not without its dangers, and, as Jean-Philippe warned Robert, often led to strange ideas and beliefs (as we have seen in our own day with groups like the Branch Davidians who were killed in the shoot-out at Waco in Texas), but at its heart, more often than not, was a desire for a depth of spiritual experience

which formalised religion did not fulfil. Today we have a more balanced understanding of the role of feelings in making judgements. The psychoanalyst Carl Jung, for example, described feeling as a rational function. A modern spiritual director would stress that intellect, no less than feelings, needs to be tested against the truth revealed in Jesus.

Toulouse

CATHARS

We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. ...So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness. See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ. For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and in Christ you have been brought to fullness. He is the head over every power and authority.

Colossians 1.9b–14; 2.6–10

Robert's conversation with Jean-Philippe took place when the first glimmers of the dissent that led to the Reformation began to emerge. The Church had

become powerful, and, inevitably, with that had come corruption, and a loss of the evangelical dimension of the faith. Christianity had become too much an instrument of social and political control, rather than a means of spiritual liberation. The growth of dissent coincided with the growth of the urban population, and the two were linked. Sir Richard Southern writes: 'There is something about urban life which provokes dissent. The comparative stability and isolation of rural life does not encourage the expression of unauthorised opinions. One man who does not think as his neighbours had better keep quiet. But when rebels and eccentrics come together in twenties and thirties instead of two and threes, they find safety in numbers...they begin to say what they think and to think strange thoughts.... Articulate lay opinion about religion, often crude and generally subversive, began in the towns.' [RWS 46] Dissent took time to gain ground, and it was not until the fourteenth century that its effect was fully felt. Try as it did to silence figures like John Wyclif and Jan Hus (whose ideas today do not seem at all strange), the Church could not turn the tide of dissent.

A notable example of religious dissent in southern France and northern Italy were the Cathars (also called Albigensians). Their ministers were called 'parfaits', and were referred to locally simply as 'the good men'. The Counts of Toulouse were more tolerant of the Cathars than the pope and the bishops, and it was this that led to the dispute with Peter of Castelnau at Saint-Gilles. (This toleration seems to have been more to do with resisting the Church's power than sympathy with the Cathar faith.)

Vicomte Edouard and his party have now reached Toulouse. The cathedral, dedicated to Saint-Sernin the first bishop of Toulouse, was built high and wide with pilgrims in mind, and made the extraordinary claim to have among its extensive collection of relics no less than twenty-seven whole bodies of apostles, saints and martyrs! At Toulouse Vicomte Edouard wishes to meet Count Raymond, for whom he has a letter from the Count of Nîmes. He sends Jean-Philippe and Étienne to set up the meeting, and the next day all six of the Vicomptal party make their way to the castle, where Robert has an unexpected encounter. He takes up the story.

VISITS like this followed an established protocol. We were greeted by the Count's steward and an honour guard of knights – of course, had it been the Duke who was visiting, the Count would have welcomed him in person. A groom helped Vicomte Edouard to dismount, and then the steward conducted him to the great hall where Count Raymond received him. I waited at the entrance of the hall with Jean-Philippe, and then we were called forward and presented to the Count. Jean-Philippe then joined them, and I went with the steward. Meanwhile, Hughes and Étienne had gone to the knights hall, and the groom and Paul had led the horses to the stables. It was all very practised and correct.

As we made our way through the castle, its rooms hung with armour and tapestries, the steward introduced himself as Bernard. We made our way to his own rooms in one of the towers where we were to have lunch. A woman and a man were already in the room whom he introduced as Aliénor, his wife, and Patrice, his own understeward. The four of us sat down to an excellent lunch, with a very good local wine. They asked politely about our journey so far. I thought it wise not to mention my meeting with Jacopo, but I did mention Vicomte Edouard's desire to avoid Béziers and its Cathar presence. 'Are there many Cathars in Toulouse?' I asked. There was a silence; Patrice glanced at Aliénor and then across to Bernard, who hesitated, and then, relaxing his face, indicated assent.

'There are many Cathars in this Comté,' Patrice began, 'and its easy to see why. Religion is now more about power than prayer. Tithes are imposed on so many goods that the burden has become intolerable – the clergy behave more like tax collectors than pastors. There are lots of jokes about rich priests. And most of them are hypocrites, leading immoral lives. I heard of a priest in the Comté of Foix who is a serial seducer; everybody could name twelve of his mistresses, and there were more besides. With one of them, he prepared a bed in his church, and there they spent the night with Christ and his saints! You don't

have to know much about Jesus and what he taught to see how far we have come from being real Christians.'

'The Church may have the obedience of the people, but it doesn't have their hearts,' Aliénor interjected. 'Unlike the good men, the Church has them in fear, but not in love. The Cathars are peaceful people; they try to live as the apostles did, simply and faithfully. They deserve respect, but the Church persecutes them. And, another thing the Church does not like is that they allow women as well as men to become *parfaits* – you know, one of their ministers.'

As she was talking Jean-Philippe's words about strange beliefs came to mind. 'Do the Cathars believe in Jesus?' I asked.

'Yes, they do.' Patrice replied, 'They believe that they are the true Christians.'

'But do they believe the same as us?'

'Not really. Because they see the world and the Church in the grip of evil, they believe that there are two Gods, an evil God and a good God. The world is the creation of the evil God, and is subject to decay; the soul is the creation of the good God, and that alone is immortal.'

'So don't they believe in the resurrection of the body?'

'No they don't,' Aliénor said sharply, 'and neither do I. One day I saw a grave being dug, and the bones from a previous burial were in a pile by the side. I said to myself, "How is it possible for the souls of the dead to come back one day in the same bones as were theirs before?" A lot of what the Cathars teach makes sense to me.'

The conversation continued and I learnt that the Cathars reject the sacraments – baptism and the mass – as well as the resurrection. They only have one sacrament, the *consolamentum*, through which the believer is made perfect and his soul enters heaven. For the *parfaits*, this takes place in this life, and thereafter they led an ascetic, moral life abstaining from meat, sex and marriage. But this was not an

option for most believers, who delayed receiving the *consolamentum* until they were at the point of death. 'How very convenient,' I thought. 'Live how you like; salvation guaranteed at the end!'

Bernard, who had not so far joined in the conversation, must have read my thoughts.

'It sounds very convenient, but it offers hope to people who are burdened enough already with Church rules and tithes. Like Jesus, the *parfaits* offer the ordinary people hope. He sat light to all the religious rules; he said its what's in your heart that matters, and they say the same. We may think their ideas wrong-headed, but living in this castle its easy to not to see what a struggle life is for most people. That's a large part of why the Count is so tolerant. The Cathars do no harm.'

With that we rose from the table. I bade them farewell, and made my way back to the courtyard where Paul and the knights were waiting with the horses. I had much to think about. I could see why people were attracted to the Cathar way, but I felt that it did not lead to the personal devotion that I had met in Jacopo. St Paul had warned against being led astray by delusive speculations (*Colossians 2.7*), and I felt that this was exactly what had happened to the Cathars. On the other hand, the moral lives of the *parfaits* and the emphasis they placed on moral perfection weighed with me. The hypocrisy of the bishops and the clergy that so disturbed Patrice, disturbed me no less. I guess I had more or less accepted that that was how things were, and always would be, but my eyes had been opened. Hypocrisy was never right, and it undermined the authority that the Church claimed. It had prompted the Cathars to seek another path. Their path wasn't for me, but dimly I began to see that in some way we all had to discover our own path. 'Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,' St Paul had said (*Philippians 2.12*). That night I prayed to Jesus that he would guide me.

*Lord Jesus, you said straight is the gate
and narrow the path that leads to life;
guide me to that gate and along your path
that I may live your life.*

Postscript

My information about the Cathars comes from Montailou, by Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie, a remarkable account of the life of a medieval village in the Compté of Foix in the late 13th and early 14th centuries. The book is based on the detailed records of the inquisition conducted by Jacques Fournier, Bishop of Palmiers, later Pope Benedict VII, into heresy within his diocese. In 1208 Pope Innocent III launched the Albigensian Crusade, notorious for its violence and cruelty, against the Cathar heresy, but clearly it did not completely exterminate it, as Fournier's inquisition shows. (The term 'crusade' brings to mind the struggle to regain the Holy Land from the Muslims, but most crusades were fought against other Christians, like the Cathars in Languedoc and the Hussites in Moravia.)

Robert's summary of the Cathar teaching about sex and morals needs rounding out. There was a two-tier morality: for ordinary believers, no restrictions and total liberty of life and manners. For the parfaits, an ascetic and elitist morality which went with their responsibility for reconciling believers, at the point of death, with the principles of good through the consolamentum. Until this moment all was permitted.

Béatrice de Planissoles, one the mistresses of Pierre Clergue, the libidinous Catholic priest referred to by Patrice, giving evidence to Bishop Fournier said that Pierre had told her 'that both man and woman can commit any sin they like during their life. And do whatever they please in this world. Provided that only at the end they are received into the sect or into the faith of the good Christians. Then they are saved and absolved of all the sins they have committed in their life...thanks to the laying on of hands of these good Christians.' This, says Ladurie, is an extreme interpretation of the Cathar ethic, and over-simplified. The parfaits were much more careful and considered in their teaching, and this in part because a society in which there are no common moral rules soon becomes dysfunctional and ceases to be a society in any meaningful sense. [ERL 327] Pierre

Clergue is, perhaps, the most notorious example of the way many Catholic clergy sympathised with the Cathars, hedging their bets between the two faiths, and betraying their priesthood.

The Cathar practice of the consolamentum was at variance with the Church's teaching that forgiveness, although freely given, is always conditional upon repentance and mutual forgiveness. Repentance is more than being sorry; it is a real change of mind and intention, a turning-around to face towards God and not away from God. The second condition – forgiving others – is what Jesus taught in the Lord's Prayer: 'forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.' The two conditions are linked: he who does not forgive, cannot repent. When they are fulfilled there is no limit to God's forgiveness, nor should there be to ours. As Jesus said to Peter, he must forgive not once, nor seven times, but seventy times seven, i.e. without limit (Matthew 18.22).

The Cathars also believed in metempsychosis, or the transmigration of souls. This derived from their belief that humanity was the creation of Satan, who had lured souls away from the good God, and trapped them in a human body. The trapped soul went from body to body, animal or human, until it was finally hereticated, that is brought to a state of justice and truth, at which point it returned to heaven.

The good men, or parfaits, do not seem to have cultivated the over-bearing personality cult of the the leaders of most modern deviant sects, nor the tight control over their followers' lives. Indeed, Ladurie says that not only did they act as mediators between the believers and God, they also performed a social function, working to bring a measure of integration to a society that was under-administered, segmentary, and in danger of disintegrating through local feuds and enmities. Many parfaits had connections with the bourgeoisie, and even the nobility, and were able to strengthen respect for social values, appeasing violence without having recourse to the repressive counter-violence used by secular and ecclesiastical authority. [ERL 325]

Saint-Just-de-Valcabrère

AUTHORITY

Jesus said “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven. “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘You shall not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment... “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”

Matthew 5.17; 20–22a; 43–45

From Toulouse the Via Tolosana continues to Auch, but Count Raymond had advised Vicomte Edouard to take another route because a group of pilgrims had recently been set upon by robbers at Gimont. He decided to make a detour to the less frequented southern route, and so his party headed for St-Gaudens and ‘le Piémont Pyrénéen’, a route that runs alongside the river Garonne (the path has recently been named the Via Garona). An important stage on this route is the Church of Saint-Just-de-Valcabrère, built in the late 11th and early 12th centuries, and now a World Heritage Site. I imagine Robert and the others visiting it soon after its completion.

IT TOOK us two days to reach Saint-Gaudens. From there we continued to see the new church at Valcabrère dedicated in honour of Saint Just, one of two Spanish brothers who, around AD 304, were martyred for their faith during the persecution of Diocletian. Its a fine building in the modern style. Approaching the portal we were

welcomed by four saints: Just and his brother Pasteur, Stephen and Helena. Stepping inside we entered a light, welcoming space, that offered a welcome for the heart.

This church, like the others where we had stopped and prayed, was a sermon in stone. The massive solidity of these buildings carried the message of an unchanging faith, handed down by the apostles and handed on by local saints like St Just. But I knew in my heart that it wasn't as simple as that, a feeling strengthened by Aliénor's outspoken disbelief in the resurrection of the body. Her feelings resonated with doubts of my own. I'd long wondered about Jesus' ascension into heaven – taken up into a cloud according to St Luke. Are we meant to believe that literally – and if so, where did he go? And then there's the Mass. Reading the gospels with Père Arnaud I remember being surprised to see that at the Last Supper, as he blessed the cup of wine and gave it to the disciples, Jesus said, '*Drink this all of you....*' So, I asked myself, why today are the people excluded, and the priest drinks all the wine himself? And talking of priests, Jesus also said, '*Call no man father,*' but that's exactly how we address the priests. I did ask Père Arnaud about all this. He said there were good reasons, though he wasn't very specific. Of course, I respect him; he's been good to me; but I can't quite assent to the tidy religious package that he offers. But on the other hand, once you start questioning where will it end? Better to accept things as they are. And so that's how I left it. But with time to think on this pilgrimage, I find I can't leave it there.

