

## The Walsingham Children's Pilgrimage

Our journey began early on Friday morning in Aldwick, where bleary eyed and with mixed emotions of shyness and anticipation we waved goodbye to parents and set off on the five hour journey to Norfolk. Halfway there we stopped to eat our lunch at a Welcome Break, and joined the rest of the Chichester Diocese, where Father Mark talked to us about the pilgrimage, held a little service and sprinkled us all with holy water. It was a long journey, with lots of 'are we nearly there yet'? We played games and sang songs (for some reason a loud and tuneless rendition of the national anthem was the chosen favourite—note for next year, learn some tuneful bus songs!), and looked out for the 'chimney house'—a sign that we were finally approaching the magical land of 'nearly there'. Finally we saw it, and with excited chatter we pulled around the corner in to a beautiful cobbled street with wonky brick buildings, proper little old corner shops, and so much character you could almost taste it! We piled out of the bus and rushed in to the house, excited whoops and exclamations as the children found their rooms and threw themselves on their beds in delight—for about a second, and then they ran off to explore. The whole Chichester Diocese group stayed in Richeldis House, named after the Lady Richeldis de Faverches, whose vision of the Virgin Mary led to her building the shrine. It is a beautiful house full of higgledy piggledy staircases and hallways perfect for games of hide and seek. It was very much one big family and everyone looked out for everyone else. The house we stayed in is part of a sort



of church 'campus'; a little path opened out on to a tiered garden leading down to the shrine, past a big hill with three huge crosses on it, and a little corner with a cavelike 'tomb' with a round stone. At the bottom of the garden are the shrine church and the well, over the spring where the Virgin Mary appeared to Lady Richeldis de Faverches and told her to build a house identical to the one where Jesus grew up in Nazareth.

The house is nestled safely inside the church—the original was destroyed by Henry VIII in 1538, and was rebuilt in 1931—inside the shrine church. After the children had let off some steam, we gathered here, and the busy hubbub simmered down to silence as Fr Mark prepared us to go inside, and to think about why we were visiting the shrine. We chanted a song to the Virgin Mary as we walked in to the holy house, and gathered in silence in the tiny building. We lit a candle for our loved ones and filtered out a little more humbled and richer in thought than we had been on arrival. We returned to the house for the children to collect their pilgrimage T-shirts and wristbands, and before long the noise levels and trampling of feet and laughter had resumed. We had a delicious supper in the refectory, and joined all the other pilgrims in the church for an 8:45pm service. It was quite different from the services we were used to, and there were some very tired and overwhelmed little pilgrims by the time we got back—a good sleep was in order!

Next morning began sleepily, with a long, cold queue for breakfast, after which the energy levels shot up and everyone was eager and ready for our holy mile walk. The Chichester Diocese group walked down to the Slipper Chapel—some groups got the bus

and missed out on a wealth of excitements (sticks, mud, slippery slopes, lots of laughter and we even saw a barn owl)! By the time we arrived at the Slipper Chapel, most of the groups had already had their talks, and unfortunately we missed out on a large chunk of the sermon explaining the reason for our pilgrimage. We had a few fidgety cold people but we managed to catch a little of the lessons about mercy over the brisk wind, and then came the moment everyone had been waiting for—many of the children whisked off their shoes—and some put them straight back on again—it was REALLY cold, but some brave soldiers managed to keep their shoes off the whole mile (and a silent quarter!). Banners held high, we strode (or hobbled) out down the stony, thorny track, those with bare feet relishing the odd soft patch of grass and the blissful few seconds of the wooden bridge. Arriving back at the shrine was a true moment of triumph, and there was a real sense of elation



as we settled down for the service. Afterwards, we lined up for the sprinkling, where we each drank holy water from the well and had a cross marked on our foreheads. We gathered for a group photo and then rushed off for lunch, after which there was an activity zone, with huge inflatables in the garden, and indoor crafts, and to top it all off, after dinner there was a disco, with balloon entertainment! Bed time was gratefully welcomed and there was golden silence in the church on Sunday morning. There were a few sad faces at the prospect of it all being over (and school tomorrow!) but we still had time to explore the shops, the cobbled streets offered a veritable Hogsmeade of opportunity, and after a weekend discussing the values of mercy, the children apparently saw no controversy in buying ALL the toy guns from the tiny little corner shop and had a wild and wonderful time hiding behind banisters and leaping out at each other in a cowboy craze of glee. Thankfully, alongside bulk buying toy weapons and wobbly pots of goo, the children also spent ages deliberating over finding the perfect Mothering Sunday gift for the following week, and so left the shops laden with sweets, guns, flowers and jewellery.

We waved a sad goodbye to Walsingham and set off on the long journey home, arriving back safe and sound at about 8:30pm, ready for about a week's worth of sleep, full of adventure and already looking forward to doing it all again next year!

*Lauren van Niekerk*

### WHY WE LOVE CHILDREN ...

In the back garden of his house, a vicar overheard some children at prayer. His five-year-old son and his playmates had found a dead robin. Feeling that proper burial should be performed, they had put the robin in a small box, then dug a hole and made ready for the burial. The vicar's son was chosen to say the appropriate prayers, and with sonorous dignity he intoned his version of what he thought his father always said: 'Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and into the hole he goes. Amen!'

*Anonymous (from the internet)*