In the footsteps of pilgrims
a reflective walk around a church or cathedral

Lisa Tulfer
Introduction

Every cathedral you visit, and many churches too, will have a guide book or leaflet to enable you to appreciate the glories of the building, and its unique historical features. This guide is different. It is designed to enable you to get more out of your visits to cathedrals and churches. It guides your walk around the building, pausing at the main features which are common to most churches, and gives you a little background to what you are looking at. It then invites you to pause, reflect, pray – whatever is right for you – before moving on to the next point on the tour.

Each point on the walk is called a ‘station’ – the traditional name for a pause on a pilgrimage route. The ‘core’ of the guide has stations which you will find in most churches and cathedrals, while the ‘extra’ stations refer to features which you may find in some buildings, and which you can fit in between Station 6 and the last Station.

Many of our older churches and cathedrals have been either places of pilgrimage (e.g. Canterbury) or staging posts on the routes of pilgrimages (e.g. Ely, on the route to Walsingham). This guide seeks to evoke something of that spirit of pilgrimage, whilst also informing about the buildings, and providing the opportunity to explore these fascinating buildings which are the testimony in brick and stone of the Christians who have trodden this way before us.
Using this Guide

This guide is designed so that you can take a reflective walk around almost any church or cathedral that you visit. All you need to do is to match up the stations in the guide to the locations of the relevant parts of the church. You may find the easiest way to do this is to look first at a guidebook or plan of the building, locating the stations from this guide on the plan of the building. Then, simply follow the route around the stations, using your senses to explore each part of the building, and this guide and any guidebook to find out more as you go.

The reflective walk can be as lengthy or quick as you wish – but you should normally allow a minimum 30 minutes for a church and 45 minutes for a cathedral (simply because it is likely to be larger, and have more of the extra stations). Obviously, the longer you take, the more you are likely to gain from the experience.

Core stations

Station 1  Doorway – entrance
Station 2  Font
Station 3  Nave
Station 4  Pulpit
Station 5  Chancel/Choir/Quire/Sanctuary
Station 6  Altar
Last Station  Doorway – exit

Extra stations

Station 7  Windows
Station 8  Clock
Station 9  Lady Chapel
Station 10  Chapter House
Station 11  Cloister
Station 12  Chapel for private prayer/Reserved Sacrament
Core Stations

Station 1 – Doorway – entrance

Church doorways can be at the west, south or (less often) north side. North and south doorways often have porches. West doors are often very large and grand, and associated with processions. In churches which were originally part of a monastic foundation, the west door was the entrance from the outside world, the rest of the church being within the monastic enclosure.

The majority of parish churches have doorways on the south side of the nave, or main part, of the church. A number of superstitions are associated with doors on the north side, including one tradition where the north door was left ajar during baptisms to allow the devil to escape.

Church porches were, in medieval times, sometimes used as the venue for weddings (formal weddings in church being a fairly modern custom), and for the transaction of legal business – the association with the church building was thought to impart a particular solemnity to the transactions.

Sometimes there is evidence of a small room above the porch, which was where the verger lived.

Things to think about

- Is the doorway at the west end, the north side (on the left facing the altar) or the south side?
- Is there a porch? If so, was there a room above it?
- If it is a west door, are there any interesting carvings or statues to make it grander?
- How welcome do you feel?
Prayer
‘The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in, from this time on and for evermore’ (Ps 121.8). Be with me now, Lord, as I come to this place, in the footsteps of those who have walked in your way before me, and may this visit be a blessing to me. Amen.

Station 2 – Font

The font is where baptism takes place – the ceremony by which a person becomes part of the Christian Church. Fonts are usually located near to the door, symbolising the idea that the sacrament of baptism is the entry point into the community of the faithful. Occasionally, the font is located in a small annex called a baptistry.

The font is sometimes one of the oldest parts of a church (e.g. a Saxon font in a later, medieval building, or a medieval font in a Victorian re-building). Some are very plain, but many are richly carved, and some also have ornate wooden covers. It is quite common for fonts to be octagonal in shape – the 8 sides symbolise new life (7, the number of completeness, plus 1).

To think about
• Think about the images of water in the bible. How does this font connect us to the living water that Jesus spoke about?
• In baptism, we are all called to a vocation of discipleship. What might this mean in practice?