OUR route here had followed the river Garonne, and we had rested at Saint-Julien, where Jean-Philippe and I had had another chance to talk. So, as we sat by the river, talking over what I had learned about the Cathars at Toulouse, I asked him if there was space for doubt in the Christian faith.

'Its a good question. But I think its more about whether there is space for doubt in the Church. The lack of it in any meaningful way was part of my reason for leaving the monastery. Doubt is an essential part of discovering the truth. We need to ask questions. There were fierce disagreements between Christians about what we believed in the early years, but the Church seems unable to cope with that now. Even when some of the best minds, like my teacher in Paris, Peter Abelard, ask questions, they risk being branded heretics, as he was.'

'What was his offence?'

'He taught that morals were entirely a matter of intention. The traditional view is that morality is about conforming to the standard set by authority. But he said that human acts take their character from the intention with which they are performed. So something is sinful only if done with an evil intent.'

'What's wrong with that?'

'Well, in general its a good principle. Its there in the commandment *Thou shalt do no murder*. Murder is killing another with the intention to end life. And Jesus sharpened the importance of intention: he said even nursing anger against another is wrong. But that doesn't mean that killing another without evil intent, by accident, say, is right. Taking life is always wrong. But the real point is that the emphasis on intention undermines the role of authority, and that's what brought Abelard into conflict with the Church.'

'I see. So rather than argue it out the Church preferred to discredit him. Isn't that what they did to Jesus?'

'Exactly! Authority seeks to discredit its opponents rather than debate with them, because if you debate with them you give them authority. And there was another reason why Abelard had to be discredited. He struck at the basis of the Church's hold over people when he insisted that love rather than fear is the basis of morality and penitence. He insisted that if your behaviour is not based on love of

God and your neighbour, and if your hope for forgiveness does not come from a desire really to be reconciled with God, then you are not acting with purity of heart and full responsibility.'

I sort of understood what Abelard said – about always letting the love of God determine how you act and speak – and part of me would have liked to talk more, but it was getting cold, so we retired for the night. Sometimes I found Jean-Philippe too intense, and was glad for the break. He had been damaged by the Church, and felt the pain acutely.

Alone in my room, I reflected on what he had said. I guess Abelard had a point, but I'm a practical man, not a philosopher. What I'd learnt about the Cathars showed how morality based on intention alone could degenerate into licence and anarchy. There have to be some rules that all accept if we are to live in peace. But I was also learning that once religion is reduced to rules it loses its spiritual power. The devotion that I'd seen in Jacopo was inspired by the love of God, not by rules. Jacopo's life was inspired by a person, not a rule-book, or a set of doctrines. People grow and develop, and a faith that is founded on Jesus must be the same. It, too, has to grow and mature. If it didn't grow it would ossify, like the stones of a Church.

The thoughts went round and round; I lay in my bed with my head aching. Its easy to see why most of us avoid asking questions – better to keep your head down. Before I fell asleep I prayed again.

*Lord, the waters of faith run deep,
and you alone are our foundation and saviour;
help me, like Peter, to come to you across the waters.*

Lourdes

MERCY

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." *Matthew 9.10-13*

From Saint-Gaudens Vicomte Edouard's group followed the pilgrim path along the foothills of the Pyrenees, with its glorious scenery and fast-flowing rivers, like the Gave de Pau at Lourdes. The journey would have taken them about three days. When they visited it would have been a small village surrounded by dramatic mountains. Its fortunes changed after 1858, when Bernadette Soubrious had her visions of the Virgin Mary, and Lourdes became a major Marian sanctuary. Today the river banks have been built up to contain the flow; it would have been wild and untamed when Robert was there.

MY CONVERSATION with Jean-Philippe at Saint-Just about love, not fear, being the basis of morality remained with me. It was just so different to what I'd been hearing all my life – like lots of the things that he said. We had also talked about sin. We got the wrong idea, he said, if we simply thought of it as wrong thoughts and deeds. Sin is much more fundamental than doing the wrong thing; its about living your life off-centre, directed at the wrong ends, serving the wrong gods, like an arrow that misses the mark.

I wanted to know more, but I don't get much time to talk with him, as most of the time he has to accompany Vicomte Edouard. A chance to talk further came when we arrived at Lourdes, a small village by the Gave de Pau. It was a fine evening, and after supper, we had time to walk by the river. There had been a storm the previous night, and the river was a swollen torrent, tumbling and swirling over the rocks and down the valley. A tree had fallen into the river, and lots of debris had been trapped by it, forming a barrier. We stopped and watched as the force of the water pressed on it relentlessly. Suddenly, it gave way, the power of the water finally overcoming it; the debris, and the tree were rapidly washed away downstream. The power of the water was mesmerising; I was completely caught up in the scene. Vaguely, I became aware that Jean-Philippe had said something. I asked him to repeat it.

'I said: That's what the love of God is like.'

'You mean like the power of this river?'

'Yes. Its irresistible. In the end it overcomes all that is opposed to it.'

'So, is that how you see God: powerful, controlling everything, overwhelming?'

'Yes, but be careful. Ask yourself, what kind of power? If we wanted to clear away the debris from this river, we'd use direct physical force. We'd wade in, seize it, and throw it out of the way. The river does it differently; it presses on the obstruction until it gives way of its own accord. I know the analogy is not perfect, but it's a good picture of how the love of God presses upon us until we turn to him of our own accord.'

'So all this talk about God hurling down thunderbolts is wrong?'

'Well, think of it this way. Jesus said we should call God father, just like a child. That suggests a close, loving relationship, not something remote and angry. Jesus also said that God causes the sun to rise on

good and bad alike, and sends the rain on the innocent and wicked without distinction (*Matthew 5.45*). Whatever else he may be, first and foremost, God is love. He may be wrathful; he may punish; he may hurl down thunderbolts... but before all this he is love.'

I had to pause and think about this. Of course, what Jean-Philippe had said was true; Jesus did say those things, but we heard much more about what he said about sin and judgement. How did it all fit together? I looked again at the river. Its flow never ceased. If we put an obstacle across it, it rapidly found a way around it. Perhaps the answer was that whatever God did, love was his purpose. He always sought a way around our waywardness. He corrected and punished because he wanted the best for us; sin aroused his wrath not simply because its ways were so opposed to his ways, but because it diminished us as the persons whom he had created in his image. My thoughts surprised me; I didn't usually think in this way. Where had they come from?

As if to answer my unspoken question, Jean-Philippe said:

'When you start asking the right questions, you find yourself thinking new thoughts, and you arrive at a new place. Jesus constantly challenged his hearers to ask the right questions because he wanted them to see things as God sees them. Take the occasion when he had dinner at Matthew's house, and the Pharisees asked why he ate with tax collectors and sinners. Wrong question! The real issue for God is not whether we are keeping the right company, but whether we have God's concern for those whose way of life separates them from him – and, of course, that included those who challenged Jesus, although they couldn't see it. He reminded them pointedly that God wanted mercy, not sacrifice.'

'What did he mean by that?

'He was echoing something the prophet Hosea had said (*Hosea 6.6*). Hosea was sharply critical of the people of Israel – too concerned

with the outward forms of religion, like offering the right sacrifices, and not enough concerned with what was in their hearts, especially showing mercy to those who fall short of God's laws. With God, mercy comes first.'

'So do we forget about justice? – Sin and wrongdoing? Where do they fit in?'

'Being merciful doesn't rule out being just. Hosea never loses sight of Israel's sinfulness. The question, at the end of the day, is which comes first? Hosea was sure that God's demand for right conduct never wavers, but he was equally sure that God's yearning for his people is stronger. Mercy comes first. There is a lovely passage where, despite her rejection of his ways, Hosea heard God saying to Israel:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, Israel?...
My heart is changed within me;
all my compassion is aroused.
I will not carry out my fierce anger...
For I am God, not a man –
the Holy One among you.

Hosea 11.8–9

'So, mercy always comes first?'

'Yes, it has to. This dawned on me when I was testing my vocation at the monastery, and I realised that that's where the Church falls short. Too often the rules come first, and mercy takes second place. If only it could see that God's mercy is like this river, clear, fast-flowing, sparkling with joy, swiftly bringing forgiveness to all who truly repent.'

WE RETRACED our steps, the river rushing beside us with undiminished force. It will ever remain with me as a wonderful image of

God's mercy forever coming toward us, the fruit of of his free and gracious love, unmerited and undeserved. In his mercy our sins are forgiven, carried away like the river had carried away the debris, so that they no longer formed a barrier between us and God. I thought to myself, how different the Church's teaching might have been if its theologians had lived in the mountains with these fast-flowing streams, and not in the lowlands and cities with their slow, muddy rivers!

*Lord, you are love; in love you made us,
and your love flows towards us like an ever-flowing stream.
In your mercy, let your love flow over me;
let it wash away all that separates me from you,
that I may dwell in you, and you in me.*

Postscript

The conflict between justice and mercy continues in the Church. It is seen particularly today in the dispute in the Catholic Church about the admission of those who are divorced to Holy Communion. On the one side are those who argue for a merciful response, looking to inner intention rather than outward acts; on the other side are those who argue that any relaxation of the rules would compromise the Church's teaching on the indissolubility of marriage.

Oloron-Sainte-Marie

PAUL

But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?" How foolish! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. When you sow, you do not plant the body that will be, but just a seed, perhaps of wheat or of something else. But God gives it a body as he has determined, and to each kind of seed he gives its own body. Not all flesh is the same: People have one kind of flesh, animals have another, birds another and fish another. There are also heavenly bodies and there are earthly bodies; but the splendour of the heavenly bodies is one kind, and the splendour of the earthly bodies is another. The sun has one kind of splendour, the moon another and the stars another; and star differs from star in splendour. So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.

1 Corinthians 15.35–44

THESE last couple of days, as we've ridden along, Paul has not been his usual self. He seemed withdrawn, absorbed with his own thoughts. As we drew near to Oloron-Sainte-Marie, I asked him if he was feeling alright. He lifted his head. 'Its a difficult time for me,' he replied; 'Gauzia died in the middle of July, and our child with her.' As soon as he mentioned it, I remembered it all. Her death had touched us deeply. It was about three years ago. I said I was sorry. Of course, I should have remembered.

I've never found it easy to respond to grief, but I had realised that that most people like to talk about the one who has died, and so I added, 'I didn't know Gauzia well; tell me a bit about her?' Paul seemed glad of the opportunity, and so I learned about how they met,

and fell in love, and were looking forward to the birth of their first child. It was all going so well, and they were so happy, and then his world collapsed. He didn't know what exactly, but something went wrong with the birth, and both mother and child died. He knew giving birth was a risk; it had happened to others he knew, but he never thought it would happen to them. 'I'm doing this pilgrimage for her,' he said.

It was a moving story. Loosing children at birth is not uncommon, it is part of life, but to lose your wife as well – that was just awful. 'How do you think of them now?' I asked.

Robert paused, 'I can't think much about the baby. They'd wrapped him in his shroud, so I never saw him. He didn't have a name – I suppose we would have called him Paul, like me. I used to call Gauzia my angel, and that's how I think of her now – as an angel, close to God.'

Something that Jesus said came to mind, that after we had died we were like the angels in heaven (*Mark 12.25*), and I mentioned it to Paul. 'Yes,' he said, 'Père Arnaud told me that. He also told me about what St Paul said about the life to come. I asked him to read it to me so that I could remember it. Someone asked St Paul how the dead were raised, with what kind of body. Paul said we are given a spiritual body. The body we have now perishes, but our spiritual body is imperishable.'

'Did you ask him what St Paul meant by a spiritual body?'

'Yes, I did. He said it was like Jesus after the resurrection. He was a real being, not a ghost – he could eat and drink, he was recognisably the same person, but his body was no longer tied to the earth like ours. He could come and go. So I think Gauzia and our baby must be like that now.'

I thought it was a pity that Aliénor couldn't hear this humble man talking about the mystery of passing from this life to the life to come.

What St Paul said seemed to me so much more believable than the Cathar idea. And, clearly, Jesus did not think of the resurrection of the body as reclothing our old bones as Aliénor apparently did. When I'd been talking with Jean-Philippe about the Bible, he'd said something about picture language – not everything had to be taken literally. If it was a picture that St Paul was painting, then it was of the survival of who we really are. And that made sense. After all, God can't have made us in all our wonder – in his own image, as the Bible says – just to see us perish like so much garbage.

