1.

Pilgrimage, Miracle and Art

First of all, I would like to express my thanks to the Institute of Medieval and Early Modern Studies and the Centre for Visual Arts and Culture at the University for their kind and flattering invitation to offer what I understand is the third of the two centres' annual joint lectures. It is a particular privilege to speak in such an august venue. It is a great pleasure to be here. Thank you all for coming.

The invitation was entirely open as the subject matter, but when I learned that the diocese had nominated 2020 its year of pilgrimage with the Institute of Mediaeval and Early Modern Studies as one of its supporters, I thought it would be appropriate to offer some thoughts on the topic, because it's something that my thoughts have kept returning to during my research.

I don't want to try and define pilgrimage, but I think it may help to begin with some broad issues on which we can perhaps agree.

At a basic level, pilgrimage is understood to involve a journey. The conventional image of the pilgrim

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is someone equipped for the road. This is an image of St James from a let 15th century French Book of Hours in New York. James, the focus, of course, of a major pilgrimage is often depicted as perhaps the archetypal pilgrim - plainly dressed, with sensible shoes and staff in hand and bedecked with badges – here the famous scallop shell. I'll say a bit more about tokens later on.

Conventionally, that journey is to a place understood as in some way sacred, but before we go that far, in a more general sense the journey is fundamentally to somewhere else. When I first began research in this area I found very useful book by the anthropologist Jill Dubisch called simply *In a Different Place*. This can easily seem rather bland - if you go on a journey, don't you inevitably end up somewhere else? But the difference in place may not be principally spatial. There is a very forceful interpretation of pilgrimage in the Christian tradition by another anthropologist, Victor Turner, on whom Dubisch

drew, who proposed that pilgrimage is a form of rite of passage: the pilgrim goes beyond normal experience and returns in some way transformed. Not only does the pilgrim go to a different place: they may not return, indeed ideally should not return, to the place from which they started out.

I confess that in my work I have not principally be interested in the journey. I've been more interested in the destination and what people have understood about their goal. Where do people go to seek this transformative experience?

In the Christian tradition, perhaps the paradigm of pilgrimage is that to the land called holy: principally the sites associated with the life and passion of Christ, and among them the focus is the site associated with the central element of faith -- the place of burial and the site of the resurrection of the incarnate son of God -- of Christ himself - the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

3.

I show you here that familiar view of the old city of Jerusalem from the East. The dome of the Church of the holy Sepulchre is here, but I deliberately show a more general view to acknowledge the point that this is, is of course a very dense holy place. In the foreground is the Temple Mount this site of the Hebrew temple the holiest places in Judaism, and upon it the Al Aqsa mosque - the so-called Dome of the Rock, one of the holiest sites in Islam. This observation makes the simple but painful point that holy places can also be places of contestation and conflict.

4.

and the Western, Gothic form of large parts of the Church of the holy Sepulchre itself is a reminder of one extended violent episode: the so-called crusades when Christian authorities? Sought to assert Christian control of the holy places.

I should stress that I'm not going to say much about pilgrimage to the holy land. I have never visited the holy Sepulchre and I am by no means an expert on it. But it needs acknowledging as a basic point of reference.

Famously, Jerusalem was presented as the very centre of mediaeval visualisations of the world

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here is the world map from the so-called ‘Map Psalter’ of c1265, British Library Add. MS 28681, f.9.

6

With Jerusalem right in the middle.

This introduces an important point. Whatever the grasp of what we would think of as geography, pilgrimage presupposes some kind of awareness of distributed holy places - a kind of sacred gazetteer - because whatever else the pilgrimage journey is, it is not casual travel.

In an English context mediaeval pilgrimage inevitably prompts thoughts of Chaucer's Canterbury Pilgrims with their often bawdy tales of loose living, but it's important to remember that at root pilgrimage involved a solemn undertaking – a vow – and that vow, to go to that different place, implies a knowledge of a range of places that one could go to.

In this paper I want to consider a number of different sorts of places that could be the focus of such a vow and how those places are themselves constituted.