Prayer
Jesus said ‘The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life’ (John 4:14). We give thanks for the promise of new life which has been given to us in baptism. Send your Holy Spirit on us now, to equip us to live out our vocation as Christians, living as your disciples and building your kingdom. Amen.
Station 3 – Nave

This is the main western part of the church building – usually the largest part, and the most open. The word ‘nave’ comes from the Latin word for ‘ship’, a connection which may refer to a beamed roof resembling the hull of an upturned ship. In a traditionally designed building, this is the area intended for lay people. Originally, there would have been no chairs or benches. People worshipped standing up, or occasionally kneeling, and the floors would have been covered with straw or rushes. Benches for the old or infirm would have run along the walls, which is probably the origin of the phrase ‘the weakest go to the wall’. The notion of having seating for congregations dates to after the Reformation, when the emphasis within the service shifted to the sermon; where people were required to listen to lengthy sermons, seating became necessary.

The nave would have been the largest indoor public space in the community (no village halls or church halls in those days), and would therefore have been used for other purposes as well as worship – e.g. court hearings, business transactions and meetings.

The size of the nave is not always an accurate indication of the size of the original congregation – churches were often built aspirationally, or as a way of demonstrating wealth and status, and were often far bigger than was needed to serve the local population.

To think about

- People have been worshipping here – and possibly in earlier churches on this site – for years, decades, centuries. Rich and poor, ordinary folk and people of influence, faithful and doubtful, bringing their joys and sorrows with them as they came to this place. Some of them may have left some record of their lives in the memorials set into the walls and the floor – see if you can find any. Many more will have no such memorials.
Prayer
As we pause in this place, Lord, we give thanks for our mothers and fathers in faith, who have prayed and worshipped you here before us. We thank you for their example, and ask that we might be an example to others. Amen.

Station 4 – Pulpit

The pulpit is traditionally the place from which the sermon is preached. Although some pulpits dating to before the Reformation do survive, the majority in our churches are later, when there was more emphasis on the sermon. Many 17th and 18th century pulpits were heavily ‘restored’ by the Victorians.

The pulpit is raised above the heads of the congregation to help with audibility in the days before public address systems. If there is public access to the pulpit, and it is safe to do so, do take the opportunity to climb up into the pulpit – it will give you an entirely different perspective on the church building.

To think about
• How important is the sermon in your experience of a service?
• The purpose of the sermon is to ‘break open’ the word of God – does it achieve this?

Prayer
God our Father, you sent your Son to be the Living Word. Open our ears to hear that word, and strengthen us to ‘be doers of the word, not merely hearers’ (James 1:22). Amen.
Station 5 – Chancel/Choir/Quire/Sanctuary

This is the area of the church which is to the east of the nave. It may be divided from the nave by an openwork screen – a few of these survive from the medieval period, others are Victorian or later. It may also be one or more steps higher than the nave. The chancel was the part of the church which the clergy occupied – in monastic churches, it was where the monks or canons would sing the ‘office’ (the series of services throughout the day and night). The ‘choir’ or ‘quire’ is the area with two or more rows of seating, facing inwards, sometimes equipped with ‘misericords’ – the ledges provided for leaning against during the long periods of standing during the services.

Robed choirs (originally of men or boys, but now also of women and girls) are a throwback to these medieval choirs of monks. Since the latter part of the 19th century, even quite humble churches have aspired to robed choirs, although they are particularly associated with cathedrals.

Normally, the sanctuary – the area around the altar – is to the east of the choir stalls. It may be divided from the choir by rails and is often a step higher. This practice of ascending step by step from the west end of the church to the east is possibly partly to improve the visibility, so that those in the nave can better see what is going on at the nave – although where there were substantial screens between the nave and chancel, this would not have been a factor. It is also symbolic of moving from the secular to the holy, from lay to ordained, from the outside world to the altar. This is a way of thinking which made sense in the hierarchical world view of the middle ages, which is when the standard layout of our churches was fixed, but may feel less appropriate now, when we look to the Early Church for a more inclusive sense of everyone, lay and ordained, being the people of God who gather round his table.
To think about

- Does the shape of our church buildings affect how we think of our relationship with God?
- Medieval monks prayed at fixed times throughout the day and night. Clergy are still required to say morning and evening prayer every day, and many other people choose to. Is punctuating our daily life with times of prayer a useful discipline which we might want to try? There are a huge number of resources available, from various Christian traditions – ask your clergy for suggestions, or search online for anything with ‘daily prayer’ or ‘office book’ in the title.