WALKING through the town after we arrived, I made my way to the church of the Holy Cross that we'd seen as we arrived – its right on the pilgrim route. A funeral procession was leaving the Church; someone said it was a pilgrim who had died on his way home. That brought home to me the reality of the venture on which I was embarked. I had to face the possibility that I might not return. And that was a sobering thought. I entered the church and prayed.

*Walk with me Lord, and keep me safe.
And when the time comes,
re clothe me in my spiritual body
and call me to yourself.*

Postscript

Robert reflects a modern understanding of resurrection as the survival of the whole person, not the survival of some supposed immortal element (generally referred to as the soul), nor about survival in a different body or species, as the Cathars believed. The Biblical understanding of the human person is of an ensouled body, or an embodied soul; body and soul are inseparable aspects of

the one person. The resurrection of Jesus points to a continuity between earthly life and the life to come, which distinguishes resurrection from other conceptions, like the immortality of the soul and reincarnation.

In the passage that Robert refers to, St Paul poses the question of how the dead are raised, 'In what kind of body?' he asks, and although he describes such questions as 'senseless', he proceeds to offer an answer by drawing an analogy with the transformation of a seed into a plant (1 Cor. 15.35f). While it is only an analogy, and St Paul misunderstands the biology – he says the seed has to die before it can come to life as the plant; seeds do not die, they grow and bring forth new life – the image is profoundly hopeful: all the potential in the seed comes into full flower in the plant; nothing is lost, all is gain, and there is a continuity between the two, even though the physical nature is completely transformed. Thus St Paul speaks of our own resurrection as our transformation from a physical body to a spiritual body where all our potential is realised. Many have offered their own speculations on the nature of the life to come, but in the end I think we have to be content to accept it as a mystery – that is, something that can be experienced but not explained. This was the experience that changed the disciples, transforming their fear into boldness. They knew that the person who had appeared to them was one with the person they knew as Jesus of Nazareth. While his resurrected body was not physically constrained in the way that his earthly body had been, he was not a ghost; he ate with them, and was demonstrably the same person that his disciples had known, and they found in him a continuing source of grace and hope.

Bedous

A MOMENT OF PEACE

If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love. We love because he first loved us. Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

1 John 4.15–21

As Robert has said, so far in his life his faith has been conventional, and even though his pilgrimage is bringing a new dimension to his faith, he shares the sense of fear that pervaded medieval society, particularly the fear of judgement, which for him is heightened by his intimate feelings. From Oloron he and the others set out on the long climb that will take them over the Pyrénées into Spain. The prospect of leaving France for the first time, and the possibility of facing hostility from the Spaniards, reawakens his fears.

TOMORROW, or the day after, we shall reach Spain. I'd been thinking about this since we arrived at Oloron. It would be the first time that I had left France. Père Arnaud's warning about how the Spaniards can be hostile towards the French had come back to me, so I was a bit apprehensive about what awaited us. And there was a different mood in the group; we were all feeling the same, I guess, though we all kept

our anxiety to ourselves. Leaving France was a significant moment in our journey, a good time to take stock. We rested at Bedous, and there I went to the church to reflect.

Three things stood out for me: Aliénor's sharp comment that the Church had the peoples' obedience, but not their hearts; then, what Jean-Philippe had said about love and good intentions being the basis of how we should behave; and, most of all, the love of Christ that Jacopo had in his heart. That morning the reading at prayers had been from one of the letters of St John. In it he'd written: 'God is love; he who dwells in love is dwelling in God, and God in him.' (*1 John 4.16b*) I had heard the words before, but then I heard them as if for the first time.

I had not made my confession since we set out, but now, feeling that I wanted to do so, there was no priest in the church to hear me. Well, I said to myself, John said God is love, and Jesus said that God hears us, priest or no priest. So I knelt before the crucifix, and made my confession direct to God, not as the Church prescribed, but in my own way.

Father, your Son, our Saviour Jesus, said that when we pray in secret, you, who are in secret, and see what is done in secret, will hear our prayer; listen to me now, I pray.

Since my last confession I have kept myself from doing evil, and have sought to be a good pilgrim and to walk in your ways. But I confess, Father, that I am confused in my heart. I believe that you made me, and all that I am, yet your holy Church condemns me as a sinner, even though I have kept myself chaste. You know, Lord, that I didn't seek my feelings in an act of self-will or desire, or in rejection of your laws. My feelings have always been part of me, part of the way that you made me. It is easy for those who do not feel as I do, to condemn those who are different. I confess my anger against them; forgive me, I pray.

Father, your holy apostle St John says that you are love; I believe that all love comes from you. Help me to know what is right. I confess that I have not always dwelt in your love. Help me to dwell in your love, to place all my desire before you, and to love you like your servant Jacopo. Bless him, Lord, for his faith which touched my heart.

Thank you, Father for my new friendship with Jean-Philippe; and guide me in my relationship with him. Heal him, Father; give him peace in his heart. Go with us both, with Vicomte Edouard, Paul, Hughes and Étienne, on this journey, and keep us safe.

And when I stand before you at the judgement, look not on my sins, but upon my love and good intentions. Forgive me, Lord, and have mercy. I ask this in Jesus name, Amen.

As I knelt there, in the silence I experienced a deep sense of release. God had heard me, and my heart felt strangely warmed. I felt at peace. As I began to get up, I heard a voice, it was almost audible, saying, 'Robert, pray Psalm one hundred and thirty-nine.' So I rose, and prayed the psalm as my penance. Thanks be to God!

Postscript

The form of confession that Robert used is similar to the 'examen', or examination of conscience, that St Ignatius of Loyola includes as part of his spiritual exercises, and which is done at the end of the day. It also reflects what Jean-Philippe said about sin being not so much wrong acts and thoughts, but living 'off-target'.

The Col de Somport was the major crossing point over the Pyrenees until the path via Roncesvalles was made safe from bandits. At the col pilgrims would find

shelter at the huge Santa Christina Hospice, of which only a few ruins remain. These hospices were often endowed by the aristocracy, for many of whom supporting the pilgrimage was an important part of their identity. Kathleen Ashley tells of the wealthy countess Mahaut D'Artois, who had 'a special devotion to St James although she herself never managed to make the pilgrimage to his shrine. On 18 February 1319, she was present at the laying of the cornerstone of the church and hospital of Saint-Jacques-aux-Pèlerins in Paris. ... In the medieval world view there was potentially a spiritual meaning to every physical object or act. Thus, patrons who endowed churches or hospices along the pilgrimage route believed that they were earning rewards in the afterlife for their charity.' [KA 101,103]

Puerta La Reina

CRISIS

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Luke 13.1–5

While Robert has been travelling on horseback, Médard has continued his journey on foot from Roncesvalles, making a long descent of the mountains,

to Pamplona. In the course of the descent, Brother Gérard sustained a bad fall, and died. Sensing the depth of Médard's grief, one of the nuns, Dame Aleyne de Bohun, sought him out and walked with him sharing his grief. (The title Dame is that used by choir nuns, the female equivalent of the title Dom used by monks) After resting a few days at Pamplona, Médard and his companions have now moved on to Puente La Reina, where Queen Muniadona, wife of King Sancho III, built a bridge to enable pilgrims to cross the river Arga.

At Puente la Reina the Via Tolosana joins the other three pilgrim paths from France. By the time they arrived Robert had been there almost a week. Médard now takes up the story.

DESCENDING the mountain was a good deal easier than the ascent, but not without its dangers. The path had been washed away by rain in many places, and some of us had bad falls. Poor Gérard sustained a very bad fall that caused an internal injury from which he died. It happened near Biskarreta. Norbert celebrated a requiem mass for him in the village church, and we buried him there. Norbert assured us that if you die on pilgrimage all your sins are forgiven. Knowing that was some consolation, but it doesn't take the grief away. His death was a bitter blow – I can't say how much I miss him. Some of the others sensed how I was feeling, particularly Dame Aleyne, who came and walked with me. Although we'd been together all these weeks, I hadn't really got to know her, although Gérard had spoken to me about her, remarking particularly on the depth of her spirituality. She had a calm, healing presence, and her words about Jesus sharing our grief gave me great comfort.

We stayed a few days in Pamplona. It was good to give our feet a rest, but I don't much like these big cities – too many people, and you don't know who you can trust. And, of course, this part of Spain will always be associated in my mind with the death of my new-found spiritual guide.

Oderic, though, seemed to be very much at home. He was seen one night leaving a brothel – ladies of the night see pilgrims as easy game; they are a constant presence in every town. Abbot Norbert got to hear about it, and challenged Oderic, reminding him that pilgrims should keep themselves chaste. Oderic is reported to have replied that he might be a pilgrim, but that did not make him any less a man! Well, I guess he's got enough indulgences to cover it.

When we arrived at the pilgrim hostel, I got talking with the infirmarian, who mentioned that there was another pilgrim from France in the infirmary, recovering from a fever. He'd treated him with a potion of elderflower, yarrow, white willow bark and honey which had reduced the fever; he had pretty well recovered, but there seemed to be something else troubling him. As he spoke something told me that I should visit this pilgrim – since taking Marie for healing, I was learning to trust these intuitions – so I went to see him.

He introduced himself as Robert, a tall, strong man with reddish hair, some years younger than me. Although the fever had passed he wasn't at ease – he had a troubled countenance, and he moved stiffly, as though in pain. I asked him what had happened.

'We were attacked by bandits just before we reached here. We fought them off, alright, but I suffered a bad blow to my leg as I was thrown from my horse. Some dirt must have got into wound, and it turned nasty, and I developed this fever. The bandits escaped with my horse. They put me on Paul's horse – he was my riding companion – and we came here. The others offered to stay with me, but I encouraged them to press on. I said that once I'd rested, I'd find another horse and catch up with them. Well, that was a week ago, before the fever developed. I've no chance of catching them up now.'

'Why don't you come with us?'

‘To be honest, I’ve more or less decided to abandon the pilgrimage, and return home. You see, I came because I had to, and not because I wanted to.’

And so Robert explained to me how he came to be making the journey. He was about to say something else, but hesitated. I sat beside him and asked if there was something else on his mind. There was a silence. I kept quiet, sensing the internal debate that was going on in Robert’s mind. Eventually, he said, ‘Well... yes; there is.’ He told me about his prayer in the church at Bedous, and the feeling of peace that had warmed his heart. So why, he asked, has God struck me down with this illness, and, instead of keeping me safe? Why has he separated me from my companions. Was I deceived in the church?

Providentially, I had been talking with Brother Gérard about illness and sin as we walked from Roncesvalles – it was almost the last thing we discussed. He had said, quite dismissively, that there was no connection between the two; it was superstitious nonsense. ‘How can it be, Médard? There are lots of notorious sinners walking around in perfect health!’ This was a new view to me, not at all what I used to believe, but what Gérard said made sense. Now, it felt as though my talk with him wasn’t just a coincidence. ‘So Lord,’ I said to myself, ‘that’s why you sent me to talk to Robert. Be with us now. Let me know what to say.’ And the words came:

‘Robert, do you remember the story that Jesus told about the collapse of the tower of Siloam? He rejected the idea that suffering was a punishment for sin. That can’t that be the way of a loving God who sent his Son to save the world. And when the sick were brought to Jesus and to the apostles, they healed them; they didn’t condemn them as sinners! Your illness isn’t a punishment. We get ill for all kinds of reasons that have nothing to do with sin. God sends us healers, like the infirmarian here, because he wants us to be well. Robert, put out of your mind the idea that this fever is a sign of God’s displeasure. Think no more about returning home. These thoughts are

the work of Satan. He knows that you have been blessed by God, and so immediately he sets to work to undermine what God has done. That's what he does; I know, he's done it to me. Don't give in to him. Stand up to him, firm in your faith, and he will flee. Robert, don't let this crisis in your health become a crisis for your faith.'

He smiled, and thanked me. 'Come with us, I said. We're leaving in the morning.'

*Father, thank you for bringing me to Robert.
Be with him. Let him know that his blessing was true;
and that you have a purpose for him in this journey.*

Postscript

The belief that illness or disability was the result of sin was very much around in Jesus' day. For example, in the episode of the man born blind the disciples asked Jesus, 'Rabbi, why was this man born blind? Who sinned, this man or his parents.' But Jesus again rejected any causal connection between sin and suffering. He replied that suffering, however it occurs, provides an opportunity for God to bring new life: 'It is not that he or his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's power might be displayed in curing him.' (John 9.1-3) However, old superstitions die hard; we still say, when illness or misfortune strikes, 'What have I done to deserve this?'

