



Church Twinning Passion Film visit Sint Niklaas, Belgium, 30 March-2 April 2023

Bright and early on **Thursday 30 March** eleven members of Abingdon churches left to drive to Sint Niklaas to meet up with fellow Christians for the weekend. The focus of our trip was to see their Passion Play that we had been due to watch in 2020, but you know what prevented that visit! Now at last we were able to undertake our much-anticipated visit. We represented Anglican, Baptist, Ecumenical, Methodist and Roman Catholic congregations, all members of the Church in Abingdon, the CiA, initials that always raise an eyebrow!

We travelled in a large 9-seater people carrier driven by Astrid plus Ben's van that carried our suitcases, crossing into France via the Channel Tunnel. On into Belgium, our first stop was in Poperinge to visit Talbot House, the WW1 house for soldiers needing respite from trench warfare. It was interesting to hear that whatever the rank of soldier, they were treated as equals in Talbot House, where they could enjoy good food, comfy chairs, play chess and generally relax. Talbot House is the origin of TOC-H, an organisation that I recall being mentioned in my youth, though I never knew what it referred to.

On we drove to Sint Niklaas, where we were greeted by the mayor and our hosts at the town hall, which is a magnificent building. We also met up with three people from another of our twinned towns, Argentan! It was great to enjoy the church twinning with them too. The mayor welcomed us with a drinks reception, then after various speeches and exchanging of gifts, we each left with our individual host to enjoy their hospitality.

Friday dawned wet! We met up and drove with locals in their cars to Ghent, where we had an extensive tour of churches from different denominations:

Protestant Church: This Free Evangelical Community is thriving. The Pastor talked about the church and had taken the cover off the baptistry, which was much deeper than any I've seen in the UK. It was empty of water, so he got in and posed for photos! The modern church building was bright and airy and we saw some lovely craft decorations that had been made ready to celebrate Easter.

Pastor Erwin in the deep
Baptismal Pool



Sanctuary and Byzantine Artworks



Eastern Orthodox Parish Church:

It was fascinating to visit this church, which had very many icons and pictures of biblical stories. We were each given a candle to take into the church, light and stand in a sand tray to represent our prayers. The congregation stands for the mass and services can be very long as there are no short cuts in the liturgy!

The atmosphere was very peaceful and contemplative.

Anglican Church:

this meets in a Catholic church that had been the Begijnkerk, where women in holy orders, but not nuns, once lived and worshipped. Sadly, the Anglican congregation that had once been thriving has now shrunk in numbers. Sally found some hymn books and led us in 'Holy, holy, holy,' which raised our spirits and was very moving because the acoustics of the church were excellent due to the incredibly high vaulted roof.

Dour Beguine Lady



Roman Catholic Cathedral: After lunch at the Bishop's 'House', which is attached to the cathedral, we visited Sint-Baafs Cathedral and its very special altarpiece, the Lamb of God, or Mystic Lamb, painted in the 16th century by the brothers Hubert and Jan van Eyck. Afterwards, there was a very warm and cordial meeting with Bishop Lode, of the RC Diocese of Ghent. The bishop, a Trappist monk, provided us with Trappist beers, particularly Orval, which comes from the Abbey where he had formerly been responsible for its production! Astrid gave the bishop a brief outline of Christian twinning, and the bonds between our towns.

The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb



Having returned to Sint Niklaas, we each had dinner with alternative hosts, which was a lovely experience as we met more members of Sint Niklaas' Christian community.

Saturday:

We met at Sint Jozefkerk to view the new Armenian Cross that has been erected in the church grounds. A member of the Armenian community talked about the cross and how her fellow Armenians had fled persecution in the early and late twentieth century.

Afterwards we set off in the rain for a guided tour of Sint Niklaas, visiting the memorial for the British troops who lifted the occupation of Sint Niklaas in 1944. We had a welcome coffee break with staff from the International Committee that helps all the refugee groups in Sint Niklaas. They showed us a video explaining their work and provided delicious Romanian cake with our tea and coffee!

Armenian Cross



International Comité



Hide and Seek Mural



Walking on through the town, we saw interesting sculptures in the square, and the Polish memorial to those troops who maintained the freedom of the city after the British moved on to relieve other communities. The Evangelical Protestant Community gave us a delicious lunch in their church, which is located behind one of the main shopping streets. They were very kind and welcoming, as were members of all the churches that we met.

British War Memorial



Polish War Memorial



Johanna and Margaretha in the Main Square



That afternoon we had a little free time and visited a museum that is being renovated and is close to reopening. It's in a beautiful 'Georgian' house with wonderful architecture. Then many of us went to the Mercator Museum, which was a highlight for me. The maps dating back hundreds of years were very interesting and I was glad that the Mappa Mundi in Hereford Cathedral got a mention!

Late afternoon we gathered with hundreds of Sint Niklaas residents at the Onze-Lieve Vrouw church to walk in procession to the Roman Catholic Cathedral where the Bishop celebrated mass. The walk through the centre of the city stopped the traffic and was a witness to community as the Roman Catholic clergy wore their robes and the Bishop was dressed in his ceremonial attire, not the Trappist monk's habit of the day before!

After the service we went to a nearby restaurant for dinner, then walked to the cinema complex for the premier showing of The Passion. Since enacting the play in person in 2020 had not been possible, and 2021 was no better, the play was made into a spectacular film, shot in locations around Sint Niklaas. Among the large cast there were some professional actors, all of whom had been born in Sint Niklaas and gave their services for free. The story of the passion was told in a modern idiom to teenagers who were inquisitive about the person of Jesus and the meaning of Easter. It was really effective, especially the arrest of Jesus that took place on top of a very tall tower block and was carried out by brutal looking soldiers.

Jesus



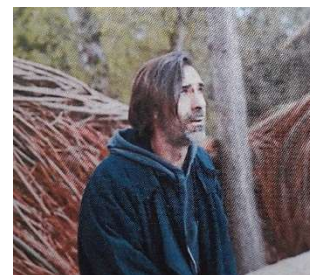
Mary, mother of Christ



Mary Magdalene



Judas



There was a reception after the film, where cast, bishop, clergy mingled with everyone. The atmosphere was excited and people were thrilled with the film of the play.

Sunday:

On Sunday we were free to go to whichever church we wanted and most of us went to our host's church. I went to Sint Jozefkerk with my host where there was a lively catholic mass that traced the whole journey of Jesus through the events of Holy Week to the cross – and resurrection!

We all met up at a farewell lunch in the Deanery held by the Passion committee and their church twinning committee. At 2pm it was time to bid the Sint Niklaas committee goodbye and begin the long drive home. It had been a memorable few days and I had found it refreshing to meet Christian brothers and sisters from Belgium and France, especially staying with my wonderful host, who I hope to welcome to my home in due course.

Our grateful thanks go to Chris De Beer, chief organiser in Sint Niklaas, for our enjoyable visit.

Sue Robbins (Christ Church, Abingdon)

