

The Camino de Santiago: (perhaps) a metaphor for life.

I decided on the title of this report and reflection as I was walking – and then for several days thereafter, it was said, without the perhaps, by quite a number of fellow pilgrims. I suspect that the thought has been considered by many folk, for many reasons, with many varied experiences – and this is mine.

About the second week in, having had quite a number of conversations, a few changes in weather, time to ache, rest, eat, sleep and reflect, I started a list of bullet point topic headings which will be the basis of this article. I'm going to try to keep them in the order they occurred to me and avoid repetition. I started at A and pretty quickly reached P but a few more were added in following days. So, there are a number of paragraphs and some have a few sentences added in *italic* where further thoughts occurred during re-reading this reflection before release.



To conclude this introduction, I had a number of questions to consider or ask during the journey. My thoughts were expanded with the inclusion of several suggestions from friends helping me see, or at least consider, a yet bigger picture. And as the saying goes, a picture paints a thousand words – so where available and appropriate, there are some images. Read on:-

Grey, overcast – dreary. Is that how a reflection should start? Well this is my story as I experienced it and it was spring with an emphasis on grey, over cast and dreary. It didn't rain much at all throughout the walk but on several occasions having been encouraged to see a cove, a beach, a cliff or even just the greenery – I couldn't. Fog, mist, low level cloud – haar – or whatever else you might like to call it when you cannot see ahead or around. On several occasions it really felt, where am I going, will this ever dissipate, what am I missing – and on a couple of occasions, take real care not to stumble over that something coming out of the mist. Is life meant to be like that? Dreary, overcast, no clear direction?

While walking there was always a goal – find the next coffee bar, lunch stop, your bed for the night but you couldn't see it. So I plodded on because I was on a journey within a time frame – and missing.... I don't know, I couldn't see it. *(After completing the Camino, I travelled on by car with a friend to Finisterre ('end of the earth') and it's light house. No matter which way you looked, you could not see or hear the sea, literally, the earth ended – in fog and steep cliffs.)*



And here begins the 2nd point - plod, trudge, continue, onward. Fairly negative way of looking at walking in a lovely country – or considering this to be a metaphor for life. There are stages where life can and for most people does become a drudge, getting through the day knowing tomorrow will be pretty much the same. That feeling was a regular companion while walking. The rucksack, which definitely had more in it than I needed and even after discarding a few bits, was still heavy and weighed me down. Pick up your cross and follow me versus take my yoke it is light – neither are quite right and both argued in my head with the pack on my back. When I could see it is lovely countryside (more on that later) but it took such an effort for it to change. Walking is not fast and the path could be seen for hundreds of yards or more in non fog days. With the weight of the pack, the track, path or road seemed to go on forever. And you couldn't give up because you were committed to reaching that day's destination. So many factors niggled, weighty rucksack, task, need and expectation and they all fit within the metaphor of life or Camino.

Waste – lot of it. To explain, Spain is a big open country with much that is excellent but they also have the space to abandon, not complete, discard buildings and much more. Perhaps it is cheaper to build new, the project ran out of money, the barn or farm or house could no longer serve where and how it

was originally created. I was struck by the number of derelict buildings of all sorts, shapes and sizes in 'every' field, hamlet, village, town. They had obviously taken considerable effort to erect (think of the dry stone walls in this country and the effort involved) and then they were simply abandoned with bits of furniture, traces for family mouldering away beneath rotted and often collapsed roof timbers. (Yet, almost no litter anywhere.) A puzzle about building and abandoning, about creating something functional or/and pretty but the fashion changes so leave it behind, about let someone come along at some time in the future and maybe they will clear it up. Perhaps, with thought, the building or at least much of the material, could be repurposed rather than dumped in landfill. And Church? Church (the people) cannot be, must not be repurposed. Perhaps regular, consistent yet contemporary reminders of that purpose with encouragement and 'maintenance' are needed. Church buildings are different. Let them serve somehow, perhaps not as originally purposed, but not abandoned simply for someone else to have to tidy up later. Nor be a partially completed project that never serves. In some ways, the same applies to church fellowships where many have left and unlikely to return because the mess, damage and broken relationships caused by others within the fellowship. Am I creating a mess in what I do and how I do it? That would be a catastrophic waste in so many ways.