Prayer
Help us, Lord, to remember you, not only on Sundays, but throughout every day of the week. We are your people, and you are with us always – at the beginning and end of each day, in the hours of our work and rest, and in the hours of night. Help us, through reading the scriptures and through prayer, to shape our lives more and more according to your will for us. Amen.

Station 6 – Altar

The altar, or communion table, is where the bread and wine are placed for the celebration of the Eucharist. The altar is usually at the east end of the church building, although many modern churches – and those which have been altered in recent times – have either moved the altar to a more central position, or if that is impossible because it is stone and fixed to the floor, have added a ‘nave altar’. This is to symbolise that the Eucharist is shared by all the people of God who gather round his table to give thanks and worship him (see also the section on Station 5 – Chancel etc). The priest stands behind the altar to preside at the Eucharist, facing the people (fixed altars at the far eastern end require the priest to have his/her back to the people).
In many cases, the altar or communion table may not have originated in this church – often they are all that remains of a previous church on this, or another, site. Altar stones (the flat table surface, usually inscribed with five crosses) from several monasteries found their way into nearby parish churches after the Dissolution of the Monasteries in the 16th century.

The origins of the altar are in the biblical account of the Last Supper, the account of which is re-visited at each celebration of the Eucharist. Essentially a functional object – a table from which to serve a meal – it has become associated for many Christians with an altar of sacrifice, where the body and blood of Jesus were given up for our salvation.

To think about

- What does the Eucharist mean to me? What place does it have in my spiritual life?
- In your own church, is the altar central or at the far end? Does the priest preside facing the people, or with his/her back to them? Does this have an effect on the dynamics of the service?

Prayer

Lord God, at each celebration of the Eucharist you feed us with the body and blood of your Son. We gather around your holy table to receive these gifts – send us out to take the good news of your love to the ends of the earth. Amen.

Go to any extra stations which are available in the church you are visiting, before finishing with the Last Station on page 15
Extra stations

Station 7 – Windows

Many churches have fine stained-glass windows. Often, there will be details in a guide book or leaflet. Generally, stained glass dates to one of three periods: medieval, Victorian, or modern. Sometimes there is a story connected to the windows – glass that was removed for safe keeping during the Commonwealth or during World War II, and afterwards replaced; or windows that were damaged by war and have been put back, in broken pieces, creating a kind of abstract collage.

In medieval times, stained glass windows were the picture bibles of their time, illustrating stories from scripture. Remember that the walls of many medieval churches would have been painted with murals depicting bible stories and images of the Last Judgement (a few of which survive), so the interior would often have been a riot of colour and imagery.

To think about
- Can you recognise any stories or characters from the bible in the windows?
- If you were to commission a stained glass window today, what theme would you choose?
- If you are visiting on a sunny day, notice how the windows project pools of soft colours onto the stone of the floor or walls nearby, and enjoy this unexpected beauty.

Prayer
We thank you, Lord, for the vision and skill of the artists who have created these windows, which allow the story of your love for us to shine through. We pray that these images will speak to us, and inspire us to let your love shine through our lives. Amen.
Station 8 – Clock

Medieval or early modern clocks are found in a number of cathedrals, and you will find details in their guide books. There is often something to see both inside and outside the building. Early clocks are generally very beautiful, with pictures and gilding. It is worth spending a little time with such clocks, watching the very gradual movement, and perhaps waiting for a chime.

To think about

- Do we always make the most of the time we have? Do we wish it away, or waste it?
- Are we really aware of the present moment, living it to the full?

Prayer (from the hymn ‘Take my life’ by Frances Havergal, 1874)
‘Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee. Take my moments and my days, let them flow in ceaseless praise’. Amen.

Station 9 – Lady Chapel

Many churches and cathedrals have a Lady Chapel – a chapel dedicated to the Virgin Mary, also referred to as Our Lady – hence the term Lady Chapel. Sometimes this is a chapel to one side of the church, in larger buildings it can be at the east end, beyond the altar. It will often have a statue or an icon of Mary, and there may be symbols associated with her in the architecture – the colour blue, lilies, the Fleur de Lys motif, etc.