CAMINO FRANCÉS

PUENTA LA REINA TO SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

Estella

NEW COMPANIONS

An angel of the Lord said to Philip, “Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.” So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means “queen of the Ethiopians”). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, “Go to that chariot and stay near it.” Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. “Do you understand what you are reading?” Philip asked. “How can I,” he said, “unless someone explains it to me?” So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading: “He was led like a sheep to the slaughter, and as a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he did not open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendants? For his life was taken from the earth.” The eunuch asked Philip, “Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?” Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptised?” And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptised him. When they came up out of the water, the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away, and the eunuch did not see him again, but went on his way rejoicing.

Acts 8.26–39

Robert decided to accept Médard's invitation, and the next morning joins his group. Crossing the pilgrim bridge in Puente la Reina, they set out for Estella, a city in which Médard and Robert would have felt at home as it was much influenced by French culture – its regulations were written in a Provençal

dialect. Robert begins to get to know his new companions and to compare experiences with Médard. He continues the story.

AFTER Vicomte Edouard and the others had left, and my fever came out, I really did feel that if I recovered I would return to Beaucaire – but then, I had not reckoned on meeting Médard. It feels as though he was sent to me to remind me of my resolve to be a pilgrim – a bit like Philip being sent to the Ethiopian to sort him out. When Médard invited me to join his group, Père Arnaud's words about proper pilgrims making the journey on foot came back to me. And so the decision was made.

I was welcomed warmly by Abbot Norbert and the others, and we set off. Shoes now became my first concern. Not surprisingly, shoemakers did a very good trade along the pilgrim route, but they didn't give them away. I heard of one poor young man called Jean Bonnacaze, who decided to make the pilgrimage despite his parents' opposition. He set out secretly one night from the Béarn with only three pounds in his pocket. His shoes gave out at Pamploma, and without money to buy another pair, continued for the rest of the route [750 km] in bare feet! Fortunately, I was able to buy two pairs of espadrilles, which I found very suitable, and walked the rest of the journey in them!

I asked Médard how the first part of his journey had been, and he told me about his dreams and how he had talked with Frère Gérard about what they meant. He told me also what Frère Gérard had taught him about prayer. I told him about meeting Jacopo and the effect it had had on me, and my talks with Jean-Philippe, and what I'd learnt about the Cathars, and the way Aliénor had been so strong in support of them. In different ways we both realised that we'd been making quite an inward spiritual journey as well as the outward physical journey.

‘I’d long wanted to make this pilgrimage,’ Médard said to me, ‘but I hadn’t thought much about how it would actually be. My main concern was whether I would last the distance, and return home safely to my wife. I knew it would be a spiritual journey, but in my mind that was about visiting the shrines, honouring the saints, atoning for my sins ... you know, the kind of thing we do all the time, but more intensively. It hadn’t occurred to me that God had a word for me personally – after all, I’m just a wool merchant, nobody special.’

‘Its been a bit like that for me too,’ I replied. ‘I had no choice about coming, but Père Arnaud – Vicomte Edouard’s chaplain – said I must ask myself what I wanted from the journey. I wasn’t sure at first what he meant, but it all became clear when I talked with Jacopo. Its the people as much as the journey that shapes you, isn’t it?’

‘Yes, that’s so true. Especially someone who’s a bit further on in their spiritual journey. We all need a guide ... I was thinking about that this morning – following that reading about the Ethiopian eunuch to whom Philip was sent. He was reading the bible, but without really understanding; seeking faith, but not really finding ... but it all came clear when he found someone to guide him.

‘You know, Robert, I suppose it must have been the same for Jesus’ disciples. Because we call them ‘Apostles’ they sound like really special people – well, of course, they were – but I think that’s what they became through their companionship with Jesus. When they started out they were just ordinary men like you and me, fishermen, doing their work... nothing special.’

That was a new thought for me. I’d thought of the apostles as people on pedestals – well, that’s how you see them in church. Something else that was new for me was having the four women in the group as close companions. I asked Médard if it had been new for him too.

‘No, but what has been new is travelling with two nuns – Dame Aleyne particularly. You know she was married to the Count of Bourges – came late to the religious life? She was very kind to me after Gérard’s death. There’s something quite special about her.’

‘I know what you mean,’ I replied. ‘I sensed that when she greeted me. And whatever it is, it doesn’t come from her aristocratic rank, unlike Vicomte Edouard – its more something that comes from her soul.... You know, I’ve never thought of this before, but I wonder if the women who were close to Jesus were the same? Did I tell you that the Cathars accept women as *parfaits*, you know, as their ministers? I was astonished to hear that!’

‘I had heard that. I was astonished too. Actually, I had quite a long talk with Gérard about it. Some of his opinions took me aback. He said men had no monopoly on the truth; for God gender was a secondary issue. I was pretty shocked, but then he said, “Think about it. Who were the first witnesses to the resurrection? Mary Magdalene and the other women. Jesus trusted the truth to them, even though the Jews discounted the testimony of women. And although St Paul says he forbids women to teach, he also mentions a woman called Chloe who led the Christians who met at her house. Now don’t tell me that all she did was open the door and serve the drinks. Look around you,” he added, “in this group there is Dame Aleyne, who has a position of authority in her monastery. There are lots of others like her.” Gérard told me he’d gained a lot from talking to her, and said if I got the opportunity, I should seek her wisdom.’

We walked on through a wide open valley to Estella. So different to France, and this new group of pilgrims was very different too. New companions, new ideas, even new truths! I felt happy, even if being a pilgrim was becoming even more of a challenge. As I walked I prayed:

*Walk with me, Lord Jesus, as you walked with your disciples.
This is all new to me, I don't know what to think any more.
But I believe that you are the way, the truth and the life;
guide my life and open my eyes to your truth,
that I may walk in your way.*

Postscript

In Estella the French pilgrims would have found the food was to their taste. One French pilgrim praised its cuisine: 'Estella, which is stocked with good bread and the best wine, and meat and fish and all good things.' [KA 165]

Food on the pilgrim ways varied from frugal to plentiful. Guillaume Manier (he of the sore feet) says he had a good dinner at the hostel in Burgos. But even those like him with funds, could not always be sure of finding a good meal and a comfortable bed for the night; on one occasion he had to sleep with the animals. He commented that the way of the country was suited to men and women who only changed their bed linen twice a year! In the barn where he spent the night, the pigs and other animals were free to wander around. A pig disturbed his friend Hermand, attracted by the smell of a large turnip that Hermand had been keeping in his bag to eat in Santiago. The pig got it first! [BB 28]

Santo Domingo de la Calzada

ALEYNE DE BOHUN

Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up. He said: "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared what people thought. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God or care what people think, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually come and attack me!'" And the Lord said, "Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God bring about justice for his chosen ones, who cry out to him day and night? Will he keep putting them off? I tell you, he will see that they get justice, and quickly. However, when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?"

Luke 18. 1–8

Travelling with others is one way that we get to know their character, and in Médard's group it wasn't long before it became apparent that among them one of the nuns stood out. As Médard said in the last episode, Dame Aleyne de Bohun comes from a noble family. She is able, lively and intelligent, with a natural sense of authority, and has become the Prioress of her convent, second only to the Abbess, whom she is expected to succeed.

Her father was a baron; the title was granted for military service and went back many generations – the family were proud that their coat of arms had the coveted sixteen quarterings. She was the third of five children, the eldest daughter, and thus the plan of her life was clear: marriage into another noble family and providing an heir. But life did not go according to plan. She was married into the nobility before she was twenty, but she suffered several miscarriages before giving birth to a daughter. Not long afterwards, her husband was badly injured in a jousting tournament and died of his wounds.

She married again, this time to Gaston, Count of Bourges, ten years her senior, with whom she had two daughters and a son. The son, alas, was a sickly child, and died before he was ten. When Aleyne was thirty-one Count Gaston was killed in a hunting accident, and the title passed to his brother. Although other suitors offered for her hand, she chose another path, as she explains.

ONE OF my aunts was a nun. My mother's youngest sister, Virginie. She was more spoken about than seen. When I was a young girl, I remember it felt odd that there was a member of our family living not far away whom we never saw. Of course, in those days I didn't know anything about the religious life and the monastic principle of enclosure. It felt to me as though she'd been tidied away – and, looking back on it, in a way she had. As the youngest daughter she didn't attract much of a dowry, she wasn't pretty and vivacious like my mother, and no one had offered for her. Women in her position, even from good families like ours, don't have much choice: you can stay at home, remaining dependent on your father and take your chance that his heir will be kind, or you can become a nun. And that's what she chose. We were, of course, brought up to value those who chose the religious life, and I did, but it never occurred to me that I too, one day, would make the same choice.

The death of our son was a bitter blow. It wasn't just that the natural order was reversed, but also that it dashed our hopes for an heir. Some husbands in this position would have been angry and bitter, finding ways to humiliate their wives who, they felt, had failed them, but mercifully Gaston was different. He was a devout man, and found comfort in the the Book of Job. 'God gives,' he said, and 'God takes away. Blessed be his holy name.' (*Job 1.21*) Being able to share our loss brought a new depth to our marriage, so it was all the more painful when a few years later Gaston died in a hunting accident. I was

thirty-one, and overwhelmed with grief. 'Why has this happened to me?' I cried out to God, 'Haven't I had sorrow enough?'

Other men seemed to expect me just to get over it. I had some offers of marriage, but grief had touched my soul, and I felt that I was being called to begin a different journey. I couldn't quite sort it out. Part of my grief was that I felt lost, as though the purpose of my life had been snuffed out, but at the same time I felt that grief was enlarging my soul, not shrinking it, as so often happens, and that I was being called to begin a new journey. I went to see Aunt Virginie, now the Abbess of her community, and spoke to her about my feelings. How should I make sense of what I felt?

She received me in her room, light and airy, sparsely furnished, but none the less welcoming. She listened carefully to my story and my confused feelings, and then, leaning a little towards me, said,

'Aleyne, what we say to ourselves when sorrow and misfortune strikes makes all the difference. Speak to yourself the words of God, as Gaston did. There are some lovely words in the psalms:

Why are you cast down, my soul,
why groan within me?
Hope in God; I will praise him still,
my saviour and my God.

(Psalm 42.5)

The more you speak the word of God to yourself, the more peace you will find.'

'Hope in God; I will praise him still.' The words reminded me that there had been moments in my grief when I had been able to hope in God, and as I told my aunt, it was in those moments that I felt that God was enlarging my soul.

'Good! Good!' she said. 'God responded to your prayer. Some people believe that he sends misfortune to test us. I don't think that's

right. God doesn't send misfortune, but when it comes he is there with us in the midst of it.

'Have you ever wondered where Jesus found his love and compassion? I believe they came from the depth of his sorrow. He felt in his heart the true tragedy of our sin and suffering, and that moved him, even to giving his life for us. In sorrow we turn to him, as you have done, and if you listen I believe you will hear him calling you to join your grief to his. Lose your life for my sake, he said, and you will gain it (*Mark 8.35*).'

She paused, and then she asked, 'How long have you had this sense of being called to begin a new journey?'

'Oh... well... it was some time after Gaston died. I was praying those very words of Jesus that you mentioned – about losing your life in order to gain it. They almost leapt off the page.'

'That's a clear sign that God was speaking to you. Perhaps he has a special purpose for you.'

'Do you think so? ... Oh, goodness! ... How can I be sure? How did you know that God was calling you?'

'Well, Aleyne, it was different for me. At first I felt that it wasn't God who was calling me, but my family who were pushing me. Hints were dropped, that kind of thing, some none too subtle. St Benedict says in the Rule that all who seek to enter a monastery should be discouraged – the door literally shut against them – to test their desire. I had none of that; no real desire, no testing of vocation, nothing; the door was opened without demur. "Well," I said to myself, "the only way is forward. If I am to gain any happiness and fulfilment, I must give myself to this life that has been chosen for me." And so I did. I won't pretend that it was easy, but God responded to my self-offering, and I found peace, even joy.'

'You know, aunt Virginie, these last few years I've been praying a lot, much more than I used to. At mass one day the priest read the parable Jesus told about the Unjust Judge, you know, where Jesus says that God rewards persistence in prayer. I took it to heart. I was a widow, and I was persistent. "Lord," I said, "let me know your love. Show me the way I should walk."' "

'And you think he is calling you to the religious life.'

'Yes, I do. I think about little else.'

'Are you ready for humility? Its something I had to learn. All the sisters will tell you that obedience is the hardest part of the religious life. Isaiah said, "My eyes are drawn to the man of humbled and contrite spirit, who trembles at my word." (*Isa 66.2*) I knew I had to take those words to heart. My family had humbled me. If I could accept it as though it had been my decision, I believed that God would lead me, and he has.'

'Doesn't St Benedict say that humility the basic virtue?'

'Yes, he does. He describes it as a ladder to climb: the first step is to keep the awe of God before your eyes; the second is to seek his will and heed his word, imitating Jesus himself who said, "I came not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me." (*John 6.38*)

'Aleyne, do you truly desire to tread that path? To many in the world, it seems like foolishness. Are you happy to become a fool for Christ?'