There were a number of sounds associated with the Camino. The birds with so many different cheeps, warbles, chitters (none of which I recognise), along with big deep clanging bells (cattle mainly) and slightly higher toned ones on goats and donkeys. But this paragraph is about "this is mine, keep off, keep out", I will protect my material possessions. Not every, but definitely the majority of farms and houses, had very prominent signs warning of the guard dog. But they were very audible long before you were close to the property. With years of experience and the number of pilgrims, though low numbers this year so far, I would have expected the dogs to ignore someone on the other side of the road. But no, they yapped and barked forever as you walk to and passed the property until eventually (if there wasn't another pilgrim fairly close by) they would fall silent. Smaller dogs were not restrained but the majority were either behind heavy fencing, chained or on long leads – and they all made certain you were warned off. What does that say of society and the metaphor of life? Don't engage, don't come close, this is mine and I want you to move on and away? I understand deterring burglars and similar but if that is the priority, then something is really very broken within a community. Where I live there are a large number of visible burglar alarms serving as deterrents. However, they can be ignored completely if you are passing or even if trying to visit the house. I suppose the barking dogs on the Camino is similar to "an Englishman's house is his castle" – keep off or out once the drawbridge is raised – the dogs simply make more noise about it. Is this how society is meant to be? In Spain, people meet and socialise at all sorts of times of day in the local café where here, perhaps it's the climate, culture or something else, 'hanging out' doesn't seem to happen. It can when specifically arranged or a special series of events (e.g. the Platinum Jubilee). Surely the relaxed, temporary, passing, almost daily touching base with your community is worth developing? Of course we all have different personalities so perhaps this challenge is simply mine.

Another aspect of 'mine, keep off' might be material possessions but in the sense of baggage. I carried a rucksack, all sorts of bits and pieces included. I read quite a bit before setting off to make sure I had the right, but only the necessary, kit with me. I also listened to people and heard about a suggested maximum weight that might be manageable – but better lighter. I honestly believe I started having considered it all carefully, weighed, packed and minimalist. However, I discovered part way through that I was unlikely to use some items and discarded them. I tried to donate them but that wasn't possible – not wanting to create 'waste'. So the load became lighter – but on my return home, I weighed the pack and reconsidered. About a 1/3rd of the kit hadn't been used at all! Why had I been carrying, with some pain, discomfort, expenditure of effort and energy about a 1/3rd more than I needed? I also realised that with a little more effort I could have managed with only half of the clothing I did use. Slight increase in monetary cost for the washing/drying machines but a considerable reduction in the weight. I carried about 11kgs which is comfortably below the maximum weight to body weight ratio. Strangely, a pilgrim who handled my pack declared it light and his was definitely heavier. But another, who was on



her 4th long distance walk finds she only needs ever carry a maximum of 5kgs. Of course, it is more than the physical baggage – it is about the baggage we all carry. What do you want, are able or need to carry? What can be left behind, given away or some other option? Two Dutch girls (they preferred girls to women) I met on the Camino were to ‘find themselves’ and ‘leave behind’ and ‘overcome’ a number of previous very poor experiences. I was privileged and warmly welcomed into their conversation which grew to include some of my ‘baggage’. Insights shared, experiences explored, perceptive comments and questions throughout. What do we carry that we need to forgive, not necessarily forget but learn from, and move on? What ‘chip’ is there on my shoulder? There is something in here about the ‘foot of the cross’, ‘the price is paid’ – but we continue to carry ‘stuff’ that isn’t doing anyone any good at all. For me, this continues to be a challenging issue to be explored further as I seek to serve. Did I leave some things, physical, mental, spiritual on the Camino – yes, I think I did – but I might still be carrying a 1/3 of excess baggage in some fashion. *(In a bar relatively close to Santiago, I took a break and the lady serving asked if I wanted my ‘Credencial’ stamped. As she did so I asked if she had walked the Camino and she said yes. In the following conversation she told me that she had done the pilgrimage as a thank you. I wasn’t thinking quickly enough to ask who or what she was thanking but she did it because she had survived violent domestic abuse. Her comment at the end was ‘life matters most’.)*

The two folk I’ve mentioned above also provoked all sorts of thoughts about being alone, having a task and being in company. Walking the Camino on my own (not in an organised group of any sort) was one of the concerns expressed as part of the sabbatical discussion. I did not expect to find being on my own a problem – and expected that I could join with other pilgrims for periods on the walk or at the hostels – and so it proved. However, the task aspect was NOT something I had realised was to become a ‘cross to carry’. I know I am task, purpose, goal orientated and that gives rise to umpteen different frustrations at so many different levels. On the Camino, was it cheating to catch a bus on two occasions? Taking an easy route and not walking while covering the distance. I’m not sure how to answer that – but several folk remarked I was being too hard on myself and recognising the need and accepting the help was right and sensible. The help came in several different guises – the bus itself for one – almost no walking the two days buses were involved so no further growing blisters, carrying excess baggage and a day of rest. Add to that the folk who pointed out how to catch the bus, where to catch it (no bus stop or road markings in one village), the timetable etc – so helpful and really appreciated. A story of helping others in need... and there were many others. But task – still stuck in my head. I had made a personal commitment to walk, had been granted time and encouraged by the local fellowships and Synod to do so, so I was letting myself and them down. If my and the church’s aim is to live and proclaim the Gospel that others may come to know Christ – is there an acceptable shortcut? Certainly, help each other and accept help but the number of folk associated with the various fellowships continues to decline. Have I got it wrong, am I going about it in the wrong way, is there a different way of bearing witness and encouraging the congregations that they have a responsibility, task, commission and it isn’t all down to me? (Perhaps more directly phrased that I mean – or perhaps it is time to be bluntly direct – with myself at least.) Can you short circuit God’s mission, take a bus as an easy way of getting the result and reaching the destination? I am regularly reminded that seed scattering is something we can all do and then leave it to God to bring about the growth. Absolutely. But am I scattering the good seed on concrete? As I continue to be task and goal orientated, some small sign of germination would be really encouraging – am I looking in the wrong place?

