MY SAINT

I have a friend who lived 700 years ago. She was a pilgrim like me.

Birgitta Birgersdotter was born into a noble family in Sweden in the Middle Ages, and people knew she was special even before she was born - her grandmother prophesied that her wondrous voice should be heard all over the world. Birgitta was much loved as a child and people agreed that she had a sunny disposition - everyone described her as cheerful and happy. But there was a problem. Birgitta was almost three years old, and she didn't speak at all, not a single word. Doctors came to examine her, but no one could figure out what was wrong - and how would her voice be heard around the world if she couldn't speak?

Then one day shortly before her fourth birthday, little Birgitta woke up and surprised everyone by opening her mouth and speaking clearly, more clearly than most children her age, even though those were her very first words. Birgitta's family and friends were delighted of course!

But she still wasn't quite like other children. Her family was very religious and she was taught to love Jesus, but her devotion started very early. She loved going to mass in her family's chapel and in nearby Fresta or even the cathedral at Uppsala for special occasions. One day she surprised her parents by telling them that the Virgin Mary had visited her and allowed her to try on her crown. Birgitta didn't get to keep the crown, but she never forget how it felt when it was placed on her head. She would be visited by Mary and Jesus many times in her life.

Sadly, Birgitta's mother died when she was still just a child, and she and her younger sister were sent to live with their aunt and uncle. They missed their family and their home, of course, but even more changes were coming - three years later when Birgitta was only thirteen years old, her father announced that she was to marry the son of an old friend, and that her sister Katarina would marry his brother. The girls were very young, barely teenagers, but it wasn't unusual to marry early in those days.

Birgitta's new husband, Ulf, was only a few years older than she was, and he was very handsome and smart. Ulf had inherited a large home, almost a palace, and Birgitta took on the job of running the large household with all of its farms and businesses. And soon they became parents! Ulf and Birgitta went on to have eight children, so she was very busy caring for them and overseeing their education while Ulf served as a *lagman* (similar to a governor) and Lord of the Manor. Birgitta loved her home and family, but before her children were grown, the King of Sweden called on her serve as the Mistress of his Royal Household. All of the children, even the youngest, were sent away to finish their schooling while their parents served their country and the king.

Despite her new responsibilities, Birgitta always found time to care for the sick and the poor - she believed everyone had the right to good food and medicine, and she was much loved for the way that she cared for everyone, not just her own children. This continued when she moved to the palace in Stockholm - she would put on a cloak and boots and slip out a side door so she could visit the local hospital to deliver parcels of food and clothing that she bought with her own money. Everyone loved her - from the

poor peasants outside on the streets all the way up to the royal family, even though she often scolded them for being so wasteful and frivolous.

While she was still living at court, Ulf and Birgitta's son, Gudmar, died while he was living at his school in Stockholm. Grieving for him, it became clear to Birgitta that it was time for her to leave court life and Ulf and Birgitta decided to fulfill a dream they had shared for many years. Birgitta would leave court and Ulf would step back from his professional responsibilities, and they would go on pilgrimage together.

Birgitta had grown up hearing stories of pilgrimage from her parents and grandparents, and she longed to travel to the holy sites they had told her about. Her love of Jesus and his mother, Mary, had deepened over the years and she wanted to focus on her prayers and spiritual life. The couple made extensive arrangements and as soon as they could, they left to make the journey to Trondheim in Norway to visit the cathedral and the bones of St Olaf. Although they were wealthy, the couple chose to travel as true pilgrims, without servants, and making most of the journey by foot. They walked 500 miles, through forests and lakeland to reach their destination - this would have taken them several weeks, and then, of course, they had to walk all the way back home again.

Ulf and Birgitta loved their time on the road, and felt that this was a good life for them. They decided to make a longer pilgrimage, to the tomb of St James in Santiago, Spain, along the pathway known as the *Camino de Compostela*, traveling from their home in Sweden, across Europe, to Spain. Again, they chose to walk most of the way through those foreign lands. Birgitta was happy on these journeys - she loved the simplicity of pilgrim life, especially having time to pray and think about her life and how she wanted to live. She was happier wearing a pilgrim's cloak and hat rather than the silks and satins of royal life. The couple stayed in simple inns whenever they could and ate whatever they were served - they did not seek any royal privileges, though surely they were recognised and welcomed along the way. Traveling was slow, and they stopped to visit holy shrines and cathedrals along the way, places pilgrims still visit today. Her experiences would change her life.

When Ulf and Birgitta arrived in Santiago, they were greeted as royalty and given special access to the cathedral so that they could pray in front of the saint all night long if they wanted to - which they did. They loved their months there that winter, and people were already calling Birgitta a Saint.

