

Today, we go back in time for today's 'on this day' to April 28 1982, when POPE JOHN PAUL II became the first Pope to visit England. And I was there! I remember the evening the Pope arrived going with my family to the area



around Westminster Cathedral where he was staying, and he came out on a balcony to greet everyone. But why had it taken so long for a Pope - the head of the Catholic Church - to come to visit England? The reason went back to KING HENRY VIII, and his proclaiming himself to be the Head of the Church IN England, so that the Pope was no longer head of the Church in England. And then under KING EDWARD VI - Henry's son - the Church IN England broke away completely from the Catholic Church and became the Church OF England, with Protestant church services, prayer books and religious beliefs that were very different from that of the Catholic Church. There was a reversal when Edward VI died, and his half-sister MARY became Queen. She was the daughter of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, and had been raised a Catholic - so when she became Queen, she said, 'Right - England is going back to being a Catholic country' and she hunted down and killed loads of religious people who were Protestants. When she died, her half-sister ELIZABETH became Queen and tried to stop all the killing over who was what religion - but it looked like the Catholic countries of France and Spain were trying to get rid of her, so she moved strongly to go back to being a Protestant country and England has remained one ever since - and everywhere the British Empire went, the ANGLICAN CHURCH went with it, spreading Protestant Christianity all over the globe.

The Catholic Church was horrified by this development, which split Christians in the West down the middle into Catholics and Protestants. (In Eastern countries like Russia and Greece, a different form of Christianity has taken hold - ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY.) Losing England was a very big blow for the Catholic Church. For example, one of the biggest places in the whole of Europe for Catholics to go to was WALSINGHAM, in the East of England. But once England became a Protestant country, no Catholics wanted to go there anymore. And the DISSOLUTION OF THE MONASTERIES - which happened under King Henry VIII, with Henry seizing the wealth of all the Catholic monasteries in England and destroying their churches - robbed the world of places where Catholics could go to in order to get closer to God. So no wonder the Catholic Popes didn't want to visit England, even if they had the chance to do so. Instead, they kept praying for the English to come to their senses, and convert back to being Catholics. POPE LEO XIII (which means X (ten) plus three Is (ones) = 13), who was Pope from 1878 to 1903, predicted that 'When England returns to Walsingham' then Mary, the Mother of God, 'will return to England'. And so the Popes just waited to see if England would ever 'return to Walsingham' and become a Catholic country again. However, after the end of WORLD WAR II, the feeling was that just waiting to see whether England would come back to being a Catholic country wasn't enough - and that the Catholic Church

had to reach out to the Church of England, start talking to it, and see whether the two churches could start moving towards each other and re-unify. Pope John Paul II was strongly in favour of this movement, and his visit to England was part of that effort to try to get talks going between the Catholic Church and the Church of England. But there was maybe a deeper significance to his visit.

Less than a year before the Pope visited England, a gunman had tried to kill him - on 13 May 1981. The Pope was shot and suffered severe blood loss, but he was not killed. The suspicion was that the gunman had been hired by the Russian government to kill the Pope. This is because ever since the end of WORLD WAR II, Russia - or, as it was known then, the SOVIET



UNION - had been in control of the countries surrounding Russia - Poland, East Germany, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Romania. Everyone who lived in the Soviet Union and those countries around the Soviet Union lived really horrible lives - they didn't have much money, or much food, it was very hard for them to move abroad, and they couldn't say bad things about the government without being scared that they would be punished. A lot of people in the West - including the President of the United States RONALD REAGAN (pronounced 'Ray - gun'), and the British Prime Minister, MARGARET THATCHER - were determined to do what they could to release the countries around the Soviet Union from Russian control so the people in those countries could live better lives. The Pope was from Poland, and he was very sympathetic to what Reagan and Thatcher were trying to do - and that's why the Russians might have wanted the Pope to be killed. So by visiting England, the Pope might have not only been trying to bring the Church of England and the Catholic Church closer together - he might also have been trying to encourage Margaret Thatcher's government to keep on going in their efforts to free Eastern Europe from Russian control. These efforts would succeed spectacularly in 1989 - but we will talk about that another time.