

## Homily: Solemnity of St Clare, patroness of our parish

When we made our parish trip to Assisi last year, one of the highlights for me was an afternoon walk from the city to the valley below. What made it special – aside from the excellent company and the beautiful Umbrian scenery – was that it was a journey St Clare herself had made 800 years earlier. Clare's walk took place on the night of Palm Sunday 1212. She left her family home, where she had grown up with all the benefits of belonging to an aristocratic family, and journeyed, in secret, to the little church of St Mary of the Angels, the Portiuncula, on the plain below Assisi. There St Francis and his companions were waiting for her; inside the tiny church she exchanged her fine robes for the rough habit of religious life, and made her vows to live a life of poverty. On that night, Clare's life changed for ever. That short walk, just a couple of miles or so, was really an image of the journey she made throughout her whole life.

Clare wasn't much of a traveller. She spent her whole life in Assisi, at her family home until she was 18, then for the next 41 years living at her convent at San Damiano just outside the city walls. In the chapel there hung the original San Damiano cross, a copy of which we have here in our church. Clare must have prayed in front of it every day. For those four decades she almost never left the confines of the monastery. It was a very different life from that of Francis and his brothers, who would travel to preach the Gospel. Different, too, to the life she had left behind. Her family were free to travel; her mother Ortunala, in fact, had made some very long journeys, going on pilgrimage to the Holy Land, to the shrine of St James at Santiago de Compostela, and to Rome.

Mediaeval pilgrimages were dangerous undertakings. Before leaving, pilgrims would receive a blessing from the local priest or bishop. They would then put aside their worldly clothes and put on a pilgrim's tunic, so that they could be easily identified and so that there was no division: rich or poor, you all wore the same outfit. They would put up with great hardships on the journey, which itself was a form of penance. And leaving behind the safety of their homes and towns, they had to put great trust in God, relying completely on His protection and His Providence. No doubt as they journeyed, they would have got to know each other well and formed new friendships. Pilgrimages are not made alone.

Clare never made a pilgrimage quite like these. And yet somehow such pilgrimages are a perfect image of her whole life. Clare did not perhaps have a pilgrim's feet, but she undoubtedly had a pilgrim's heart. The night she left her family home, she left behind the safety and security of a wealthy family to live a life in which she would put all her trust in God, relying completely on His Providence and trusting in His protection. She put aside her beautiful clothes to put on the habit which she and her sisters would wear. Like the pilgrim's tunic, they would be identifiable from their clothes, and all divisions of status and wealth would be put aside. They lived lives of penance, putting up with hardship and offering it to the Lord. And although they didn't make a physical journey, inside they were making the most important journey of all – the pilgrimage to perfect union with God. The shrine at the end of their pilgrimage would be heaven itself. And they did not make their

pilgrimage alone: as sisters they travelled, supporting and encouraging one another, living in bonds of love, in friendship with one another and with Francis and his brothers.

Over the last few months I've heard many people say that during the strict lockdown they found it easier to pray. They were perhaps less busy, had fewer distractions, more reason to focus their hearts and minds on God. Clare would have understood this very well, I think. Her whole life was a sort of lockdown, precisely for this reason! She stands as a powerful sign to us all: life is about more than activity. We can so easily get drawn into the busyness of life, hurriedly moving from one place to another, but travelling nowhere. Clare teaches us something crucial for our happiness: the importance of being still, of contemplation, of prayer; the need to rest our weary feet, to allow ourselves to have a pilgrim's heart. A great woman of mediaeval times, she is also a great teacher for us today. St Clare, pray for us.

Fr Andrew

