

## A CONTEMPORARY PILGRIMAGE IN SOUTHWARK

*The focus of our Annual General Meeting was 'Pilgrimage' so it seemed entirely appropriate to begin by going in a mini-pilgrimage arranged by our Anglican Co-Moderator, Bishop Michael Ipgrave.*



We gathered around the font near the west door of the Church of St George the Martyr in Borough High Street, Southwark. Bishop Michael told us a

little of the story of the area we were visiting. Just across London Bridge from the City of London, Southwark was where everything that was prohibited within the city walls took place. There were theatres, prostitution and prisons. There were also many slaughter houses and tanneries. The place would not have smelled good! He quoted from the Epistle to the Hebrews 13.11-12: 'For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. Therefore Jesus also suffered outside the city gate in order to sanctify the people by his own blood.'



Southwark was the starting point for pilgrims making the journey to the great shrine of St Thomas Becket at Canterbury. The tiny area around the church offers seven particularly resonant places where we could go to reflect and pray about some of the many pressing issues in our life together today. We were each given a booklet containing a map and some ideas for reflection and intercession along the way and, after a short prayer, off we went on our little pilgrimage in groups of three or four.

### On the church steps

The quiet of the church was in stark contrast to the bustle of Borough High Street. Standing on the church steps we were reminded that the dedication to George the Martyr, recorded in 1122, is the earliest to this warrior saint in the London area. It was probably chosen by local gentry returning from the First Crusade. Tradition relates that George was one of the warrior saints who appeared miraculously at the Battle of Antioch in 1098 to rally the Crusader armies. So this was a good place to pray for peace, justice and reconciliation throughout the Middle East, for greater understanding between Jews, Christians and Muslims in the Holy Land, for the Christian communities of the Middle East suffering at this time, and for the Council of Christians and Jews, the Christian Muslim Forum, the Three Faiths Forum.

### In the Red Cross Garden

It was a five minute walk from the church to Redcross Way and the Red Cross Garden. The garden was established by the Anglican social reformer Octavia Hill in 1887 on the site of a burnt-down factory. Southwark at that time was a severely deprived slum area, and Hill felt passionately that inner city children should have access to nature. 'Nature breathes again in darkest Southwark,' she wrote on completion of the project. There we were invited to pray for responsible stewardship of our fragile world's resources, for education in ecological awareness, for communities suffering as a result of environmental degradation, and for the work of



Bankside Open Spaces Trust.



### Cross Bones Burial Ground

Just up the road from the Red Cross Garden is the Cross Bones Burial Ground, where the names of paupers and prostitutes buried there are displayed on ribbons attached to the fence. Bishop Michael had told us when we set out that in medieval times Southwark was notorious for its sex trade. Indeed, many of the prostitutes were licensed by the Bishop of Winchester in whose diocese the area then stood! So this was the place where we prayed for people caught up in networks of human trafficking, for respect for the dignity of all women and men, for all on the margins of society, and for the London Borough of Southwark.



## The Borough War Memorial

It took a few minutes to walk to our next location, passing under road and railway bridges along busy roads to the Borough War Memorial where we were invited to pray for all caught up in war. The memorial was erected in 1922 to commemorate those who died in the 'Great War' from the parish of St Saviour's, Southwark (Southwark Cathedral). The bronze statue on the plinth is of an infantryman tramping through mud. The front of the plinth shows a soldier in classical costume and the rear has a mourning woman with a naked child and a dove. The inscription reads: 'May their memory live for ever in the minds of men'. We remembered all who were killed or maimed in the First World War, and prayed for those committed to building and keeping peace around the world, for the United Nations and for world leaders, and for the peoples and governments of the countries from which we came.



## The site of The Tabard

Here are Bishop Martin Lind and Gudrun Kaper, deep in conversation as they walked along Borough High Street. There you find inns from which in medieval times pilgrims set out to the shrine of St Thomas at Canterbury. Chaucer's pilgrims, who entertained one another with stories in his *Canterbury Tales*, set out from The Tabard, the site of which is marked in Talbot Yard. Beneath the blue plaque that marks the spot where The Tabard stood we prayed for all who today are seeking meaning and purpose in their lives, for people looking for healing and forgiveness, for those trying to articulate a sense of spirituality, and for the Archbishop of Canterbury, and his Cathedral Church which to this day remains a focus of pilgrimage.

## The John Harvard Library

On our way back to the church we came to the John Harvard Library. In the 17th century Southwark had many Puritan households, and among them the Harvards. They kept the Queen's Head Inn. John Harvard, baptised in St Saviour's Church (Southwark Cathedral, where a chapel is named for him) travelled to New England in 1637 to seek freedom ministering in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Dying the following year, he bequeathed his library and half his estate to endow the university which bears his name. Outside the library we prayed for vigilance in promoting freedom of religion around the world, for those who abuse or distort freedom, for the victims of oppression and exclusion, and for the President and people of the United States in their global role.



## The site of the Marshalsea Prison

Immediately past the library we turned left into Angel Place, which is currently largely under scaffolding. We were able to glimpse parts of the surviving wall of the Marshalsea Prison. One of five prisons in historic Southwark, the Marshalsea was particularly notorious for the number of debtors locked up there. Charles Dickens' father was imprisoned there during the writer's childhood, for a debt owed to a baker. Dickens later described the prison graphically in his novel 'Little Dorrit'. The Marshalsea prison was closed in 1842, and imprisonment of debtors stopped in 1869. Beside the wall we thought of people caught up in spiralling debts, and prayed for credit unions and for everyone promoting financial responsibility for households, and for those people who work in the financial sector, and for the London and Southwark Churches Credit Champions.

From there it was just a short step

back to the Church of St George the Martyr where we joined a group who felt unable to walk the course so had shared a 'virtual version' of our brief pilgrimage inside the church. We found it a very moving experience, and it opened our eyes to ways of walking much more carefully and prayerfully as we go about our business in our own home neighbourhoods. We hope you have enjoyed reading about it and sharing it with us.

