

Labyrinths

Labyrinths are found all around the world in many cultures and civilisations. They are found carved in rock, made of clay, painted, cut into the earth, or planted with hedges, as well as in Cathedral pavements. Labyrinths are different from mazes as mazes have many different paths and dead ends, while a labyrinth, however complicated it looks, has only one twisting path which you follow into the centre and back again. By this definition, one of the most famous labyrinth stories – the Cretan legend of Theseus and the Minotaur - is clearly about a maze, not a labyrinth!

The Romans adapted the labyrinth as a decorative floor pattern, and in the medieval period Christian artists and thinkers then began to use floor labyrinths as a decorative feature in medieval cathedrals. The pattern used at Chartres Cathedral (the 11 layer round pattern in this booklet) is generally seen as the most perfect of these medieval labyrinths. In churches the labyrinths took on new religious meanings:

- The path was seen as representing the path of the Christian soul as it moved through life towards God. By walking the labyrinth the believer traced out his laborious life upon earth to death at the centre, they then took the symbolic route out to resurrection
- Medieval pilgrims who visited the cathedrals would often follow the path of the labyrinth on their knees. As most of the labyrinths were placed by the entrances to cathedrals this symbolised how the pilgrim was putting his secular life behind him and journeying to God. When he reached the centre he turned to walk back out into the world – his pilgrimage was over. This usually took about an hour.
- When it was no longer possible to visit Jerusalem and the Holy Land, pilgrims would walk the labyrinth as part of their pilgrimage, as a sign that they wished to make that longer journey if only it were possible.
- Other people would walk the labyrinth on the eve of their baptism or confirmation, again as a sign of putting off the old life and embracing the new life in Christ.
- Still others would walk the labyrinth in Holy Week, as they contemplated Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem and to the cross.

An important feature of walking a labyrinth is that you do it both alone and in company. The single person path guarantees that you make the journey alone in your own unique way, but around you are your fellow believers, also on the journey with you.

After the medieval period labyrinths fell out of use and their spiritual message was forgotten; many examples were destroyed when cathedrals were repaved during later centuries. **Ely Cathedral** never had a medieval labyrinth, but in 1870 Sir George Gilbert Scott constructed one under the West Tower. The labyrinth is 66 metres long – the same distance as the tower above it. It is the square example in this booklet.

The idea of walking a spiritual labyrinth was revived for the Millennium when a travelling version was created with artwork, music, meditations and personal CD players! It is too complicated to be used in the primary classroom, but you may like to look at an on-line version of it at www.labyrinth.org.uk