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The sites of the holy land are amongst the oldest established sites of Christian pilgrimage; famously we have accounts going back to the fourth century. And, of course they remain a vibrant centre of Christian pilgrimage. The appeal of the sites has remained remarkably constant. The sites of the holy land map Biblical events on to a physical landscape. Holy land pilgrimage allows the devotee to physicalise a journey – to walk through – the sacred texts.

The appeal, that is, is not much the presence of things as the commemoration of events.

The holy Sepulchre itself highlights the point.

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I show you here a schematic map of Jerusalem of about 1200 from a Psalter fragment in the Hague where the Holy Sepulchre appears as a circle within a circular plan of Jerusalem – circles within circles.

The momentous significance of this place in the context of faith is that it is the site of the resurrection of Christ which promises the devotee's salvation. Christ is risen. The tomb is empty. There is, in an important sense, nothing to see.

What is there, according to tradition, is the rock cut tomb described in the Gospels: a place that contained, if only for a short time, the holy body. The tomb, crucially, counts as a secondary or contact relic of the saviour, something I will come back to.

But, as generations of pilgrims have found, disorientatingly it looks nothing like a rock cut tomb in a garden. What you see is the presentation of that tomb, many times reworked and reconstructed, dating back ultimately to the time of the Emperor Constantine:

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the so-called aedicula – the little house - enshrining the tomb, itself further enshrined in the great rotunda of the Anastasis, of the resurrection. The pilgrim may go to walk through the momentous events of the Gospels, but what they experience most directly is art and architecture.

Speaking as an art historian, I feel compelled to observe that this is, paradoxically, not very familiar art and architecture. Conceptually, this is the most important church in Christendom, but it is by no means central in the history of architecture. What is more familiar is that aspects of this artistic and architectural presentation came to be reproduced all over Christendom, and I offer you just one example, which I had the privilege to see again quite recently,

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the tomb aedicula constructed by the great Renaissance architect Leon Battista Alberti for Giovanni Ruccelai for his burial chapel in the church of San Pancrazio in Florence in 1467.

Much could be said about the spectacular monument, which, as you can see recognisably chimes with the form of the aedicula in Jerusalem even in its current form. But this is a particularly useful example because of the inscription in Alberti's elegant classicising roman capitals which articulate the appeal of the site. It quotes the words of the young man in shining clothes who confronted the women who had rushed to the tomb in the Gospel of Mark (xvi, 6):

YHESVM QVERITIS NAZARENVM CRUCIFIXUM SVRREXIT NON EST HIC ECCE LOCVS VBI POSVERVNT EVM

I don't have images to allow you to follow it all the way round, but it reads:

You are seeking Jesus of Nazareth who was crucified. He is risen;

10

he is not here; behold the place where they put him

Note how those telling words – non est hic, he is not here –

11

are centred over the apse of the structure.

This monument reveals the yearning at the heart of devotion and the enormously attenuated chains of reference that could be used to evoke the focus of that devotion. This is a reproduction, a copy, not of the tomb of Christ itself but of its age old enshrinement – Constantine's aedicula - the original of which encases the tomb of Christ which is itself no more than a touch relic of Christ himself. Christ is not there. But note how this visually articulated thing – art – steps in to manage that yearbing.

I recognise that in the context of pilgrimage this absence can be spiritually enriching – one would not want to find the tomb occupied – but I think the absence is worth remembering. Pilgrimage doesn't necessarily lead you to a direct engagement with the divine.

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A good deal of pilgrimage has, however, always had a much more, in principle, tangible focus, because pilgrims travelled not just a places associated with the saviour, but also those associated with the saints - those heroes of virtue in his service - and especially their places of burial.

I have already invoked Chaucer and by far the most famous saintly shrine in the British Isles is that of St Thomas at Canterbury. The focus of the pilgrimage to Canterbury was the body of Thomas preserved in the shrines at the east end of the cathedral.

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Those shrines were swept away in the Reformation and are known today only from descriptions, famously the satirical one in Thomas More's Dialogue on Pilgrimage for the sake of true devotion. I show you the gap in the centre of the Trinity chapel where the shrine once was.

