

## Pilgrimage

There are many pictures of Xn life in Bible

for example, *discipleship - apprentices to / followers of Jesus*  
*running the race*  
*fighting the good fight*

A thread running through the Bible is - *pilgrimage*. In popular culture we've adopted this kind of language by talking about life as a journey. I've been reflecting a lot on this because my wife and I recently completed the last 112km of the Camino to Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, Spain

Here are some examples of pilgrimage in the Bible

- In the book of Genesis, when Joseph introduced his father Jacob to Pharaoh, Jacob said to him, *'The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult'*
- There are of course the great pilgrim festivals of Jewish faith
  - Passover (celebrating the Exodus)
  - Pentecost (Feast of Weeks, celebrating the grain harvest)
  - Sukkoth (Feast of Tabernacles, remembering the 40 years in the wilderness on the way to the Promised land)

For each of these festivals the people would make their way in pilgrimage up to Jerusalem

- There are 15 "Songs of Ascent", Psalms of pilgrimage in the Psalter, numbers 120-134
- Psalm 84 says: *Blessed are those whose hearts are set on pilgrimage*

In the New Testament we see that

- Jesus was taken to Jerusalem aged 12 for Passover (his parents went every year)
- In John chapters 7 and 8 Jesus is in Jerusalem of the Feast Tabernacles, with its water ceremony and great candlelight in Temple. It was then that he proclaimed *Whoever is thirsty, let him come to me and drink, and ... I am the light of the world*
- His arrest, trial, Crucifixion and Resurrection all took place around Passover, and in Jerusalem
- In Acts 2, the coming of the Spirit and the birth of the church all took place during Pentecost, when Jews and God-seeking Gentiles from all over the Mediterranean were in Jerusalem for the festival

And of course Jesus himself is the Way. So early Xns were known as followers of The Way

Eugene Peterson, in his book, *The Journey*, wrote that the trend today is to think that ... *anything worthwhile can be acquired at once. There is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Xns called holiness*

He then quotes the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: *What is required is long obedience in the same direction*

At the same time as this societal trend, there is something of a reaction to the high speed world we live in. Maybe that's why this pilgrim path in Spain is so attractive. 300,000 people now walk the Camino every year, including families and large groups of young people. It seemed to me it was a kind of rite of passage for Spanish young people

I read this testimony written on the wall of an underpass:

*Today I will arrive in Santiago after 36 days of walking from St Jean. I feel as if I've lived a whole life in just one month. The Camino has taught me to love more, live better and laugh louder. And don't forget to forgive yourself... Thank you Camino for giving me a new perspective on life and how to live it.*

Here are some reflections on the Camino, and what it helps us understand about Christian life

### **Signposts**

Thankfully there are lots of signs on the Camino, at least the five days of our walking. They tell you how far you have to go, to the nearest metre! They are easy to follow - provided you pay attention! For example, in forests they are sometimes obscured by vegetation

### **Isaiah:**

*Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way; walk in it.'*

Jesus:

*The gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life*

The Camino is tough enough. Our group had to walk 18-20 miles two days running. It's a test of stamina and fitness. And in the tough pilgrimage of Xn life, we sometimes don't know which way to take. We need guidance, we need encouragement, we need the voice of conscience, we need the promptings of the Holy Spirit, we need the teaching of Jesus. All these we need to keep us on the right road

The Christian life has many signposts, but we must look out for them by reading our Bibles, spending time in prayer, listening to the promptings of the Spirit

On one night while I was out in central Edinburgh as a Street Pastor, we came across a stag party in the Grassmarket. One of the group was a social worker who said "I admire what you guys do". Another member of group spend ages explaining he was not a Christian but was interested in different religions, including Christianity. He was full of questions, confused and needing some clarity and purpose in life. It's actually not unusual to meet people like that on the streets, people with spiritual longing

Christian believers have such a privilege! We have so much to help us on the Way. But remember, the great sign of Christianity is the Cross. It's a reminder that of course we are saved through the sacrifice of Jesus, but also that the way of Xn pilgrimage is the way of self-sacrifice

### **People**

Another thing I certainly learned on the Camino is the importance of other people and they help they can give

In our group of 32 people there were a number of incidents

- someone lent a pair of sandals to a woman who got a nasty blisters on her toe
- I took two packs of Compeed, the blister plasters and came home with just one plaster after giving away all the rest to various members of the group
- my wife gave one of her walking poles to another person who developed Achilles tendon problems

When all else failed, you could call for taxi driver to take you to the next destination!