Are you wondering how St Birgitta can be my friend when she lived so long ago? That's a very good question! And it is something I have wondered about myself.

Ten years ago, when I was getting ready to teach a group of pilgrims in Gotland (which is a Swedish island in the middle of the Baltic Sea), I wondered if anyone from Sweden had ever gone on pilgrimage. It didn't take long for me to hear about St Birgitta and her amazing pilgrimages. It seems that everyone in Sweden knows about her and she is still well loved and much celebrated. Magical things happened for me in Sweden that summer - and I soon found myself on a pilgrimage of my own to visit the places she had lived. I wanted to learn even more about her, but everything was written in Swedish, so it has taken a long time and a lot of research to understand her life and tell her story.

But it is more than that. Pilgrims who walk the Camino in Spain talk about their camino families, the people they meet on the road who quickly become close friends, even if they don't actually spend much time together. Often those same pilgrims will talk about their Camino Angels, people they meet along the

way who offer help in ways that feel like miracles. Pilgrims never forget the people they meet and the friendships feel as real as the ones they have with people back home. That is how I feel about Birgitta. I know that, despite the centuries that separate us, we share the same experiences of long days of walking while living a simple life as we made our way to the shrine at Santiago. The road looks more modern now, but the path is the same - it leads across the same mountains and through the same cities. Then, as now, pilgrims greet each other with the words *Buen Camino*, and we share an understanding of what it means to make a pilgrimage.

I started writing letters to Birgitta, pretending that she was a wise friend. She has never answered, at least not in words on paper, but I always feel like she hears me, and it seems like I receive unexplained nudges towards information that answer my questions. The more I pour my heart to her, the more I love her, and the more I feel guided by her. Strange? Perhaps. But wonderful, and very fun. She has become one of my closest friends.

The more I learn about Birgitta and her long ago life, the more I realise that she was both a very real woman and also someone who did so much good that she was named a saint after she died. While I will never be a saint, I know what it is like to be a mother, a pilgrim, and to live far from home for a very long time. Let me tell you more about my friend and what happened in her life after she walked back out of Santiago over 700 years ago.

When Birgitta and Ulf left Santiago at the end of the winter, they had to retrace their steps all the way back to their home in Sweden, back across Spain then up through France towards the Baltic Sea. In a French city called Arras, Ulf became very ill, and everyone feared he might die. Because of his royal connections, he was removed from his pilgrim hostel and the best doctors were summoned. Birgitta left his side only to go to the cathedral to pray. While she was in the cathedral, she saw a vision. The Virgin Mary and St Denis, a French saint, visited her and showed her the cities of Rome and Jerusalem and told her that she would visit those cities and promised that Ulf would survive. The couple would, they said, return safely home to Sweden. In gratitude, Birgitta and Ulf promised to devote themselves to God for the rest of their lives.

The couple was greeted with great celebration when they returned home at last, but their lives would never be the same again. They did not want to return to their noble lifestyle, either at home or at court - Ulf would join a monastery and Birgitta would eventually become a nun. Their oldest son, Karl, and his wife became the Lord and Lady of Alfas Manor so that Ulf and Birgitta could step quietly into their new lives. Ulf lived only a few more years, but Birgitta's life went in a whole new direction.

After Ulf died, she moved out of the family home completely and joined the Alvastra monastery as a Franciscan nun. Never again would she dress in sumptuous clothes or surround herself with rich furnishings and other comforts. Her visions of Mary and Jesus continued, and soon she felt that she was being asked to create a new abbey in Vadstena on the shores of Lake Vetter right on the edge of their family land, with a donation from her cousin, King Magnus, and his wife, Blanche. The Abbey would have two communities, one for men and one for women, but it would always be ruled by an Abbess.

I have been to Vadstena, to see both the beautiful church and also the ruins of the old monastery there, with its separate living quarters for the men and the women on either side of the church. Birgitta's love of books and learning was included in the new building - the nuns' tiny private rooms included small turning

windows for passing books in and out. She never saw the Abbey completed. In 1349, Birgitta left for Rome to seek official recognition for her new Order. She would cross Europe in the midst of the second wave of the Black Death, arriving in time for the Holy Year of 1350. She would never return to her beloved Sweden again.

But that was not the end of her life by any means. Her errand would take far longer than expected and she make other pilgrimages from Rome, visiting the shrines of saints, and finally Jerusalem and the Holy Land itself. Her life in Rome was very different from her old life in Sweden. She was given a large home, *Campo di Fiori,* in the *Piazza de Farnese* right in the centre of Rome where she took care of other Swedish pilgrims, offering them food and a place to stay. She continued caring for the poor and the sick, again paying with her own money even when she didn't have much left in her purse. It must not have been easy making such a huge move to a new country. She struggled to learn Latin, the language spoken in her adopted city, but she loved visiting the many churches and shrines there. She soon became known in the city as a good woman and many spoke of her as always being cheerful despite the difficulties in her life. Her family visited and her daughter, Katarina, came to live with her mother until her death, helping with her work and travelling with her when she went on her many pilgrimages. Birgitta was able to take her sons Karl and Birger to visit the shrines she loved, which brought her great joy.