But the surviving visual articulation of the shrine space introduces a crucial issue. Famously the windows of the ambulatory, visible here - the walkway around the main shrine space - is to this day resplendent with stained-glass windows showing the miracles of the saint

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I show you here just one example of one of the two roundels dedicated to the story of Henry of Fordwitch – a man of unsound mind who was driven to the shrine with cudgels, bound with ropes, but after a night at the shrine in the presence of the saints body he was cured – the ropes and sticks being left as votive offerings. These images, articulated by text cross reference with collection of miracle stories.

The sacredness of place here seems to depend upon the physical presence of the body of the saint and the saint's sacredness is made manifest through miracles.

The extraordinary mediating role of the saint was once succinctly expressed by an Inscription on tomb of St Martin at Tours

'Here lies Martin the Bishop, of holy memory, whose soul is in the hand of God; but he is fully here, present and made plain in miracles of every kind.'

This is a familiar idea perhaps, but this idea is rather distinct from that paradigm of the holy Sepulchre that we be looking at. There are miracles associated with the holy Sepulchre but it's not generally presented as a miracle working shrine. The key miracle at the holy Sepulchre is the miracle of Christ's resurrection itself and the focus is the salvific power of that event.

But at Canterbury there is a marked stress on healing and this marks an important transition. The stress is not so much on the life to come and the fate of the soul as on the immediate fate of the suffering body. God, through his saints, can help you here and now.

I'm going to leave Canterbury because I want to pay my respects to St Cuthbert.

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As a Canterbury, the late medieval shrine was swept away by Henry VIII's commissioners, though not here the saint's remains themselves interred below where the shrine stood.

We have its later mediaeval setting, of course,

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in the spectacular mid-to-late 13th century chapel of the nine altars. But we also crucially have evocations of the shrine amongst the visualisations of stories of miracle amongst the illuminations of the remarkably rich late 12th century manuscript containing Bede's life of St Cuthbert preserved in the British library.

Cuthbert was renowned as a healer during his life

16

is shown during a girl of pains in the head by anointing her with oil.

But the miracles continued after his death

The image of the discovery of the saint's incorrupt body

17

11 years after his death, In Bede's words 'much more like a sleeping than a dead man', articulates the promise of the shrine: the Power of a servant of God poised between heaven and earth. But this image

18

Of a crippled man healed praying at Cuthbert's tomb, an image familiar from the visualisation of many saints shrines, reveals an important aspect of the normal experience of the saint. The body of the saint is frustratingly inaccessible to the senses.

Qualifying: this is a visualisation of Cuthbert's original shrine on Lindisfarne.

But the body is clearly the point of reference as this remarkable image

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visualising a story of a paralytic healed at the shrine, in the same manuscript extracted, reveals.

The story, from Bede's ecclesiastical history, concerns a brother of the monastery on Lindisfarne, Bethwegen, who became paralysed down one side.

'In the midst of his prayers, he fell at as it were into a stupor, and, as he was afterwards wont to relate, felt a large and broad hand touch his head, where the pain lay, and by that touch, all the part of his body which had been affected with the distemper, was delivered from the weakness, and restored to health down to his feet.'

The illuminator visualises the episode with the saint's hand reaching out of the shrine to touch the sick man's body. There is no suggestion in the story that this was seen to happen, but it stresses the promise of contact. It shows you what you can't actually see. Images such as these are important parts of the visual presentation of the shrine.

This all seems to be about the direct impact of the body at the shrine. But things are a little more complex. Another story in the life tells of a youth in a nearby monastery who was deprived of all use of his limbs.

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Medical treatment not having helped, he ‘asked his servant to bring him some portion of the incorruptible relics of the sacred body because he believed that by the bounty of the Lord he might return to the grace of health through its virtues.’ The Abbot recommended the shoes which had been on the saint's feet in his tomb. The sick man put them on and he went to bed and he slept, but his feet began to twitch and when the hour came for matins he was able to get up and spent the rest of the night praying.