'Becoming a fool for Christ...? Well, didn't St Paul say that the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom? (*1 Cor 1.25*) I don't think I have any choice. Being a fool for Christ is something that I have to do. Will you pray for me?'

'Of course I will, and so will we all. So be it, then. Trust in God, Aleyne, and he will be with you. I rather think he does have a special purpose for you.'

So, I knelt before my Aunt Virginie, whom the family had pushed out, and who now exceeded us all. I placed my hands between hers, and as she held me I felt her quiet strength flow into me. She prayed for me, and she blessed me. My new journey had begun.

FOURTEEN years have passed since then. A few years later, when my daughters were well placed, I followed Aunt Virginie into the religious life. I insisted on my vocation being properly tested; I didn't want any doors held open on account of my rank. She died not long after my profession, but her words about joining my suffering to that of Jesus found a place in my heart. And, as I have tried to do so, I have, in a way, lost my life only to find a new one.

I was talking about this with Médard and our new companion Robert – they intrigue me, those two; they've only just met, but you'd think they'd known each other for many years. Robert asked me what Jesus meant. Losing your life in order to gain it didn't make much sense to him. But, on the other hand, I could tell that the idea of finding a new life spoke to him. It was late. We can walk together tomorrow, I said, and talk more about it. That night I prayed for them.

Father, thank you for walking with me, for giving me new life.

Be with me as I walk with Robert and Médard.

As you have been a friend to me, help me to be a friend to them.

*As you have touched my heart, so touch their hearts,
help them to know you, to join their grief with yours,
and to walk with you as your friends.*

Postscript

I imagine Aleyne as a French ancestor of Eleanor de Bohun, an English noblewoman of the fourteenth century (c1366–1399). The daughter of Humphrey de Bohun, 7th Earl of Hereford, in 1376 she married Thomas, 1st Duke of Gloucester, the youngest son of King Edward II and Queen Philippa of Hainault. Sometime after her husband's death in 1397 Eleanor became a nun at Barking Abbey. She is buried in Westminster Abbey. She appears briefly in Shakespeare's Richard II, and one of her remote descendants was Zachary Taylor, 12th President of the USA.

Aleyne is akin to a number of notable women who, over the centuries, have been recognised for their teaching, among them Hildegard of Bingen, Hilda of Whitby, Julian of Norwich, Catherine of Sienna, Teresa of Avila and Thérèse of Lisieux. However, Aleyne's teaching (described in the following episodes) is based on that of a more contemporary spiritual guide, the Dutch/American priest Henri Nouwen (1932–1996), and is drawn from his book Reaching Out. Nouwen describes the three movements as reaching out to ourselves, reaching out to our neighbours, and reaching out to God.

Aleyne's prayer is inspired by a prayer attributed to Albert Camus:

*Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow.
Don't walk behind me, I may not lead.
Walk beside me, and be my friend.*

Burgos

A STILL CENTRE

Very early in the morning, while it was still dark, Jesus got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place, where he prayed. Simon and his companions went to look for him, and when they found him, they exclaimed: "Everyone is looking for you!" Jesus replied, "Let us go somewhere else – to the nearby villages – so I can preach there also. That is why I have come." So he travelled throughout Galilee, preaching in their synagogues and driving out demons.

Mark 1.35–39

Médard and Robert accept readily Dame Aleyne's invitation to walk with her and Sister Thérèse, and she begins to talk to them about the three movements of the spiritual life.

ROBERT is very keen to hear what Dame Aleyne has to say about the spiritual life, but walking and talking with two women is something of a new experience, and he's not entirely at ease. Aleyne senses this, and so she asks him to tell her a little about his life and his experience of the first part of his pilgrimage. She listened attentively, without interrupting; when he hesitated, she kept quiet, silently encouraging him to say what he really had in his heart. Robert, who was more used to the to-and-fro of male conversation found this both disturbing and liberating. After he'd mentioned his encounter with Jacopo Aleyne responded:

'Well, Robert, you certainly lead a busy life. You remind me of my life when I was married. Always things to do, people to see, a château to run, children to look out for. Hardly a still moment. I enjoyed it and felt fulfilled, but when my son died, and then my husband, I felt

empty. It wasn't just that their deaths left a huge gap in my life, but that something deeper was missing, something I'd never had. All around me my world was filled to over-flowing, but in myself I felt empty. It sounds as though Jacopo touched you in the same way.'

'Yes, that was it. He had something in his heart that I didn't.'

'I think its connected with what you asked me last night – what Jesus meant when he said we had to lose our life in order to find it. I think its about finding a goal and motivation in life beyond our everyday concerns, so that we can find our true selves in Christ. Each of us has to discover the answer for ourselves, not so much in our minds as through our experience. You're someone who likes to get things clear in his mind. That's fine, but to find an answer, you have to start in a different place. You have to start with what's in your heart.'

'How do I do that?'

'You said Jacopo had something in his heart that you didn't have. I think you do have it – we all do – but you have to discover it. I think of it as our still centre. You have to learn to make your still centre the centre of your life, not your work.'

'But my work is my life.'

'And so it should be. Jesus' work was his life. But ask yourself, Where is the energy that I put into my work coming from? It needs to come from your still centre, otherwise its so easy for the cares and demands of the world to take us over, to shape our lives, and knock us off course.'

That resonated with Robert, whose life to a large extent was about responding to other people's demands and needs. He often felt that he had no time for himself, and that his real self remained hidden. He mentioned this to Aleyne. She replied that getting things right with your self – 'reaching out to your self,' as she put it – was the first step

in the spiritual life. He asked her to say a bit more about the still centre; what exactly did she mean?

‘Think of it this way, Robert. You remember the monastery of San Pedro in Estella – at its heart is the cloister. All the different parts of the monastery lead off from it: church, chapter house, refectory, library, dormitory. The cloister is a beautiful, still place that connects all the aspects of the monastery’s life and relates them to one another. Your still centre does the same. It connects all the aspects of your life, and relates them to one another. Does that make sense?’

‘Yes, it does. So, what you’re saying is that reaching out to myself is about discovering my still centre. How do I do that?’

‘You have to learn to be silent, to still your heart and mind. It’s a piece of spiritual wisdom as old as the hills. As Isaiah said:

In returning and rest you shall be saved;
in quietness and trust shall be your strength. *Isaiah 30.15*

‘Take those words to heart – *in quietness and trust shall be your strength* – and follow Jesus’ example. You have to give time to God. Jesus would spend time alone with God in prayer. This gave him an inner stillness and stability that was the foundation of all that he was, and all that he did.’

Médard had been listening carefully. ‘Brother Gérard said something similar to me,’ he interjected. ‘He said that because Jesus had taken time to listen to God and absorb his wisdom, so that he came to see the world as God sees it, he spoke with God’s authority. He described it as listening to the rhythm of God, and living accordingly.’

‘I’d never thought of it like that,’ Robert replied. ‘So, how do I get to hear the rhythm God?’

‘You begin with God’s word,’ Aleyne explained. Take a saying of Jesus, like, “I am the light of the world. No follower of mine shall

walk in darkness; he shall have the light of life.' (*John 8.12*) Repeat the words to yourself as though you were sounding a bell, and listen to the echo. Don't think about it too much – its not an intellectual exercise – just listen, and you'll find it gets into your heart.'

'That's easy in the religious life.' Robert objected, 'How would I find time do that in the real world?'

Aleyne smiled. 'People often say that,' she said. 'A little and often, is how you begin. Don't forget that when I began this spiritual journey I wasn't a nun. I began with a few minutes every day, and it gradually became a habit – a habit of the heart. I planted a seed, and gradually it grew.'

'Its really about attitude. After Count Gaston died my life was invaded by silence. At first it wasn't a welcome experience. There was noise in the house – things went on as usual – but within me there was a numb silence, a loneliness, that took me over. I said to myself, "Aleyne you must take this loneliness and make it into something positive. Turn it into solitude rather than loneliness." That desire helped me to embrace the silence. It became an inner, peaceful silence in which I found the space to pray. And so my emptiness was gradually filled, and I found that I began to look on the world in new ways; I was beginning to understand it from my quiet, inner centre.'

'So, its about what I really want,' said Robert, 'and if I want it enough, I will find it – and the time to pray?'

'Yes,' Aleyne replied. 'What you're looking for is an inner attitude or desire. It doesn't depend on being apart from other people, or being in a secluded place. Its part of you, your inner being. Its about seeking to understand the world from your quiet, inner centre. It will be something quite new for you, Robert, as it was for me. But if you want to do it you'll find a way. The capacity for devotion that you saw in Jacopo is already within you. You just have to free it and give

it space, and allow it to shape you. But... you have to want it. The wanting comes first.'

THEY walked on for a while in silence, both men absorbed in thought. This was new ground for them, like the pilgrim path that they were following. Robert was beginning to see that when Jesus said he must lose his life, it was about moving beyond the life that was only about the next thing he had to do, to a life shaped more by his own desire for God. They climbed a small hill and stopped for a rest. As they sat in the silence Sister Thérèse quietly prayed:

*Be silent, still, aware
for there
in your own heart
the Spirit is at prayer
listen and learn
open and find
heart wisdom – Christ.*

Postscript

Henri Nouwen describes the first movement of the spiritual life as moving from loneliness to solitude. He sees loneliness not so much as being friendless, but rootless, which we try to cover up by activity, or by seeking new relationships. This, he says, is to look for solutions outside ourselves, whereas we will only find the solution within ourselves; this he describes as cultivating solitude.

In describing Dame Aleyne's teaching I have used the image of absorbing the rhythm of God. A modern image is of tuning-in to God's wave-length.

The concluding prayer is by a Benedictine sister of Malling Abbey in Kent.

Carrion de los Condes

KEEPING GOING

As they were walking along the road, a man said to Jesus: "I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus replied, "Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

He said to another man, "Follow me." But the man replied, "Lord, first let me go and bury my father." Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the kingdom of God."

Still another said, "I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-bye to my family." Jesus replied, "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God." *Luke 9.57–62*

From Burgos the pilgrim path sets out on a long traverse of the Castillian plain, a walk of almost 300 km (185 m), to the border of Galicia. Although in the C12th I imagine there would have been more natural shelter, than there is today, it would have been a long slog through a flat, bleak landscape that wearies both the feet and the spirit.

Several rivers cross the plain. At Carrion de los Condes, around half-way between Burgos and León, a long bridge takes the traveller across the Rio Carrion to the monastery of San Zoilo, where the group stayed. The geography took its toll on the group, and Médard found all kinds of negative thoughts and feelings welling up in his mind. As he crosses the bridge Dame Aleyne's words about living from our still centre come back to him.

THE BRIDGE at Carrion de los Condes is long and low, taking the traveller over the river, but also over some soft ground that floods in winter and looks firmer than it is. It rather reflected my feelings about my spiritual journey.

When there is lovely scenery to look at, hills to climb or difficult country to cross, my energies go into the journey, and there is plenty to distract me from the things that annoy me about the other members of the group, but here, where the journey is monotonous and requires no special effort, those annoyances aren't so easily dealt with. I'm not the only one who finds Oderic difficult – he's in the group, but not of the group; and then there's Marie's sister Irene, who never seems quite ready to set off at the agreed time. And then there are my own feelings of unease. What I'm learning is quite a challenging. I thought I'd got used to this by now, but there's always something new. It's like this journey: What's round the next corner? I find myself resisting the idea of reaching out to myself. Would I like what I found there?

Then, as so often happens, the reading at prayers this morning seemed to have been chosen to especially to speak to me. Once you've set your hand to the plough, said Jesus, don't turn back. There are many excuses for delay, for turning from the path, like resting under the few trees in this endless plain, but the only way is onward. I was brought up short when I realised that this was exactly what I'd said to Robert when he said he'd decided to turn round and return to Beaucaire; and this morning I heard Jesus saying it to me. In moments of weakness Satan whispers in our ear: 'Turn back, you don't have to put yourself through this. There's an easier way. Follow me.' I'd learned enough of his wiles to say, 'Get behind me Satan!' Even if it took me to uncomfortable places, I had to make the journey within as well as the journey without. As I walked, I was reminded of what Dame Aleyne had said about how being in touch with our still centre helps guard against the cares and demands of the world taking us over and knocking us off course.

Since we'd left Burgos we'd talked more with Dame Aleyne about the inner life – guarding our 'inner mystery', as she put it. This was something quite new for Robert, though not entirely for me, as Gérard

had said something similar, but even so, I felt that I was on uncertain ground.

