



**A sermon for Festal Evensong at Wells Cathedral,
preached on Sunday 14 September 2025 by the Very
Reverend Toby Wright, Dean of Wells.**

Pilgrimage: the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death

*May my words be faithful to the written word and may the written word lead us to
the Living Word, Jesus the merciful One. Amen.*

Choristers, some of you might recall Book 7 of the Harry Potter series, *The Deathly Hallows*, when Harry, Ron and Hermione leave the safety of home and school and wander across the country suffering hunger and cold as they seek to destroy the Horcruxes. And it is their journey which transforms them into who they need to be.

‘Harry could not help wondering whether [Ron and Hermione] had only agreed to come on what now felt like a pointless and rambling journey because they thought he had some secret plan that they would learn in due course.’

P240. Other pilgrims, I wonder if any of you thought this of Annie this weekend?!

Today, we keep the feast of the Holy Cross, as we recall the consecration of the Constantinian Basilica over the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem on 13 September 335, and the following day (today’s anniversary) the people were shown the cross for veneration. This discovery of the Cross had been made in 326 by S Helena, who was on pilgrimage at the time.

Now, pilgrimage is a really important thing. Like Harry, Ron and Hermione’s journey, pilgrimage – or undertaking challenging spiritual journeys – is really significant in the Christian life. And the Cross lies at the heart of all pilgrimage.

Today, Annie and her supporters have completed their pilgrimage from Bath. So of course I can’t ignore Geoffrey Chaucer’s character from *The Canterbury Tales*, the Wife of Bath. She’s a little risqué – a socialite who is often outspoken and sadly rather manipulative – even hedonistic - yet with a deep love of pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Rome and Santiago de Compostela, and a great propensity to verbally attack the clergy around her!

But rather than stick with the motley bunch of Chaucer's tales, I want to take you to the contemporary writings of Guy Stagg, a non-believer who in 2013 after suffering from years of mental illness, decided to make a pilgrimage by walking across ancient paths over 10 countries, travelling over 5,500 kilometres by walking from Canterbury to Jerusalem.

In *The Crossway*, Stagg notes how from the end of the first millennium, the last pagan powers in central Europe converted to Christianity, in Hungary and how from that point in 1018, King Stephen I opened the borders to Christian pilgrims, and so an overland route to Jerusalem became possible.

During his walk, Stagg reads *The Way of a Pilgrim* and finds himself lost in the spiritual instruction, whilst simultaneously gripped by the narrator and whilst lying in bed he was drawn to this passage about pilgrimage:

'Everything drew me to love and thank God; people, trees, plants, animals. I saw them all as my kinsfolk, I found on all of them the magic of the name of Jesus. Sometimes I felt as light as though I had no body and was floating happily through the air instead of walking...' (p221 of *The Crossway*).

For those who are convinced of the truths of Christianity, as our second reading put it, the message of the cross is the power of God and the wisdom of God. In pilgrimage, we see the themes of suffering turning to triumph – the pain of sore feet and hands are transmogrified into the joy of accomplishment. Just as we see in our first lesson from Isaiah 63 a foreshadowing that in the cross the symbol of pain and suffering can become the ultimate act of divine compassion which we celebrate on this Rood Day.

Here in Wells we see this visually every time we enter the building. My hero predecessor, Armitage Robinson, placed the Rood Screen up by the Scissor Arches to remind us of this truth. In the soaring architecture of this building, the great vertical lines and arches pull our eyes upward to see Christ's act of love and triumph revealed afresh.

So pilgrims, having journeyed from Bath to Wells. I hope your pains will be transmogrified. I hope you will have seen people, trees, plants and animals as your kinsfolk and that the magic of the name of Jesus will have inspired you in new ways. You join with countless pilgrims through the ages who have travelled to this space to affirm that the cross of Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. And I pray that your journey will have transformed you into who you need to be. And that for each of us in our life which is all a pilgrimage, we may grow in grace, and come to know this power for ourselves.

In *The Deathly Hallows* Harry Potter makes a pilgrimage to his parent's grave and there he sees the inscription 'the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death'.

Today's feast reminds us of this truth and that the power of the cross is that in Christ:

the last enemy that shall be destroyed is death

Toby Wright, Dean of Wells

14 September 2025