An eloquent example of the perceived power of a secondary or touch relic. The paralysed youth could not touch the body of the saint, but when he touched something that had touched the saint's body - the shoes that had been upon his feet - he was healed. But note that the saint’s power is here delivered at a distance from the shrine itself.

There are some significant motifs here which I will come back to.

Such stories can easily seem rather quaint and rather remote, but I have become interested in the nature of miracle and how we can understand it historically and for me it became a pressing issue when I encountered the objects on which my research has concentrated.

So far I've stressed the role of the visual arts in articulating place made sacred by association with the events of the gospels themselves or with the bodies of saints. But, though less familiar, there are cases in which works of art rise to become the very focus of devotion. They are very significant in devotion to the Virgin Mary who, according to medieval Christian tradition, had, like Christ been physical raised up at the end of her earthly life.

This emerged from the in my doctoral studies. I had developed a rather broad research topic around art and devotion in late mediaeval Poland - my father was Polish, hence my interest in that part of the world and my unusual surname. One of the objects on my list of things to look at was this picture

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a panel painting if the Virgin and Child of uncertain date, housed in a monastery at Czestochowa in south-west Poland. It came to occupy a central place in my research. To me this painting was an almost absurdly familiar object. Czestochowa is about a half hour’s drive away from my father's family

home. It remains a major pilgrimage destination and a major tourist site. We visited often on family holidays when I was a child, hence my familiarity.

The challenge posed by this picture is that it is this very thing, this painting on a wooden panel, that is the focus of the pilgrimage in this place. It is said to have been painted by St Luke the evangelist and it is associated with miracles - miracles delivered on the intercession of the Virgin Mary depicted here. That's something that I was aware of since before I can remember. But as I was learning art history in the 1990s I became aware that my discipline had very little to say about objects like this - hence my motivation to begin the study -- to begin to fill that gap.

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To reinforce the point: here is an aerial view of the monastery in the late 1980s at peak pilgrimage time. The monastery buildings are now largely post-mediaeval, but the structure of the body of the main church here, and the side chapel to the north where the picture is kept, are probably 15th century in origin. These people have come in principle to see the picture and they've been coming in large numbers, it seems, ever since the mid-15th century at the latest. From my visits in my childhood and youth I am aware that it was not uncommon at that stage for people to spend their entire summer holidays undertaking the pilgrimage to Czestochowa on foot from as far afield as Gdansk on the Baltic coast.

Here we have this key element of the journey: the devotees gather at the holy place.

But this is not a site associated with the life of a key holy figure, nor is it a site of the body of a saint.

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It is the location of a picture of the Virgin Mary.

So, why? Why go a long way to look at a picture? And what does it mean to say that it works miracles?

It's fair to say that so-called miraculous images have had a bad press. If the body shrines of saints fell foul of the reformers of the 16th century, images

shown an unequal veneration were a special target of reforming zeal. The veneration or worship of such manifestly man-made things too easily raised the spectre of the ultimate error of idolatry and throughout Europe such shrines were swept away. It is, of course, no accident that I'm showing you a shrine in what we now regard as the Catholic world.

The Reformation discourse has, I think, contributed to the scholarly neglect of this phenomenon. As an art historian I want to argue that the study such images can tell us important things about the way people use material objects including those we are accustomed to call works of visual art, and they may also help us to understand notions of holiness and phenomena like pilgrimage and perhaps miracle.

In the case of Czestochowa my studies were limited by the relatively scant survival of textual evidence. I'd like to share with you some of the insights and challenges that arose when I began to study a more well documented shrine.

A colleague had pointed out to me that miraculous images were a significant phenomenon in late mediaeval and early Renaissance Italy and I began to work on the shrine of Santa Maria delle Carceri,

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St Mary of the prison, in Prato in Tuscany.

The Carceri church has an established place in the art historical literature. It was designed by a well-known architect, Giuliana da Sangallo, and begun in 1485. It's a very lucid example of a building type closely associated with the Italian Renaissance - the domed centrally planned church.

