

After an outbreak of the coronavirus dashed her plans to pursue a new-found interest in St Brigid, the editor of the Tablet's Living Spirit answers the question 'How do I go on a pilgrimage without going on a pilgrimage?' by immersing herself in the footsteps of the early Irish saint / **By LAURA KEYNES**

To be a virtual pilgrim

DURING lockdown, I made a habit of rising an hour before the household because otherwise – with three small children to care for in a two-bedroom flat in London – there was no way of getting time or space for myself. It was an hour for prayer and spiritual reading. One book mentioned “a prayer for the hearth-keepers”, which evoked St Brigid of Kildare. The prayer struck a chord – I felt very much the hearth-keeper, rising early to tend a spiritual fire before children appeared – and it sparked an interest in St Brigid.

Knowing that we were to be in Ireland over the summer, I enquired about taking a hermitage at Solas Bhride, a Christian spirituality centre run by Brigidine sisters within walking distance of St Brigid's holy well. One was available, for 48 hours, in late August, after I would have completed my two weeks in quarantine.

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Solas Bhride is usually a busy hub for spiritual seekers, but without physically going to Kildare Covid-19 had meant the cancellation of its retreats, pilgrimages and conference facilities.

At the time of my planned visit, Kildare had seen a spike in cases and remained under local lockdown, but it was widely expected the restrictions would be lifted before I planned to make the journey. Then news came of an outbreak at a meat factory in the town. My plans for a pilgrimage had to be shelved.

Already 2020 had left me grappling with questions like “How do I ‘do church’ without a church?” Now the question was “How do I go on pilgrimage without going on pilgrimage?” It's a

position most of us have found ourselves in this year, unable to travel, changing plans at the last minute and having to be present “virtually” rather than physically.

It's intensely frustrating, but perhaps best viewed as a gift of sorts: an invitation to think more creatively about our relationship with God and others, and to find different ways of getting to the heart of what really matters.

Still, I couldn't help but think about what I'd lost. There is, as Sr Phil O'Shea at Solas Bhride puts it, “an element of being physically challenged” when we go on pilgrimage to holy sites: “We are exposed to the elements and the terrain. We are invited to open our eyes, our ears and our hearts, and who knows what may be seen or heard and what it might come to mean. By walking in the footsteps of St Brigid, the pilgrim comes to know her story and her values and how

she can be an inspiration for us today.”

I had wanted to get to know St Brigid in the place where she lived; to sit and listen to the water running through her holy well; to whisper a prayer at the site of the monastery she founded. How, then, could I come to know this most elusive of saints, and to carry a little bit of her spirit back with me into my everyday life without physically going to Kildare?

There is very little historical data about St Brigid, but much folklore, expressed in customs, traditions and prayers (like the one I'd found, for hearth-keepers). She seems to merge with a pagan goddess Brigit, then come into sharper focus through stories and images of her holiness and faith.

One thing scholars agree on is that the historical Brigid of Kildare was born into an era of transition, in which Christianity evangelised a pagan Celtic culture by assimilating its older traditions.

For the Brigidine sisters at Solas Bhríde, Brigid can best be characterised as a woman close to nature; a woman of faith, peace, justice and hospitality. To know her better, they suggest maintaining a spirit of openness, fostered through

pilgrimage.

“Pilgrimage ultimately is a journey of the soul,” says Sr Phil, “a path of self-discovery, a search for deeper understanding of life itself and of the God who calls us.

There are many different ways we can do this. Going for a walk in nature either to a woodland, park or seashore. Visiting a sacred shrine or holy well in your own area. Collecting some rushes and weaving a St Brigid's cross.

A person can create a simple 'pilgrim experience' by setting up a sacred space either indoors or outdoors. Light a candle or perhaps play a favourite piece of music or hymn. They might like to take a symbol to represent each of the values espoused by St Brigid and take some time to quietly reflect on them and how they might live them out in their own life.”

I took the sisters' advice and one evening, after putting the children to bed, went out for an evening walk to St Declan's holy well in Ardmore, Co. Waterford, a much handier distance from my door than Kildare. Venturing out beyond the well into a wild area of headland known as Dysert (think desert, after the desert fathers), I caught the last light of the setting sun as it went down on the Celtic sea, and felt a sense of peace and calm

I'd been struggling to find since Covid19 crashed into all of our lives. It was the most extraordinary light, somehow engaging all my senses far more than the dramatic sea cliffs and wild expanse of sea and sky.

BACK IN London, enmeshed in daily routines, emphatically not close to nature (unless you count the few pot plants I could cram into our flat), unable to offer hospitality to anyone outside my “family bubble” and failing to bring peace to my children's squabbles – really not “doing Brigid” very well – I kept thinking about my mini-pilgrimage in Ardmore. It struck me that all I could really remember of it was that extraordinary evening light.

At her holy well, a modern-day sculpture depicts Brigid carrying a flame, the light of faith. She lived in dark times but she carried the Christ light to those she encountered. Tradition holds that St Brigid kept a fire lit at her monastery, to represent the new light that had reached Ireland's shores.

In 1993, that flame was symbolically relit in Kildare and has been tended by the Brigidine sisters ever since.

I had thought that I could only understand Brigid by going to Kildare and seeing those things – statue, holy well, flame – for myself. Forced to put aside my own will, and follow another way, I discovered that the “elements and terrain” Sr Phil had spoken about were, given the right openness of attitude, there for the finding closer to home. I had encountered that extraordinary light; I had gleaned a more Brigidine awareness of God’s divine presence in the natural world.

It gave me hope that despite my more narrowed and gloomy environs, despite all the current restrictions on our daily living, St Brigid’s beacon is still there for those who look, showing the path ahead. It’s a path that cleaves to the landscape of what really matters: family, friends, community, prayer, living simply, and being in touch with nature.

Covid-19 may mean travel is off the menu for a while, but that doesn’t mean to say pilgrimages are too. Even short walk in a local park, keeping our smartphone switched off, simply feeling the ground beneath our feet, taking in the sky above us, feeling the light on our face, just looking at the world around us, can be an experience of pilgrimage. With

Covid restrictions looking set to continue well into 2021, this is not just a snatched consolation in dark times, but a spiritual habit to embrace and make our own.



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