

## Shuffling to Santiago: An outward and inward journey.



Just over three years ago I was just about to start my sabbatical, a gift offered to ministers by the Methodist Church after an initial 10 years of service and then every subsequent seven years. It is a change to refresh, to restore and hopefully return to ministry rejuvenated and raring to go. The question was what to do with the opportunity? Not for me a tour of Wesley's preaching hot spots, cosy Celtic communities or even attempting to binge watching the entire Netflix catalogue. No, I decided to follow in the footsteps of literally millions of other people and walk all the way across northern Spain on the pilgrimage route to Santiago along the world famous Camino. At almost 800km long it is not a walk for the faint hearted although I did wonder at times if it was one for the fool hardy.

For many people, pilgrimage is an integral part of Christianity and this particular route is one that has been walked since the 9<sup>th</sup> century when Santiago, under threat from the spread of Islam, was the site of a 'discovery' that was to help the Christian faith maintain a stronghold in the North West corner of Spain. For some the walk would be done as an act of self penance but for many unfortunate souls walking in the Middle Ages, they were often doing it not for their own benefit but having been commanded to do so by their master / owner as an act of penitence in order that the master / owners sins could be forgiven.

Given the state of my feet at times during the walk, I did begin to wonder what sins I must have committed to be punished in such a way. Still having a bruised, battered and blistered soul (or n my case souls) is a remarkable aid to prayer with the phrase "Jesus, how much longer is

today's walk going to go on for?" often to be found running round my head.

For some the Camino is simply a long distance walk, other chose to do it in stages returning over several years, more and more people cover the distance on bicycles, kitted out in all the latest hi tech gear and yet seeming to forget the one essential thing that makes their journey, and that of any walker much better...a bell! But for many there is a deeply spiritual/religious/faith aspect to the walk with people from all over the world, of every size, shape and age finding themselves inexplicably drawn here.

The Camino de Santiago is a route that many people who have walked it believe can be divided into three parts. The initial part is where walkers are physically broken; broken by the miles of walking (I had calves that initially felt then had been assaulted by ex Leeds United player Norman Hunter), broken by the carrying all their belongings on their backs, broken by simply being out of their comfort zones. And you know what they say about when the going gets tough, the tough get going...or perhaps they pause at a roadside cafe, order a beer and just watch the world go by.

The middle section is the part where many pilgrims unravel mentally. Walking across the large and expansive central plateaux of Spain with its huge skies, endless open spaces and arrow straight tracks there is lots of time to simply think. LOTS. Think about the 5 'W's and the single 'H'; Who, What, When, Where, Who and How. There were times when I walked in silence, times when I walked deep in prayer, times when I walked listening to music that literally reduced me to tears as I put one foot on front of the other, times when I walked deep in conversation with others about life, death and everything in between. And despite its reputation as being the part of the walk many pilgrims decide to skip, it was without question my favourite part of the journey.

The last section of the journey is the part when the pieces start to get put together again. Physically you feel much stronger and the aches and pains have diminished, (not disappeared I hasten to add.) Mentally you have had time to think and the muddle of thoughts you began the journey

with has hopefully started to clear. Issues you have wrestled with, problems you have needed to solve and decisions that you needed to take have resolved. For me it was the question whether I should seek an extension to my stay in Poynton or whether the time was right to consider moving on. The fact that I am now here in Nottingham tells you the answer to that little dilemma. And one hopes that the closer one gets to Santiago, the more healed and whole one becomes, feeling closer to God, closer to those you have walked with, closer even to your true self.

Over the course of 28 days, the rhythm of the Camino inevitably ingrained itself into my bones so that the moment when I felt most 'lost' was not an occasion when I took the wrong turn and wandered off track but the day after I arrived at my destination, when the routine that had been my life for a month was no longer there. There in the midst of the thousands of people in Santiago I have never felt so alone in a crowd.

For me it was never about reaching the cathedral, never about seeing the great discovery of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the supposed resting bones of St James (of James and John biblical fame), but it was all about the journey. All about the transformation. All about the change. Change brought about by the people I met, by the places I visited, by the encounters I had, physically, mentally emotionally and spiritually. Change made possible through grace and by being open to giving and receiving from fellow pilgrims in the journey. Change as a result of being able to find time to spend time walking with others, walking with God and walking with myself.

And of course the journey did not stop in Santiago, neither did it stop a further three days walk west which brought me literally to the end of the earth...Finisterre. In his poem Little Gidding TS Elliot once wrote "We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." Coming back to the UK, back to Poynton, back to the familiar, perhaps nothing had really changed. And yet everything seemed different. The journey, my pilgrimage had not ended in Santiago but had merely been the starting point for another adventure, another pilgrimage. One that I walk with you and with God here in this place. Together in faith.