As I listened to Aleyne, I began to see a little more clearly, and feel a little more secure. She said our inner mystery is a gift from God. It is what makes us who we are; it shapes our uniqueness as a person; it is the source of our spiritual and moral qualities and our practical abilities. It what marks us out from other people. Above all, she said, it is our inner mystery that shapes our love – what we have in our hearts. I was reminded of a verse that Gérard had quoted from the Book of Proverbs:

Guard your heart more than anything you treasure,
for it is the wellspring of life. *Prov. 4.23*

As I turned this over in my mind, I remembered Sister Thérèse's prayer that we might find 'heart wisdom'. What exactly did this mean? Was she asking for something different to the practical wisdom that guided our everyday lives, or were the two related? When I next found myself walking with Aleyne, I asked her about it.

'Well,' she replied, 'I'd say that they were two sides of the same coin. Obviously we need practical wisdom, but it has to be shaped by the wisdom of the heart. Think of it this way: intention shapes our conduct, but more important are the values that shape our intention. Its like that bridge we've just crossed. Our still centre, our inner mystery guards our values and connects the two sides of our life: intention and action, rooting them both in God's wisdom.

'But what prompted your question, Médard?'

As usual, she had seen beyond my question, so I told her about my feelings of annoyance. 'Ah! Yes,' she said. 'Other people... Its easy to be put off by others, especially in the Church! I had exactly the same feelings when I became a nun, and they never really go away. My teacher asked me to think about how Jesus dealt with those he found

annoying. Jesus always responded, she said; he never simply reacted. His response could be angry; more often it was pointed, like we heard this morning – the man who said to him: ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ Jesus didn’t simply react and say, ‘That’s great! Welcome aboard!’ He responded by testing the man’s determination: “Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” In other words, Are you prepared to forsake all for my sake?’

‘I guess that was a pretty direct response. More than the man expected.’

‘Yes, but not made without compassion. Responding from the heart is what makes compassion possible. Jesus felt the man’s hesitation in his own inner centre, just as he felt the pains of the world, and when we feel them in the same way, we can respond like he did. Too often we try to seek solutions without a compassionate involvement in the causes of the problems. If I’ve learnt one thing, Médard, its about trying not to run away from the pains of others, but to feel them as our own. Touching them with compassion brings healing and new strength.’ [HN 60]

I hoped that this is what I’d been able to offer Robert, and something that he had said to me about deep friendships passing him by came back to me. Getting to know Jean-Philippe had awakened in him a feeling of what a deep friendship might be like. I guessed that this, too, had to do with guarding our inner mystery. Aleyne agreed:

‘Yes, I think so. It’s our inner mystery that enables us to form lasting relationships and to find love. I have the feeling that Robert has not been able to be true to who he is, and so he is not completely in touch with his inner mystery, his still centre.’

‘So, what would you say is the essential capacity that we need in order to guard our still centre?’

‘The ability to keep silent. You can’t guard your still centre if you chatter all the time. Think how the Bible begins... with a silent, formless world. God speaks into the silence and the world is formed. Its the same with us. Silence is necessary for the person God made us to be formed. Just as words lose their power when they are not born out of silence, so openness loses its meaning when there is no ability to be closed.’ (HN 32–33)

Aleyne said things like this from time to time. It must have left me looking rather uncomprehending, because she continued:

‘Its like when I was grieving. There were plenty of people who wanted to *do something* to help me, or they’d try to distract me with their chatter. They were well-intentioned – of course they were – but I think their response was really prompted by their own need to be active. What I needed was someone who could be still with me; someone who could reach out to me from their own still centre, and give me hope. You’ve got to guard your still centre, your own inner mystery, if you’re going to help people in that way. Having the ability to be closed does not mean shutting yourself off from others; its about nurturing your own inner life so that you can be really open to others and reach out to them from your heart.’

‘And people who chatter all the time can’t do that?’

‘Not really. The need to speak, to articulate every thought and feeling, gets in the way. Chatter is generally all about the chatterer, not the person they’re talking to. Chatter is about what’s on the surface of our lives, and not about our depths. The first step in the spiritual life is to take time to attend to our depths.’

That made sense to me. I’d realised through talking to the others in the group that we reached out to other people most effectively from our depths. Like it says in the psalms: ‘Deep calls to deep across the roar of the waters.’ (*Psalms* 42.7)

Aleyne had given me much to think about. I could see more clearly why nurturing my inner life was so important. The land may be bleak, the ground uncertain, and the journey hard, but if I wanted to be fit for service in the kingdom of God, I had to keep my hand to the plough.

*Father,
in the beginning there was silence,
and the world was still and without form.
From your depths you spoke into the silence,
and all that is came to be.
Help me to speak from my own silence,
and to act from my own stillness,
that all I say and do may come from you.*

Postscript

St Benedict, whose teaching formed Dame Aleyne, taught the importance of silence and spoke of the need to discipline the tongue. Quoting from Psalm 39 he notes in chapter 6 of his Rule he cautions against letting our tongue lead us into sin; to this end sometimes we need to refrain 'from speaking even good words.' Speech has power. The old adage that sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me, is simply not true. Words can build up, and they also can wound, often with long-lasting effect. As it says in the Book of Proverbs: 'Death and life are in the power of the tongue.' (Proverbs 18.21) As Esther de Waal comments, restraint in speech goes against the culture of a world filled with words and noise, a world in which we forget that 'spoken words are a reflection of what is going on in my heart, and an uncleansed heart can be a dangerous and destructive thing.' [EW 46] Part of this first step in the spiritual life, reaching out to our inner self, is learning to speak from our depths, from our own silence, and not simply reacting to the noise around us.

León

A WELCOMING HEART

The apostles and the believers throughout Judea heard that the Gentiles also had received the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticised him and said, "You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with them." Starting from the beginning, Peter told them the whole story: "I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. I saw something like a large sheet being let down from heaven by its four corners, and it came down to where I was. I looked into it and saw four-footed animals of the earth, wild beasts, reptiles and birds. Then I heard a voice telling me, 'Get up, Peter. Kill and eat.' I replied, 'Surely not, Lord! Nothing impure or unclean has ever entered my mouth.' The voice spoke from heaven a second time, 'Do not call anything impure that God has made clean.' This happened three times, and then it was all pulled up to heaven again.

"Right then three men who had been sent to me from Caesarea stopped at the house where I was staying. The Spirit told me to have no hesitation about going with them. These six brothers also went with me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen an angel appear in his house and say, 'Send to Joppa for Simon who is called Peter. He will bring you a message through which you and all your household will be saved.' As I began to speak, the Holy Spirit came on them as he had come on us at the beginning. Then I remembered what the Lord had said: 'John baptised with water, but you will be baptised with the Holy Spirit.' So if God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I to think that I could stand in God's way?" When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, "So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life."

Acts 11.1-18

In Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create

in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Ephesians 2.13–18

With virtually no baggage the pilgrim was largely dependent on charity, and hoped to find free lodging for the night. Often this was provided by the monasteries and religious houses along the route, many of which, like the Augustinian house at Roncevaux, were established expressly for that purpose. Otherwise they counted on the generosity and hospitality of the local people. Generally, this was freely given; caring for pilgrims was accepted as part of the duty of Christians, and brought a spiritual reward. But not everyone was well disposed towards the stranger, and as Père Arnaud warned, French pilgrims often experienced hostility from the Spanish.

Médard and Robert have now reached León, where they have stayed for a couple of nights. On the edge of the city, as they take their leave, a man shouts abuse at them, throwing stones, one of which hits Sister Thérèse. She is shaken, but unharmed. Robert is quick to react, and runs after the man, but he escapes.

FLUSHED with anger, and breathless from his chase, Robert rejoined the others. ‘Are you alright?’ he asked Sister Thérèse.

‘Yes I am, thank you. I was a bit shaken, but my cloak protected me. Poor man, to have all that evil in his heart.’

Robert just managed to stop himself from saying what he thought of the ‘poor man’, and indeed of the Spanish generally, but his face gave him away. Médard went over to him and gently led him aside; the two walked on together, in animated conversation. When they stopped for a break, Robert went over to the two nuns:

‘Forgive us,’ he said, ‘for walking alone. I was just so angry, and needed to calm down.’ Turning to Thèrese, he added, ‘Sister, I wish I

had your restraint. I was saying to Médard, your words reminded me of what Jesus said about turning the other cheek, and praying for those who hate us (*Matt 5.38*). I guess that's something else I have to learn. Médard said it must have come from your inner stillness.'

'Well, I hope so,' Sister Thérèse replied. 'Its just the way I feel. When you live in a monastery you have to learn to accept others without judging them. You never know what's going on in their lives. One of the things that the religious life has taught me is that charity is loving men for God just as we love ourselves.' [CU 92]

Robert turned to Aleyne, 'Is this part of losing our lives?' he asked.

'Yes, I think it is,' she replied. 'Getting right with others flows from getting right with ourselves. As we discover our still centre we will be less anxious about those who are different.'

Robert looked uneasy; so Aleyne continued, 'I know its easy to say, Robert, but no one pretends its easy to do. We all fall short. There's something in us that makes us wary of strangers – something to do with our need for security, I guess – but that wasn't Jesus' way, he went out to strangers and welcomed them, like Matthew, the tax collector whom the others despised. We have to follow his example, and treat strangers with hospitality, not hostility.'

Her words reminded Robert of that morning's reading. 'I suppose its like Peter and Cornelius,' he said. 'The others gave Peter a bad time for eating with gentiles, but he said God had shown him that kind of attitude wasn't right. They can't have found that easy.'

'I don't suppose they did. But they took it on board. None more than St Paul. He described Jesus as breaking down the barrier of enmity between Jew and gentile, making them into a single new humanity in himself.'

'I thought he was just talking about the Christian fellowship,' Médard interjected, 'does that apply outside of the Church as well?'

'I think it has to. For one, the Church is meant to be an example to the world of how we are to live together. The Church is like a family – we have to live with people whom we have been given, not those we have chosen. Its the same in the world. We've been given others to live with. We have a choice how we treat them: we can be fearful and defensive, or we can try to overcome our fears and live in peace.'

'So how exactly do we do this?' asked Robert.

'Its the same as reaching out to your still centre. It begins with desire. Ask yourself: Do I want to be bitter, with resentment and fear in my heart, or do I want love? If we see love as a better way to be, then the more we are at peace within ourselves, the less we'll feel threatened by those who are different, and the more we'll reach out to them.

'It goes back to nurturing our inner mystery. The more we know who we are, the more hospitable we can be. And we will probably find that the stranger has something good to offer us. When I was married to Count Gaston all kinds of people came to the château. He believed that in welcoming the stranger we welcomed God. "You never know," he said, "what treasure the stranger will bring.'"

'What did he mean by that?' asked Médard.

'Well, we learnt many things from the people who came to the château; they helped us to see the world in new ways. And it was a bit of shock to find that this was true of those who had lived in muslim lands. We think of them only as enemies, but when they shared their spiritual insights with us, we saw a different side.'

At the mention of muslims Robert stiffened. He thought of Etienne and Hughes who had fought in the Crusade – and probably Guy and Sir Raymond also. Médard, noticing Robert's reaction, was quick to speak first. 'But how can you reach out to those who attack you,' he protested, 'like that man this morning?'

'I know.' Aleyne replied. 'What he did was wrong, and he should be punished. But at the same time he is a child of God, in need of mercy like us all. Don't write him off. Don't just react; try to respond from your depths. Jesus said we should pray for our enemies. Try to respond, not react. Pray for him as you pray for yourself.'

'Dear God, that's a real challenge!' Robert said, almost to himself.

Aleyne had been there. She remembered struggling with her own feelings as she coped with some of Gaston's guests. 'It is a real challenge,' she said gently, 'but Jesus never said his way was easy.'

She felt she'd said enough; the whole of what Gaston had said about having the humility to learn from those who are different would have to wait for another day. He said we should cultivate a virtue that he called 'poverty of mind', a spiritual attitude that fosters a willingness to recognise the incomprehensibility of the mystery of life. He had little patience with the 'know-all's' who think that they have it all worked out. Gaston had prized openness, being free from prejudices, able to see that there is more to life than our experiences, our history, our perception of God. Many people see hospitality as a subtle invitation to adopt the lifestyle of the host; Gaston saw it as the gift of a chance for the guest to find his own. 'True hospitality,' he said, 'is not concerned to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer them freedom to be themselves, and to share their truth.' Hospitality required a kind of self-emptying, learning to be the way without being in the way. [Cf. *St Paul: Phil 2.6-8; HN 69*]

THAT evening Robert and Médard talked over what Aleyne had said. Père Arnaud's words about not becoming resentful came back to Robert. 'Its so easy to let anger and resentment take root,' he said.

'Yes,' agreed Médard. 'And I was just thinking about Jesus' words: "Straight is the gate and narrow the way that leads to life." (*Matt.*

7.14) I'd never thought of that in terms of reaching out to those who are different, those who threaten us. We ought to pray about this.'