25

Here is the interior. This is a black-and-white photo, but the interior is to a large extent in greyscale. It follows an architectural aesthetic established earlier in the 15th century by Filippo Brunelleschi - white plastered walls with classicising architectural details in the characteristic dark grey pietra serena of Tuscany.

The image venerated here is enshrined above the main altar here

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And here it is in detail: a fourteenth century image of the Virgin and Child with saints Stephen and Leonard.

I should perhaps pause here and say a word about art. I have introduced these images as cases where works of art begin to be treated as themselves holy objects. It might be objected that at the time they may not have been regarded as art at all and that they don't look very polished as works of art. My working definiotuon of art is very broad. In his book Patterns of Intention the late great Michael Baxandall coined the term 'intentional visual interest' to characterise the objects he was dealing with, and I'm happy to work that. Whatever else this is it is a man made thing with intentional visual interest.

The foundation miracle of the shrine rests on the experience of an eight-year-old boy, Jacopino, who in July 1484 is said to have witnessed the Virgin Mary in this picture, painted on a wall of the town prison get out of the picture and walk around in the prison vaults. That spectacular animation was never repeated, but in the early months of the new devotion the picture was allegedly observed by many to change colour and move its eyes. And it became associated with copious healing miracles. The town council petitioned the pope for permission to build a church on the site and the building project began the next year.

But isn't this just plain idolatry – an animated Virgin. Aren't people just conflating the saint with the picture?

In fact, much of the literature that has been growing on such pictures does suggest that people understood them to embody a sacred presence.

I'm not so sure. Let's not be so hasty. Plays into the Reformation critique.

The Carceri is very well documented as a building, but it also well documented as a miracle working shrine. That may seem like an odd claim. What I mean is that we have very rich collections of miracles from early in the life of the shrine. Two manuscript collections survive, one from the late 1480s or 1490s and another dated 1505. The latter was written or compiled by an identifiable individual - a local lawyer called Giuliano Guizzelmi, born in 1446 and died in 1518.

As it happens we have a picture of him. He founded a burial chapel in the crypt of what is now Prato cathedral in 1506

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and its paintings include a portrait of him, here on the left

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And here in close-up.

29

Here is my key informant.

Some of the stories in Guizzlemi's collection involve episodes in the first person including miracles which Guizzelmi claims happened to him and his family and others in which Guizzelmi gives himself a catalytic role in the achievement of miracle for others.

Guizzelmi turns out to be a fulsome source – he also wrote a book of miracle stories of the relic of the Virgin Mary's girdle or belt which was claimed by Prato and of two miraculous crucifixes. And he left behind a book of daily expenses which he kept for the last 30 years of his life.

Before anyone accuses me of being gullible, I'm not suggesting for a moment that that these clasims of personal involvement makes his stories in any sense reliable evidence of what we might recognise as historical 'events'. But these claims do make a difference to the status of the stories as evidence. They are, I suggest, quite direct evidence of the ritual actions he describes and of his conception of the world. And note that the stories come from a lay person not a cleric. At I want to spend some time on them.

One notable feature of Guizzelmi's stories, and more than 50 are unique to his own collection, is that the miracles are said to take place away from the shrine with the healed devotee making the journey to the shrine in thanksgiving. This is the case for all of the stories, nine of them in total, with elements of the narrative in the first person. But in almost all of these stories Guizzelmi introduces another element: an intermediary token of the shrine in lead or on paper in his words 'in the similitude of the image at the shrine'. Wee back to

the tokens like the scallop shelss of st james with which I began. The lead tokens, none of which have yet been identified among surviving objects, were presumably the same sort of thing as the lead badges long familiar to pilgrimage studies.

We have one precious survival of what can presumably be identified as one of his paper figures pasted into the endpapers of his own book.

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a much abraded and buckled single leaf woodcut which Does indeed resemble in critical respects the wall painting at the shrine.

