



THE ARCHBISHOP
OF YORK

The Ven. Dr Rachel Mann, Archdeacon of Salford and Bolton shared a Thought for the Day on BBC Radio 4's Today programme. She speaks of the transforming effect of pilgrimage.

Good morning. One of my local institutions, the Salford Lads' Club, is currently celebrating its one hundred and twentieth anniversary. Originally established for the sons of Salford dock workers, it is now open to all and a couple of hundred boys and girls use it every week to find a lifeline into music and sport.

What's truly extraordinary, however, is how the Club has become a site of pilgrimage for fans of the band The Smiths. Since featuring in a photo on the cover of their classic 1986 album, *The Queen is Dead*, thousands have travelled to Salford from across the world to re-create their own versions of that photo. You can still drive past the club and see them taking selfies.

Is it reasonable to call this behaviour 'pilgrimage'? For the American writer Rebecca Solnit, the sacred is not entirely immaterial. She says, 'there is a geography of spiritual power', suggesting that things which hold spiritual value have physical links. Particular places draw us. The Salford Lads Club is a secular building, but for those with an almost religious devotion to the Smiths, it offers a way to feel closer to their object of praise.

My own experience of pilgrimage, to the island of Iona a few years ago, suggests that the practice can offer even more. Yes, I was motivated by a desire to follow in the footsteps of the great missionary St Columba. But at the same time, at the heart of my pilgrimage was a commitment to live differently. I finished at the beach where Columba and his monks arrived in 563AD to establish the abbey. At that beach, there is a tradition which requires you to select two stones. One - which represents something you wish to abandon - you throw into the sea. The other you hold onto as a reminder of a new commitment - in my case, to be a more forgiving person.

Pilgrimage, then, is as much about inner transformation as the destination. I can see how visiting Salford Lads' Club or any number of places can be powerful. However, as Psalm 84 says,

'Happy are those whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.

As they travel, springs of water flow.'

The journey itself can bring transformation. Rebecca Solnit also says, 'Pilgrimage makes it possible to move physically, step by step, toward those intangible spiritual goals that are otherwise so hard to grasp.'

Whether I'm throwing stones into the sea or visiting a place that matters to me, it is the new commitments I've taken up that I value as much as what I leave behind.



Diocese of Manchester in 2022

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