So together they knelt, and Médard prayed:

*Father, the way of your Son
is a big challenge for me,
for Robert
for us all.
I'm not sure we can rise to it,
although we can see its the only way that makes for peace.
Be our strength, Lord;
help us to go through the straight gate
and follow the narrow way,
for we want to be instruments of your peace.*

Postscript

Henri Nouwen describes the second movement of the spiritual life as moving from hostility to hospitality. Hospitality is a rich concept, he says, that needs rescuing from today's, watered down, polite understanding. The Bible has many examples of the stranger being welcomed, the bearer of unexpected gifts, e.g. the three angels welcomed by Abraham (Gen 18); Elijah welcomed by the widow of Zarephath (1 Kg 17); and Jesus himself who was welcomed by Clopas and his companion on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24). Hospitality is not just about welcoming people into our homes; its a basic attitude towards all who are different.

I think, that if Nouwen had been writing today, he would have spoken about hospitality as including reaching out to the created world, in much the same way as Pope Francis teaches in his Encyclical Laudato 'si.

O Cebreiro

A PRAYERFUL SPIRIT

The Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us in sighs too deep for words. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for God's people in accordance with the will of God. 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.

Romans 8.26–28

From León Médard, Robert and the others made their way via Astorga and Ponferrada to the hill-top village of O Cebreiro, on the border of Galicia. Often shrouded in clouds, Médard felt it had an air of mystery – especially in the winter, he learned, when the church bells are rung to help the pilgrims find their way. Here the group rested at what was then the newly-built San Giraldo Inn that has been welcoming pilgrims since the eleventh century. From O Cebrero the path descends to Santiago. In the hills, surrounded by beautiful scenery, Médard felt his heart lift, his spirit soar, as it had done many times on the journey. Alone, he reflects on what he has learned from Dame Aleyne since they left Estella.

I CAN hardly believe it, but our journey to Santiago is almost over. It seems a long time ago when I began to realise that to walk is to pray, that a pilgrimage is not just a physical journey, but one made in the depths of the soul. But its only now that I am getting an idea of what that means, of the kind of journey that I should be making in my soul.

Both Robert and me found what Dame Aleyne had said about reaching out to others very challenging. 'Is that all part of what Jesus

meant about losing your life in order to gain it?’ we asked her. She said it was, but that it was also about how you looked at the world. We must have looked a bit puzzled, so she continued:

‘Well,’ she said, ‘we won’t get right with ourselves and with others if we don’t get right with God. In the end the goal of the spiritual life is to see ourselves, others, and the world as God sees them. I think of that man who was throwing stones as we left León... and some of the odd guests that Gaston welcomed to the château... its easy to write them off, to reject them because they don’t behave like us or think like us. And some of them should be corrected, punished even, or their views straightened out. But, as I said before, that doesn’t mean that God does not see them as his children. God doesn’t write them off as we might. Jesus died for them too.’

‘Alright,’ said Robert, ‘but I was brought up to think for myself, to be in control of my life. Are you saying that those are the wrong values?’

‘Not at all. God wants your practical spirit, Robert, but he also wants you to root it more deeply in his love. God wants us to grow into responsible adults, but what or whom do we take as our guide? How do we measure our maturity?’

‘Ah!’ I said, ‘didn’t St Paul say something about that – about growing into maturity measured by nothing less than the full stature of Christ?’ (*Ephesians 4.13*)

‘Yes, he did. And that has to be our goal. Look at it another way. We all have many gifts and abilities: How do we see them – as our own possessions, or as God’s gifts? If we measure ourselves by Jesus, we shall see them as gifts, given to us to share. Its our choice. I look around and I see how easy it is for relationships to become violent and destructive when we treat our own and other people’s lives as properties to be defended, or conquered, and not as gifts to be received.

Exercising the right kind of control is about coming to see ourselves, other people, and the world as God sees them.'

Aleyne's words took me back to something that Gérard had said about prayer. We pray, he said, in order to see things – ourselves, other people, the world – as God sees them. But, he said, that's not how most people see it. Most of us tend to see prayer as something we do when in need, rather than about aligning our wills with God's Will, and coming to see the world as he sees it. That was so true. It was certainly true of me. And you could see it all too clearly in the way we pilgrims went from church to church, from shrine to shrine, asking for mercy, asking for healing, asking the saints to pray for us and for others in need... We were always asking, asking, asking. So I asked Dame Aleyne if she saw prayer in the same way as Gérard.

'Yes, she said, 'that's it exactly. One of the great spiritual teachers described prayer is nothing else than a devout setting of our will in the direction of God in order to get good, and remove evil. [CU 106] Its the same with the things we don't understand. We don't pray to get answers, rather we pray to get a new way of looking at the questions. We pray to develop an inner sensitivity. "Go into your own heart," my teacher said, "and live with its questions."

'Gérard said you'd never get far with prayer if you thought of it as an intellectual process. He said it was more about love than thought.'

'He was right. God is beyond our thoughts, just like other people. We can't develop a relationship with them just by thinking about them. We have to move toward them, to relate to them. Again, its about wanting... about desire. St Augustine said that "the life of a good Christian consists of nothing else but holy desire." [CU 154] As it says in the Psalms, we place all our desire before God and ask him to lead us (*Psalms 38.9*). Desire is the key – desire and the doing. You just have to do it. The doing teaches you. We learn to pray as we pray.'

‘That sounds a bit paradoxical,’ said Robert, ‘doing it on order to learn how to do it.’

‘Not if you’ve had to bring up children!’ Aleyne replied. ‘You have to get used to paradox in the spiritual life, Robert. It is in the heart of our longing for the absent God that we discover his presence.’

Well, that was a bit deep for me, but I sort of knew what she meant. What Dame Aleyne had said helped me to see how the meditative reading of scripture was the foundation of prayer, as Gérard had taught me – a prayer where we sought to listen rather than to ask – and how letting the scriptures become part of us helped us to see things as God sees them.

Robert had been having thoughts of his own. ‘My life’s been about doing things,’ he said to Aleyne, ‘I’m a practical man. What you’re saying sounds very passive to me.’

‘I know what you mean, Robert, but I don’t think ‘passive’ is quite the right word. You have to be still – the prayer of listening comes from your still centre. And it’s quite hard work, not least in keeping focussed on God. It actually requires effort and serious discipline – that, I think, would appeal to you. But even so, prayer is not really about what we do; it’s about what we let God do in us. It is God’s Spirit who prays in us, as St Paul said. When we pray we give the Holy Spirit space.’

‘Think of it this way,’ Sister Thérèse offered, ‘When Jesus gave the Spirit to the apostles he breathed on them. The Spirit is the breath of God within us, and prayer is God breathing in us.’

Her image of prayer as God breathing in us stayed with me, and that night I prayed this prayer:

*Breathe on me, breath of God
fill me with life anew,
that I may love what thou dost love,
and do what thou wouldst do.*

Postscript

Henri Nouwen describes the third movement of the spiritual life as moving from illusion to prayer. The illusion of which he speaks is the notion that we are in control, that life revolves around us and our desires, whereas the truth is that we are part of a greater reality which we discover through prayer. 'It is only in the lasting effort to unmask the illusions of our existence that real spiritual life is possible,' he says. In prayer we reach out to God in whom all life is anchored. 'Solitude and hospitality can only bear lasting fruits when they are embedded in a broader, deeper and higher reality from which they receive their vitality.' [HN 105]

Nouwen advises that we need to search for our own way of prayer, remembering that all ways require discipline and protection. There are, he says, three essentials: a contemplative reading of the word of God; a silent listening to the voice of God; and trusting obedience to a spiritual guide. Scripture should be approached meditatively, not critically, asking which words are spoken to us personally. Silence needs cultivation; it opens in us the space where the Word can truly be heard. Our guide saves us from our own delusions.

Samos

THE WAY OF UNKNOWING

Paul stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: "People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: *TO AN UNKNOWN GOD*. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you. "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands. And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else. From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands. God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us. 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead." *Acts 17.22–31*

From O Cebreiro the pilgrim path descends from the mountains to Santiago, via the village of Samos. Here a large Benedictine monastery welcomes pilgrims as their journey nears its end. Founded in the sixth century, it was abandoned during the Muslim invasion, restored around 760, and adopted the Benedictine Rule in 960. When Médard and Robert visited the fortunes of the monastery were in the ascendant, with a noted school of theology and philosophy. On the final day of their visit the Abbot of Samos invited Abbot Norbert to give the homily at the Mass.

FATHER ABBOT, brothers and sisters in Christ –

Thank you for the honour that you do me and my companions as we take our leave of you with memories of your warm hospitality.

Today we heard the account of St Paul's visit to Athens. He was outraged to see the city so full of idols, and when he was brought before the Court of the Aeropagus to explain what he was about, boldly he proclaimed to them the truth about the living God, the source of all life, the world, and all creation. 'This God, whom you worship but do not know,' he declared, 'is none other than the universal giver of life and breath – indeed of everything.' It is in him that 'we live and move and have our being.'

My brothers and sisters, you do not need me to remind you that this conception of God was far removed from that common in Athens, and in most of the ancient world. They thought in terms of many gods, not one God, and these gods were all too human in their passions and deeds, whereas the God whom Paul proclaimed was utterly different from his human creation, and righteous in his thoughts and deeds. As it is written in Isaiah,

'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' says the LORD. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'

Isaiah 55.8–9

And yet, St Paul assures them, this unknown, ineffable God, can be known, for 'he is not far from each one of us.' How can we know that which is utterly beyond us? How can we relate to a reality that language cannot describe?

It is, of course, through prayer. The way of prayer that our Holy Father Benedict taught us is designed to immerse us in that greater reality that we call God. He called it 'sacred reading', and in the forty-eighth chapter of the Holy Rule, as you will know, he is careful to

prescribe the times each day that we monks shall devote to it. It is through this meditative reading of holy scripture that we come to know God and to understand his Will. St Benedict wanted the Word of God to become part of us, so that our hearts beat with his heart, and our lives share the rhythm of his life.

While this way of prayer is easy to describe, it is not so easy to do; as we all know it requires discipline and persistence. Recently I received a copy of a book by an English spiritual master, and I'd like to share his wisdom with you. He says that when we first begin it is like trying to find our way in the dark, which he describes as encountering a cloud of unknowing. And to know Him who is utterly beyond us, we have to go by a way of unknowing. It is not by thought that God can be grasped and held, but by love. As the spiritual master says: 'Of God himself no man can think. He may well be loved but not thought.' And again: 'God is incomprehensible to our intellect, but not to our love.' To know him we must 'smite upon that thick cloud of unknowing with a sharp dart of longing love.' [CU 63 & 68] It is the same as the way that we get to know each other. Each of us has his or her own mystery, unknowable to another, but not unapproachable. Love enables us to approach another, to come close to their mystery, to join our hearts with their heart and to enter into the rhythm of their life. In the same way sacred reading brings us close to God. This is our way of longing love.

This way of love also helps us to cope when life does not make sense to us. Life is disturbing, unjust; we wonder what its all about; we protest at its absurdities. The temptation is to turn away from God, or to remake him in a way more suitable to us, like the Cathars, through whose lands we have passed on our journey. But this is not the way of love. The way of love is to reach out to God – to reach out to the author of order and stability, to the One who is beyond the injustice and absurdities of the world, to the ultimate reality beyond our understanding, the One in whom we live and move and have our

being. Reaching out to God is to convert our protest into prayer – a prayer that lifts us beyond the boundaries of our existence to God who holds our life in his hands and heart with boundless love and mercy. [HN 121]

This is the God whom we meet in Jesus, and who watched over James and all the saints, and who watches over us. I pray, brethren, that he will watch over you, and I ask for your prayers that he will be with us as we complete our journey.

To God be the glory, now and for ever. Amen

Monte do Gozo

ARRIVAL

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then you will live in the land I gave to your ancestors; you will be my people, and I will be your God.

Ezekiel 36.25–28

Arriving at Compostela the arduous journey fell away and a spirit of joy and revelry reigned. The longed-for goal was first seen from Monte do Gozo with

its panoramic view. In 1455 one of Leo von Rozmítal's pilgrim company described his first sight of the city:

The town is situated among high mountains and is fairly large. It is surrounded with a single wall. In the ramparts on one side grow great quantities of yellow violets, which can be seen from a distance. On the other side ivy grows on the wall so that it covers it like a forest. A narrow moat surrounds the town. The walls on every side are surmounted by square towers of antique structure close to each other.