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I want to read you a short extract from one of the stories involving such a paper token. It forms the conclusion of a lengthy story dated August 1485. The story relates the fate of a certain Vincenti d'Alexandro da Laia, a former sacristan of the cathedral of Pisa, who was unjustly accused of stealing items from the cathedral treasury. His name was cleared after he vowed to the Madonna of the Carceri. Guizzelmi acted as a travelling judge for the Florentine territorial administration, and he claims to have heard the story direct from Vincenti himself whilst acting as judge for the capitano, the Florentine official at Pisa. He adds the following postscript:

> When the said priest, Vincenti, told me this miracle he had the quartan fever. And I gave him a paper figure of the Most Glorious Virgin Mary of the Carceri, which had touched Her Majesty, and he took it devoutly and kissed it, and immediately he was liberated from the said fever and it never returned, as he later told me himself, thanking the Most Glorious Virgin Mary of the Carceri of Prato for such graces.

This additional miracle of healing is mediated by a material object - a 'paper figure' - which the devotee kisses and which has also ' touched her Majesty' - implicitly the shrine painting, and the narrator, Guizzelmi himself, claims a part in the process through the donation of the figure.

You will notice, I'm sure, the kinship between the structure of this story and the story I quoted a moment ago of the paralysed young man healed by the touch of St Cuthbert's shoes.

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The young man was healed by the touch of something that had touched St Cuthbert's body.

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In the Carceri story, the feverish priest is healed by the touch of a print which has been touched against - well, against what? Against the wall painting at the shrine, but does this correspondence not reveal the picture to be understood as itself a holy body. Does this process not reveal the conflation of picture and saint. If this is something I wish to contest, am I not digging a hole for myself?

Well, maybe. But what is really going on here? Are people understanding pictures to work miracles in some sort of mechanistic way? What is it for an image to ‘work’ like this? What could that be? Can it be true that such images were understood to be reliable conduits of holy power? This is why I have got interested in miracles.

The belief system encourages devotion to the saints who can intercede with God on the devotee’s behalf. The tomb, the location of the saint’s physical remains, is a plausible focus where that is available.

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Even in our own culture we recognise the presence of the dead in their mortal remains as anyone with an interred friend or loved one can recognise: to visit the place of burial is in an important sense to visit the person.

But the Virgin Mary, as the earthly mother of the incarnate God, is understood to have a special relationship with her son and to be a particularly powerful intercessor. How does one focus devotion to her? There are held to be relics -- usually garment relics, like the belt claimed by Prato of which more anon. But there are also images.

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Must we assume that people thought that images actually embodied holy people? One possibility which I think we should entertain is that these highly venerated images are being exploited as the foci of devotional performances with very little thought given to the status of the image at the centre: I'm not convinced that people gave much thought to quite what such pictures actually are or were.

You may think that sounds like special pleading – surely the intensity of devotion evoked by stories such as the ones I told you presuppose a vivid perception of the sacred. Iif the shrine image is not understood as a presence, though, what is it? What could motivate and sustains this kind of behaviour?

Well, I'd like to offer a familiar example from our own mundane popular culture. This may seem like an insultingly flippant thing to bring up, but please bear with me -- there is a serious point here.

It has become customary to watch major sporting events in public on large screen televisions, typically in pubs and bars. Most people, of course, have devices of their own home on which they can watch, but one factor in this phenomenon is the increasing prevalence of pay-per-view events: I going to the pub you don't have to pay a subscription yourself. But I think there's more to it than that.

There is no suggestion that to see the televised coverage is as good as ‘being there’ but it does allow you to ‘see the event’. In strictness, the televised event is merely a representation of the event, but I think it's fair to say that live transmissions are commonly understood as a form of prosthesis: they allow people to see, and in the case of television, also hear, what is not before their senses - it extends the range of the senses. But more than this, and I think that this is the important part, it allows the viewer to participate in the event emotionally and in terms of performance.

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This is a shot from the Birmingham Mail of England fans gathering at the Walkabout pub on Broad Street, Birmingham to watch England's opening fixture against Italy in the 2014 World Cup. It's a poignant picture: this is a reaction to England's opening goal, I won't remind you of the sad outcome of the campaign.