One day was came across and Italian father and his son, walked 41 km that day. It was late afternoon and they had not found any accommodation for the night. We were heading for a comfortable hotel. I had developed a friendship with another man in our group. He was good fun to be with and we enjoyed winding each other up. When I told him about this Italian pair, he said, "Mike, you and Maggie could give up your room for them". I began to feel consumed with guilt I hadn't done more. I wondered; did they have to sleep rough through the thunderstorm that evening? I had done nothing to help them. Thankfully for me - and for them - I discovered a couple of days later they had found somewhere to lay their heads

Jesus said: *Those who find the way to life are few.* 300,000 travel the Camino every year; but whether many or few, other people are critical

How much help do we actually offer each other? Teamwork & mutual support are vital if we are to keep going in the Christian life

In another Street Pastor encounter, our team were approached by a girl on Princes Street who has, I think, come to Edinburgh to study. She had tried three different churches and sadly not a single person had spoken to her. You can understand her response: she has given up on church

Paul wrote: *Rejoice with those who rejoice...* and of course the other side of coin is.. *weep with those who weep*

Have there been times when you've needed support? How grateful you've been when someone has given it! Have you been there for someone else when they have been in need of encouragement? Is there someone you know who needs that today? What could you do for them?

### **Final Destination**

The legend is that James the Apostle, brother of John, one of the three closest to Jesus, took the Gospel to Spain. He returned to Jerusalem and was executed by Herod Agrippa I in AD44 (this is mentioned in Acts 12, without a date). His bones were then taken by his disciples to Spain, where they were buried. They were "rediscovered" in 9th century and Santiago (St James) was built. It has been a destination for pilgrims since medieval times. The Black Death and Reformation of 16th Century led to its loss of popularity, but last decade or so has seen this rapid rise in numbers

In the cathedral itself you can view a container holding his "bones". Above this box is an ornate effigy you can climb up behind are you are encouraged to go give it a hug! Not only that, but James is supposed to have appeared as a white knight before the Galician army fighting against Muslims. So he is also known as *St James the Moorlayer*, which is a pretty offensive way to describe an apostle of Jesus.

The whole tradition is tenuous to say the least, a bit weird and peculiar; it's even disappointing, though the journey was good!

Some would say "just enjoy the journey", but surely we can say there's no point to a pilgrimage unless there's a destination. As Xns we are surely going somewhere. Our *"long obedience in the same direction"* will lead to holiness, that Christian maturity that doesn't come quickly. Christian character doesn't develop overnight. There's hard work to do. It takes practice to say No to what's wrong and Yes to what's good, right and will bless others. But this is a target to walk towards

There is a final destination; of life with Jesus for ever where there will be no sense of disappointment, no sense of anti-climax, nothing weird, nothing doubtful.

Paul: *I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord the righteous Judge will award me on that day - and not only to me but to all who have longed for his appearing*

We don't know exactly what it will be like, but it will be tremendous beyond our imagining. It will be better than the French people celebrating their team's World Cup victory

In *Pilgrim's Progress*, by John Bunyan, he describes the experience of death as going through deep waters. As Mr Valiant for Truth goes further and further over this river, he says, *I don't regret all the troubles I've been through to get here*. He proclaims, *Death, where is thy sting*. Then we are told in this memorable description of the celebration that awaited him, *All the trumpets sounded for him on the other side*

### **Conclusion**

So here are some lessons from the Camino to Santiago de Compostela.

The Christian life involves walking the pilgrim way. We are pilgrims

- whether worshipping or working
- whether witnessing or watching telly
- whether reading the Bible or reading the newspaper

And important on this way are signposts to guide us, people to help us and be helped, a Xn maturity to aim for and a final destination of glory to look forward to

I would encourage walking the Camino to anyone. I hope I have encouraged you to keep walking the Xn way