

Why do some Christians go to Lourdes?, see page 92

The story of Bernadette

Bernadette pulled her woollen shawl more tightly round her shoulders. She wished her friends would hurry back. It was getting cold. They were collecting firewood but Bernadette couldn't help them. She knew that if she went in the long grass to pick up sticks, her feet would get wet and she would be ill again. While she waited, she looked around and noticed a small cave in the hillside. As she looked at the cave, a strange light seemed to glow inside it. Bernadette rubbed her eyes and looked again, but the light was still there. It was growing brighter all the time and, as Bernadette watched, she saw a lady appear out of the light. Bernadette felt frightened at first, but when she looked at the lady's face she felt peaceful and happy. The lady was wearing a white dress with a blue sash, and in her hand she held a rosary. Bernadette knew at once that this was a vision of Mary. She sank to her knees, not caring about the wet grass any more, took her rosary out of her pocket and said a prayer as she moved the beads through her fingers.

Bernadette, get up! What are you doing kneeling in the wet grass!' Bernadette staggered to her feet and, turning round, saw her friends, their arms full of firewood. 'Can't you see her!' Bernadette asked, but the vision had disappeared. Bernadette told her friends what had happened but they didn't believe her. They thought that she had been day-dreaming again.

When her mother saw Bernadette's wet skirt, she was very angry and told Bernadette that she was not to go back to the cave. But Bernadette did go back. She

went back to the cave every day, and each time she saw the vision of Mary. On one of her visits, the lady pointed to the earth and told Bernadette to drink. Bernadette used her fingers to dig, and after a while the soil felt damp. As she dug, the hole began to fill with water from an underground spring. Bernadette drank the water, which was cold and clear.

Bernadette told the people in her village about what she had seen. Some of them teased her and called her names, but others visited the cave themselves to see if Mary would appear to them. No one else saw the vision of Mary, but many people drank the water from the spring and some of them who had been ill said that the water had made them better. More and more people came to drink from the spring. People who felt ill, people who felt sad, people who were lonely, came to drink the water and went away feeling better.

After a while, a big church was built near the cave and pools were made to hold the spring water. People came from all over the world to visit the spot where Bernadette had seen the vision of Mary. Today, thousands of people make a pilgrimage and bathe in the water. Many of them come in wheelchairs, some have to be carried on stretchers but there are always people ready to help them. Some of the people who make the pilgrimage say that they have been cured by visiting this special place and drinking the water.

Many Christians call Bernadette a saint, and in their homes have pictures of Lourdes, the village in France where Bernadette saw the vision.