The point of bringing this up is that the behaviour of the crowd is not obviously distinguishable from that of the spectators in the stadium - other than in the alcohol being consumed: they behave ‘as if’ they were present at the event itself: the viewers/supporters shout their encouragement, sing, wave flags and scarves, cheer and weep.

The range of behaviours may not be directly comparable, but, I suggest, that this parallel should give us pause for thought in considering what is going on at an allegedly miracle working image shrine. Just because devotees behave in some senses as if they were in the presence of a holy figure, it doesn't necessarily mean that they think that they are.

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One possibility is no one thinks that there is anything inherently special about this particular shrine image just as there is nothing special about the TV at the bar you chose to go to to watch the match. What marks it out is the convention that has arisen that this is a good place to come to see or watch and to demonstrate your devotion (and that word seems apt to sport as well as religion) and hence to be seen. The public declaration of devotion and proof of the performance of vows is met with again and again in miracle stories. Guizzelmi's collection of the Carceri has significant number of stories in which the devotee is said to 'publicly announce' their miracle. In some cases a stress is placed on the large numbers of people present to hear the testimony – the presence of an audience is important.

My proposal is that the image acts as a focus and generates a space in which you can participate in devotion. The devotees of the miracle working image shrine don't necessarily see the image itself as the uncomplicated source of power.

But where does this leave miracle? Once again Guizzelmi's material offers us food for thought. Having giving you the light-hearted parallel of excited football supporters, I should warn you that I'm now going to offer you something altogether more serious and indeed troubling: a story from Guizzelmi's collection of miracles of Prato's relic of the virgins belt.

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Which I show you here in its 17th century reliquary.

It's the only one in that collection with an explicit personal connection to the writer. I quote:

> In the year of Our Lord 1489, Michele di Francesco Guizzelmi of Prato, had a daughter of about 20 months called Camilla who was sick with a serious illness and on the point of death and given up for lost by the doctors … having great devotion to the most precious girdle of the most glorious Virgin Mary … and having a little silver cross which had touched the said most holy girdle, he judged that it would lend some grace to the said Camilla his daughter. And with great devotion, saying the Our Father and the Hail Mary, he put the said little cross around her neck and … with this cross round her neck she lived miraculously for more than a month in such a way that her body dried out and nothing was left but dry skin on bones … And marvelling that such a wasted body should live, he began to think that she only lived by virtue of the little cross which had touched the holy girdle and wondered whether he should take it off. His wife, Alexandra, told him not to: 'Perhaps the Virgin Mary will give her grace, then you will see that miraculously she will not die'. And afterwards she continued in the same way day after day to dry up so that she became a monstrous and fearful thing, because no part of her was not consumed except for her eyes which alone seemed alive and beautiful in what was otherwise a skull. And finally it seemed to Michele, her father, that it was not natural that a dead body should live, and, giving her a little wine to drink which she took as usual, he determined to take the cross off. And once it was off, immediately her eyes turned up and she began to pass away. … This she had not been able to do … because the most glorious Virgin Mary, seeing the faith and devotion of the said Michele, father of this girl, did not allow the girl to die when she had on the cross which had touched the most holy girdle.

To clarify, as the surname of the protagonists suggests, this is another family story for Giuliano Guizzelmi. The little girl Camilla is his niece. But a modern reader might legitimately ask where the miracle is here. The story reads as an account of the lingering death of a child. The miracle emerges not any verifiable circumstances but in the judgement of the family.

One of the challenges of this kind of material is the challenge of faith itself. Whether one regards miracle as a meaningful explanatory category may depend on to what degree one shares elements of the belief system of those

involved. But the point I would like to make is that even in the context of belief, stories like this show that miracles may not be passively received gifts but hard-won constructions.

My thinking on this has been informed by the work of Frank Graziano who has worked on miracle shrines in present day Mexico. For him miracles are not events, but interpretations.

And that feeds back to our understanding of holy place. We shouldn't think of the shrines of saints,

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And I show you here the late 14th century chapel in which the belt relic is kept at the west end of Prato cathedral

whether with a focus on the body, touch relic or image, as places people went to passively experience an outpouring of supernatural power like some kind of miraculous firework display, but as much less well-defined, les well-circumscribed sites of negotiation where people built ways of making an accommodation with an imperfect world.