When Birgitta was nearly 70 years of age, she finally embarked on an ambitious journey to visit the city of Jerusalem in what was to be her final pilgrimage; she would take Katarina, Birger, and Karl with her, along with chaplains and clergymen, and two Spanish women to assist them. Birgitta worried that the journey would be too difficult for her - visiting the Holy Land was dangerous and the trip would be filled with hardships. The party stopped in Naples, where Birgitta had stayed before and knew many people. While they were there, Karl died and his mother had the sad task of saying goodbye to her beloved son and continuing on without him.

They left Naples by sea in a ship that was blown off course, taking the pilgrims to Greece before going on to their planned stop in Cyprus. From there they sailed to Jaffa where another storm blew them on to the rocks and everyone feared for their lives. Birgitta stayed calm and promised the other panic stricken passengers that no one would lose their lives in the shipwreck - and as promised, all made it safely to land. The little pilgrim party continued on to Jerusalem where they stayed in a pilgrim hospice.

Visiting Jerusalem was the high point of Birgitta's life of devotion to Jesus and his Mother, the Virgin Mary. She visited the places she knew from her years of studying and praying about the life of Jesus. With a heavy heart she climbed the steps to Calvary, then made her way to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre where she was overcome with emotion. She had much to write when she returned to her room in the pilgrim hostel each night.

Birgitta and her group spent four months in Jerusalem, returning again and again to the holy sites. She kept vigil one night in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in preparation for her son Birger to receive a knighthood, a moment of great pride for his mother. She must surely have missed Karl then, knowing that he had, in the end, been unable to fulfil his pilgrim vows. Some of the places she visited were in ruins, the result of time moving on in a war-ravaged region. She visited the Garden of Gethsemane with its grove of ancient olive trees, but the sacred temple of the Crusaders was in ruins. The home of Anna and Joachim, Mary's parents, where Mary had lived as a child, had once been the site of the Church of St Anne, but by the time Birgitta visited, this church had become a mosque.

After four months, in the middle of August, Birgitta left Jerusalem to travel the five miles to Bethlehem to visit the manger where Jesus was born. The Church of the Nativity sits directly over the cave where the manger had been. While in the cave, Birgitta received one of her most important and best-remembered visions, a vision you might have seen in pictures without even knowing it had come from her.

Birgitta herself described how she saw Mary and Joseph arrive at the cave with a donkey and cow. Wearing a white cloak and about to give birth, Mary prepared herself and the area, then, while kneeling in prayer, brought forth her Child. Mary welcomed her baby and took him in her arms before placing him in the manger to rest. [If you ever see pictures of the nativity in which Mary is kneeling, this comes directly from Birgitta's vision.]

Back in Jerusalem, Birgitta fell ill with a fever and pain. By September she had recovered enough to visit Mary's tomb in the church at the foot of the Mount of Olives. In yet another vision, Mary told Birgitta that it was time for her to return home. The pilgrim party returns to Jaffa and sailed for home, stopping again in Cyprus then landing in Naples where her authority was questioned and proven. Birgitta was still not fully well, and they remained in Naples for some time, staying with friends over Christmas and Twelfth Night. The extended pilgrimage had been expensive and Birgitta was once again short of funds, causing her concern and making her worry.

Returning at last to her home in Rome, she continued her efforts to convince the pope to return to Rome from his home in Avignon in France, even increasing her efforts sending constant letters and messengers to him. Eventually, she succeeded, but by the time he arrived, Birgitta had died at the age of 70. Considered quite old in those days, she had lived a very full life, raising her large family, traveling extensively, and had met and influenced kings, queens, and popes. When she died, she left behind a large community of friends and supporters.

Those who had known her described her as being gentle, kind to everyone, and beautiful with a laughing face. One inn-keeper with whom she had stayed, said simply, *Who would have thought she was a saint? She who was always so friendly to everyone, and who talked to all and sundry?*

Even her former employees, including her sons tutors from her younger days, remember her kindness and good cheer, and were among those waiting to welcome her home when her funeral cortege arrived back in Vadstena in Sweden with her body. Despite the seriousness of the messages she brought to the world, she never failed to watch her words and deliver them with kindness. Today she is remembered and honoured through Europe and the Christian world as a prophetess - the predictions that her wondrous voice would be heard all over the world has certainly proved true.

And today, more than 700 years after her death, she feels like my personal friend.