There were established arrival rituals that included washing the body completely in a stream outside the city in a wooded area called Lavacolla, where the airport is now situated. The C12th Pilgrim's Guide calls the place 'Lavamentula' which translates as 'washing the private parts' ('mentula' is the Latin for phallus). It says that the French began the custom 'of removing the dirt from their entire bodies, having taken off their clothes.' As Kathleen Ashley says, 'ritual cleansing was necessary before entering a sacred place, the shrine of the saint.' After washing, the pilgrims climbed the hill called Monte do Gozo from where they beheld their destination. Domenico Laffi, a pilgrim from Naples, was overwhelmed at the sight:

'When we saw the city we had so longed to reach, we fell to our knees and, with tears of great joy falling from our eyes, we began to sing the Te Deum. But we had sung no more than two or three verses when we found ourselves unable to utter the words because of the copious tears which streamed from our eyes, so intense were our feelings.' [KA 225-6] Médard and his companions followed these customs, and will have felt the same intensity of emotion. He continues the story.

WE CLIMBED the hill called Monte do Gozo and the city that we had so longed to reach lay before us. We turned and hugged each other and threw out hats in the air! Even Dame Aleyne and Sister Thérèse threw convention aside and embraced us warmly. Our eyes streamed with tears of joy as we looked towards the towers of the cathedral, the resting place of St James. Here at long last was the goal of our journey.

My brother Norbert began to sing the *Te Deum*, and we all joined in, often choking on the words:

We praise thee, O God, we acknowledge thee to be the Lord.
All the earth doth worship thee, the Father everlasting....
We pray thee, help thy servants...
make them to be numbered with thy saints in glory everlasting.

We had taken care to wash ourselves completely at the place called Lavacola. It was more than a bodily cleansing. As I washed away the dirt of the journey, I prayed the words of Psalm 51:

Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness.
In your compassion blot out my offence.
O wash me more and more from my guilt
and cleanse me from my sin.

As God had received his servant James, so I prayed that he would receive me.

We made our way towards the cathedral and came across an Italian pilgrim from Naples, Nicola Albani. His journey of two thousand and seventy-eight miles had taken him five months and fourteen days. His whole body was trembling with emotion, his spirit uplifted, he felt that he had entered heaven. As we drew closer he fell down upon his knees and gave thanks to God for all the favours that he had received from St James as he travelled. Rising to his feet, he told me that he had felt the saint's protection on his long journey. [KA 228] Indeed, we all felt the same, and as Nicola made his way up the steps and into the cathedral, Norbert led us in a heartfelt prayer of thanksgiving.

Entering the cathedral, it felt as though we were being welcomed by Saint James himself. Seated at the entrance, his head crowned with a halo, holding his crozier in his left hand and a scroll in his right with the words *Misit me Dominus*. I knew enough Latin to translate it for Robert and one or two of the others who were nearby: 'The Lord sent

me.' We looked up. Above the saint was Jesus who had sent him; Jesus enthroned in majesty, and on whose behalf Saint James had welcomed us to this house of God. On either side of Jesus were saints and prophets, and above them in a beautiful arc the twenty-four elders of the Apocalypse, each holding his musical instrument with which he sang God's praises. It was the most sublime vision, and as we stood there in wonder, I felt as though I was on the very threshold of heaven.

From there we made our way, singing and praising God, to the altar where we ascended the steps and hugged the statue of St James – some of us put our hats on his head, and our cloaks over his shoulders. There were those who disdained to do this, but not Oderic, so passionate in his embrace, so determined was he to gain the plenary indulgence promised to all who kiss the statue in faith. He was a changed man.

Then to the most solemn moment of all, our ultimate goal, to pray at the tomb of Saint James and venerate his relics. Norbert had prepared us for this, and each of us in turn, beginning with Norbert and Dame Aleyne, approached the sepulchre, bowed and kissed the stone. We knelt in silence and prayed. It was a moment of communion. I remembered Amélie and my children, all who had been praying for me on my journey, my companions around me. I remembered Gérard: may he rest in peace, and rise in glory! All of us, men and women, religious and lay, felt renewed. Making way for those waiting their turn, we went to make our offering.

THAT DAY is one that I will never forget. It confirmed in me my growing sense that I was being called to help others find God. My prayer had been answered as Gérard had said it would be. I knew, of course, that for this ministry you had to be the right kind of person, but I felt what I had learned from Dame Aleyne as we had walked

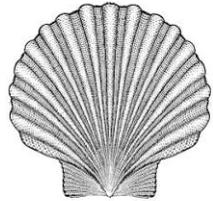
from Estella had made plain to me what that really meant. It was about guarding the treasure that God had placed in my heart, and speaking and acting from my depths. Trust in God, Gérard had said, and as I sat in the cathedral, I prayed a prayer that he'd taught me –

*O God, Father,
moment by moment you hold me in being,
on you I depend.
O God, Eternal Son,
friend and brother beside me,
in you I trust.
O God, Holy Spirit,
life and love within me,
from you I live.*

Postscript

Medieval shrines were surrounded by purveyors of food and hawkers of souvenirs, just like today, mixing trade with devotion. The traditional emblem of the pilgrimage is the scallop shell, and among the vendors that Médard would have encountered were those selling both actual shells and metal replicas. They were believed to have special power.

There is a story of a noble Italian, who lived in Apulia, who had a large goitre on his neck that disappeared when touched by a shell brought back by a pilgrim from Santiago. One medieval bishop of Santiago, realising the importance of the scallop shell, and the money to be made from its sale, banned all trade in shells and metal copies apart from those sold in the cathedral. In 1116–17 the then Bishop of Santiago was almost killed in an uprising by the local people aimed at breaking the monopoly of the cathedral clergy over the sale of souvenirs



Pilgrimage was an important source of revenue, and taxes were often imposed to finance the building of a new church and to offer hospitality to pilgrims in order to increase the trade. These taxes were widely resented, often leading to social unrest and violence. 'The most famous example was at Vézelay, where in 1106 the abbot was assassinated as townspeople rioted over taxes levied to support construction and pilgrim hospitality. The conflict between the bourgeoisie and the abbot continued throughout the century.' [KA 131]

Santiago de Compostela

A SON OF THUNDER

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Never, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!" Jesus turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns." Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done. "Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

Matthew 16.21–28

The special liturgies for the feast of St James would have been the focal point of the pilgrims' experience of Compostela, some of which, like Matins, might have taken as long as three hours to sing. For Abbot Norbert, Dame Aleyne and Sister Thérèse this would not have been an unusual experience, but it was something new for most of the others, especially Robert.

AS WE travelled I had got used to the daily pattern of worship, and it now felt part of my life, but even so, it hadn't prepared me for what I experienced at Santiago. Just as we felt on the threshold of heaven as we entered the cathedral, so I felt caught up in the worship of heaven in the services that followed. It was as though the sculpture over the portal of the twenty-four elders playing their instruments and singing God's praises had come alive. The liturgy was in Latin, of course, and so we could all follow it, but the bishop's sermon at the mass for Saint James had been in Spanish. Dame Aleyne, who spoke some Spanish, told us what he had said.

She explained that he took as his text the very words of Jesus that had puzzled me – about taking up your cross and following him, and losing your life in order to gain it. He had begun with the nick-name that Jesus had for James and his brother John – Boanerges! Sons of Thunder!' It sounded to me as though Jesus thought they were a couple of hot-heads, and I said so.

'Well, I think they were at first,' Aleyne replied. They wanted to call down fire on those who wouldn't welcome Jesus! And he had to put them right. (*Luke 9.54*) But Jesus could see beyond the thunder to the courage in their hearts. The two of them and Peter became his three closest companions. They went with Jesus on those occasions when the rest had to stay away. They were with him when he brought Jairus' daughter back to life, and on the mount when he was transfigured, and they were by him in Gethsemane when he threw himself against the rock and prayed.'

‘But I don’t think they can have really understood what it meant to be a *special* companion of the Lord,’ said Médard. ‘Wasn’t there an occasion when they asked for the places of honour in the Kingdom – one on the right and the other on the left?’

‘There was, and the bishop reminded us of how the Lord put them in their place. “If you want to be first you must be the willing slave of all!” And that, he said, is what James became. He brought the gospel to Spain, and he was the first apostle to die for the Lord. At first impetuous, later he had shown true courage in standing up to King Herod for the faith. The Church, said the bishop, was built on the faith and courage of men like James.’

Aleyne paused, as she cast her mind back to what the bishop had said next. Médard spoke again. ‘When they asked about sitting on his right and his left, didn’t Jesus say something about sharing his cup?’

‘That’s right. The bishop said James took that to heart. Jesus said his apostles would drink the cup which he drank. He also said that he came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many. At first they didn’t understand what he meant. It seemed such a strange thing to say – like many of the things he said. But then they didn’t know what he was going to have to go through. After Jesus had died and had risen, James and the others remembered those strange words and realised that he’d been talking about what it would really mean to be one of his special companions. There would be no easy glory. The way was one of self-sacrifice.

‘James had been one of the first to grasp that. He had been with the Lord on the mountain and in the garden. He had seen him transfigured and in torment before he died. At first he’d been afraid, awestruck like one who sees God face to face. James saw the glory and the agony of God as no other had done. Later he saw the connection and knew the truth deep in his heart: without the agony

there was no true glory. James had witnessed to that truth in his own life. He drank the cup which the lord had drunk.'

I'D BEEN listening carefully. I didn't know my bible as well as Médard, so I was content for him to ask the questions. James had clearly been a remarkable man; on the outside a fisherman, but inwardly with the makings of a saint. Jesus could see this, and so he called him. Maybe he saw something special in Jacopo too. I hoped that at the end of this pilgrimage, he could see something special in me also.

*Praise be to you, O God, for your servant James.
Let me, like him, be your witness before men.*

Postscript

Kathleen Ashley says the worship at Santiago sealed the experience of the pilgrims, and celebrated 'communitas', which she describes as the transcendence of cultural and linguistic diversity within a unity of devotion to the saint. [KA 237] The pilgrims would keep vigil on the eve of the festival, before the altar or outside the church, singing hymns with their countrymen and playing instruments. A medieval book, the Codex Calixtinus, describes the scene: 'Some sing with lutes, some with lyres, some with drums, some with pipes, some with trumpets, some with harps, some with violas, some with British or Gallic wheels, some with psalteries. Some keep vigil by singing; some lament their sins; some read psalms; and some give alms to the blind.' [KA 237] The picture above shows the Elders of the Apocalypse and their musical instruments on the archivolt at St Martin's church, Noia, the same scene that described by Robert at Santiago. The instruments shown are often those contemporary with the building, rather than biblical.

Finisterra

THE TWO JOURNEYS

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

At the end of their time in Santiago Médard and Robert and the others had to decide on the arrangements for their return journey, including whether they would continue to Finisterra before doing so. Médard, who had never seen the sea, wanted to go to Finisterra; Robert and a couple of the others decided to go with him. The rest, including Abbot Norbert and Dame Aleyne, began their journey back to France. Robert had been wondering, as he crossed Spain, if he would meet Vicomte Edouard and the others as they returned, but he had not. He knew that they intended to stay again at the hostelry at Puente la Reina on their way back, and he had left a letter for the Vicomte there.

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, but that is not what Médard or Robert did. However, for both of them their pilgrimage had marked a

turning point in their lives, and both had found something new: Médard a sense of vocation to Christian service; Robert the beginnings of a deeper devotion to Jesus.

We leave them at this point, with the ocean stretching before them, a symbol of the new journey and opportunities that lay ahead. The rest of their story remains unwritten, but we may assume that Médard 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 monastery in La Chaise Dieu where his brother Norbert was the abbot. At some point he would have parted company with Robert, and given the nature of medieval life, I don't think they will have met again. At Puente la Reina I hope Robert would have found a letter left for him by Vicomte Edouard letting him know how he could obtain a horse for the remainder of the journey. Perhaps he had the good fortune of joining another group of returning pilgrims making their way back to Arles. Back at Beaucaire, I imagine he found new depth in his friendship with Jean-Philippe.

MÉDARD and Robert made two journeys, the outward physical journey and the inward spiritual journey in which they sought forgiveness and salvation. We now live in the future time that Médard foresaw, when the causes of illness are better understood and when our understanding of God, we hope, is truer to the Biblical revelation. But with all our scientific advances, we seem to have forgotten the need for the double journey; the focus of modern life is on the physical journey and not about feeding our spirits. Nor are we content to live with the questions, as Dame Aleyne taught; we want answers. But in the spiritual life there is not an 'answer', but a continuing journey. One of her contemporary successors, a sister of the Benedictine Abbey of West Malling in Kent, spoke of 'the endless

goal' of the spiritual life, which, she said, was one with 'the endless way' of spiritual exploration.

Part of the endless goal is the search for forgiveness and salvation, although today 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 and the way are the same, and the story of Médard's journey reminds us that we do not travel that way alone. He saw himself as living in a world populated with saints, and where the miraculous is a normal part of life. Catholic spirituality has kept hold of that better than Reformed spirituality, and the more I follow these ancient pilgrim 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. (*Ephesians 3.16-17*)