Note that this story of little Camilla is not based here at the shrine, but implicitly in the family home. And we know roughly where that was.

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Here's a plan of Prato as it was in Guizzelmi's lifetime. From his personal records and the family's tax returns we can deduce that he lived in the block marked here is number 22. Guizzelmi, who never married, lived in the house with his married brothers including the Michele of the story. The relic of the girdle was held in the so-called Pieve or parish baptismal church, now the cathedral, marked as number 1.

Guizzelmi was writing about his local shrines. Santa Maria dele Carceri, the church built on the site of the town prison, is number 18 here. The shrines were just down the road from his house. It might seem difficult to associate this with the arduous journeys understood to be involved in long-distance pilgrimages such as that of the holy land to Western Europeans.

In fact Guizzelmi's relationship to his home and home town was unusual. He acted as a travelling judge and was on average at home only 3 months in a year. When absent from his hometown he could make vows analogous to those of a pilgrim as more conventionally understood.

Moreover, when on his frequent travels around the Florentine territories, his promotion of the Prato shrines –

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handing out the lead or printed tokens of the shrine, as in the story of the priest Vincenti I quoted – he became implicated in the inception of pilgrimages, inviting potential devotees to integrate the Carceri into their mental map of shrines as the possible focus of a vow.

Indeed, extending the thought about the shrine as a site of devotional work, we can see these distributed tokens as opening up ever more diffused devotional opportunities.

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this map plots all of the sites associated with Guizzelmi's first person stories of miracles involving imaged tokens of the Carceri shrine. In each case the perceived miracle happened at this site of the engagement with the token, not with the shrine image itself. Where then is the Madonna of the Carceri?

There is a sense in which she is wherever her image is. What I'm getting at here is that the notional holy place – the shrine – as a site of miracle begins to dissolve. In all of these stories the healed devotee goes to Prato to give thanks – the pilgrimage – but the miracle is understood to have already happened – has been made to happen, I would like to claim – in these places. The pilgrimage element is absolutely a devotional performance rather than a visit to a well-defined site holy power.

In the limit the same was already implicit in the story of St Cuthbert's shoes.

Can we think of these moments of encounter with these humble tokens

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as akin, to use current jargon, to pop-up shrines. The offer of the image itself generates an opportunity to cross over into that different transformational place.

You may feel that this plays to loosely with explanatory categories and threatens to render them useless. But it is a long standing commonplace of discussions of pilgrimage that one can in principle achieve the spiritual transformations promised by pilgrimage by meditative engagement at home.

My point in raising this possibility is that it helps as to acknowledge the allusive force of the visual and how people could exploit it in attempt to engage with the divine.

For the reformers of the 16th century this kind of behaviour represented an abuse of images, but what I'm trying to do is work towards a model which can see this kind of behaviour as meaningful rather than as purposeless activity based on a persistent delusion or cynical misdirection. We can perhaps stand back from that and use an exploration of such sites to help us understand the ways in which people have sought to engage with their God and make sense of their challenging lives.

I want to end where we began, with the Holy Land because Giuliano Guizzelmi made a vow to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Sepulchre in 1499. We don’t know exactly what prompted it but perhaps it was linked to the sense of the half millennium. But he never got there.

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This is his record of his abortive trip.

He made it as far a as Venice but was advised that passage was impossible because of the Turks. On his way back he fell ill and had to stay with a friend in Bologna. He ruefully records that the whole thing cost him 36 Venetian gold ducats. That may sound rather worldly, but the solemnity of the vow which I insisted on earlier was not lost on him.

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According to family tradition the priest anointing Guizzelmi on his death bed found embedded in bis flesh the fragments of the hair shirt he had worn ever since failing to fulfil his pilgrimage vow.

We are back to the importance of the journey. But the importance is not how long it is or how arduous or what you experience on the way. What matters is that you complete it.