Word of the Month that Wasn't: Tourism

Christmas approaches. Reading the Gospel for Saturday of the 1st week of Advent, we come across one of those words in translation that seems slightly anomalous, because of its modern connotations: 'Jesus made a tour through all the towns and villages...' Jesus a tourist? Any version will produce a few like that, as the translators struggle to capture the sense of a tricky word. There's another on the 4th Sunday in Lent, when people were arguing about whether Jesus was the Christ. 'Some would have liked to arrest him', we read. And then: 'The police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees...' Police? Now I have an image of local constabulary in my head, and it won't go away!

Tourism may seem an odd choice of word in the Christmas month, until we think of the many who visit (pace Covid and political tensions) the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, whose mayor was expecting over a million visitors in 2019. And Christmas tourism is a term that covers a multitude of destinations, from Christmas markets in different countries to a visit to Santa Claus in Lapland.

I've lost track of the number of tourism sorts that exist these days. Some are familiar; others less so. Most of us have come across teletourism, where we visit locations we've seen on screen. Then there's ecotourism, bringing together conservation, natural habitats, and sustainable travel. 2017 was the International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development, and several terms now relate to it, such as geotourism, conscious tourism, slow tourism, pro-poor tourism, and responsible tourism.

But what about architourism (to see architecture), pescatourism (days out on a fishing boat), avitourism (birdwatching), gastrotourism (or culinary tourism), and vinitourism or oenotourism (for wine)? You can visit a place to give birth (birth tourism), get treatment (medical tourism), or legally end your life (suicide tourism). Some motivations are disturbing: disaster tourism, war tourism, dark tourism, and thanatourism for places associated with suffering or tragedy - from Thanatos, the Greek god of death.

Happier connotations are seen in voluntourism (volunteers abroad), philantourism (visiting places which need tourist support), accessible tourism (for those with physical or age limitations), and VFR ('visiting friends and relatives') tourism. You can stay at home and be a cybertourist, or browse collections as a phototourist. We see the future in space tourism.

Naturally, we mustn't forget religious, spiritual, sacred, or faith tourism - visits to see religious monuments, artefacts, and locations, or travel for spiritual purposes, as on a pilgrimage or retreat. And then there's astrotourism, where we go to good places to see stars, eclipses, or rocket launches. Bethlehem had at least three well-known astrotourists. Which is where we came in.