To think about

- When God sent his messenger to Mary to tell her that she had been chosen to be the mother of Jesus, her response was ‘Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.’ (Luke 1:38) How open are we to the word of God, and how ready are we to respond to him?
• When God speaks in our lives (for example through scripture, through the beauty of creation, through the church or through other people), do we respond by saying ‘Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word?’

Prayer
Thank you, Lord, for Mary’s example of faith and obedience to your will. Give us willing hearts to hear you call and respond to your will for our lives. Amen.

Station 10 – Chapter House

Many churches and cathedrals were formerly monastic houses, and the Chapter House is a legacy of this. Literally, the place where a chapter from the ‘Rule’ of the order was read out, it is often an octagonal or apse-ended (semi-circular ended) building attached to the church or cathedral. Originally, it would have had benches running all around the walls, on which the monks or canons would have sat during the meeting. This would be where decisions were made, and where disciplinary matters were dealt with. In some cases, past abbots are buried under the floor of the chapter house – a place of honour.

To think about
• The chapter house was the place where the smooth running of the community was ensured. The ‘Rule’ – instructions for how the community was to run on godly lines – was read here to remind everyone of what was expected of them. Does this challenge us? What is the ‘Rule’ by which we live our lives? Does every aspect of our daily life reflect our belief in God, and do we always bring the light of Christ to others?

Prayer
Help us, Lord, to be aware of your presence in every aspect of our lives, and to follow the example you have set before us in the life of your Son, Jesus. Amen.
Station 11 – Cloister

The cloister is the covered walkway which runs around a central green area (the ‘garth’) and which provides access to the church and living areas of the monastic enclosure. Many cathedrals and larger churches were formerly monastic houses, and some still retain their cloisters. As well as being a kind of corridor between parts of the monastery, some monks would be at work here, using the light from the cloister windows to copy documents and books, which were a rare and precious commodity in medieval times.

To think about

- What work do I undertake? Not only paid work, but voluntary work, and the important work of keeping a household running smoothly. Am I aware of God being present in everything I do? Are there areas of my life where I do not feel God is present? Do I bring my concerns about all areas of my life and work to him in prayer, or do I sometimes feel that my work is not important enough to bother him about?

Prayer

Lord God, we dedicate our work to your glory. May everything that we do, however boring or mundane, however routine or ordinary, be done in the knowledge that we glorify you in every action. Amen.

Station 12 – Chapel for private prayer/Reserved Sacrament

Some churches and most cathedrals – especially ones which are popular with visitors – will have an area or chapel set aside for private prayer. You are asked to be quiet in this area to respect others’ prayers. The contrast between a busy cathedral full of excited visitors and the quiet of this small chapel can be quite remarkable. There will often be a candle stand, where those who wish can light a candle as a symbol of their prayer, or an opportunity to write down requests for prayer.
Often this is also where the sacrament is reserved – bread and wine which has been consecrated at the Eucharist, and is reverently reserved in this place, both in case it is required to take communion to the sick, but also as a focus of prayer. The bread and wine has become for us the body and blood of Christ, and many people find it helpful to pray in the presence of Christ in this way.

To think about
- Take a moment to sit or kneel quietly. Be still – especially at this station, take time to pause on your pilgrimage and be with God.
- If you wish, light a candle or write a prayer request.

Prayer
We bring before you, Lord, the issues and people that we carry in our hearts, committing them to your loving care. We pray that you would answer our prayers, not necessarily in the way that we would wish for, but in the way that is in accordance with your will. Amen.

Last Station – Doorway – exit

To think about
As you prepare to leave this building at the end of your mini-pilgrimage, pause for a moment and look again at the doorway.
- What will you be taking away with you? Has anything spoken to you – surprised you – moved you?
- If you have been particularly conscious of being in God’s presence, think about how you might take that with you as you go back into the rush and busyness of normal life.

Prayer
‘The Lord will keep your going out and your coming in, from this time on and for evermore’ (Ps 121.8). Bless me now, Lord, as I go back to my ordinary life, and keep me safe in the knowledge of your presence with me. Encourage me to be a sign of your love to those around me, and to be the Light of Christ to those I meet. Amen.
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