Yet, the Camino also presented something with which I’m still grappling. Life – is it the Camino or is it what is happening beside the Camino? Or is it a matter of both – take time to swap between the two different journeys? Thanks to church, I have the gift of time to think, explore, walk (lots), meet people from many nations also walking for many different reasons – all journeying physically and spiritually in some way or other. There were many significant conversations with fellow pilgrims over the weeks, and each of us were at different stages of the Camino, based on when and where we started, how ‘pushy’ and ‘able’ we were along with



when is the deadline to return to 'normality' and get home. Some (like myself) were focused on getting to Santiago by a certain date (including using the bus as it turned out), others didn't have an end date – they would work to get to Santiago but without the humanly imposed constraint. Still others, a group of three girls from Madrid, were taking 3 'bites at the cherry' because they only had a week a year – so did what they could each year, and re-started the following year where they had left off. The two Dutch friends were limited by time, jobs, money, self discovery and commitment to support each other – would not reach Santiago at all – but were intent on enjoying, engaging, exploring, discovering and many other adjectives whatever they could in preparation for a new phase of their lives. So the Camino is life in miniature – yet – it's a holiday, a break from the norm. It is a really valid journey even if you don't quite know what you're seeking, for in the conversations, the exertion, the hostels, camaraderie et al – it will give you something – to be questioned later. However, life goes on around you – and you are not included. The farmer cutting the hedges, the grass for silage, milking the cows, the street sweepers, shop workers - life is outside, away from the Camino. The Camino provides a livelihood for so many – the hostels, the bars, the restaurants, cafes and more – as pilgrims are in many senses tourists. Yes, I was touring, seeing, experiencing and providing an income at some fairly basic level to those who were living 'in the real world'. Should we drop in and out of 'holidays', adventures, experiences, so to then really treasure and enjoy the space and time something like the Camino offers before knuckling down again and getting on with 'real' life? I suspect the answer is yes. A hostel manageress I ended up visiting 3 times (and that's another story) told me she wants to walk the Camino – but due to the pilgrims and holiday arrangements, it simply isn't possible because she is needed at work while the Camino functions – so she is unlikely to have such an opportunity.

Walking for hours a day allows time to notice things. The way eucalyptus trees lose their bark and how thin and straight they grow. The foxgloves and umpteen other flowers I cannot identify that suddenly catch your attention as the stand out against the greenery. The greenery itself as sunlight hits the trees between the clouds, the rhythm of the waves, the fish between the sea and river (assumed to be salmon – but I don't know), the meanders of a river as it confronts the sea. The wonder of human endeavour such as the motorways. I'm not certain I fully appreciate this yet but the engineers keep

motorways relatively flat and they appear hundreds of meters above and then several hundreds of meters below you – in a day. A railway, even less likely to climb or descend, and the expertise of the engineers in their craft and planning manage to get it to go from a village to somewhere far distant – but it too appears well below and then high above as you walk. Really wonderful valleys, coves, rivers, hills (don't think I qualify as having crossed mountains though I did see them covered in snow a distance away – thankfully NOT on route). So



much, so very much – and cattle and church bells, animals and birds of different ages are part of this as well – so much wonder. The Americans have devalued 'awesome' but the grandeur, the scale – both large and pretty close to minute (snails, slugs, butterflies) and everything in-between, the majesty, the life in so many ways – is there around us to enjoy. If we take (are given) the time. Take the time – and I am writing about Spain – but there are so many places around Manchester – if we take the time – to notice. Having started this reflection/report with dreary, overcast etc – when the sun comes out – open your eyes, there is beauty all around. Even when the sun doesn't shine, if we take time to notice, there is definitely life to be noticed all around us. Take the time.

Life is a journey. The Camino was a journey. Make of it what you will – and in some ways, it is an attitude of mind. Did you notice, spot, respond to – whatever it might be? How did you respond? Again, this is something I have to explore further – perhaps get out of the 'task' mindset – or apply it differently. On your journey, did you have time to stop in the cafe, bar, pub? On the street, time to help someone, speak with someone, learn something, discuss an experience with someone? Times change, different 'seasons' of life create their own scenario whether we like it or not – but we travel on in life. Walking, it takes time for the scenery to change, one eucalyptus plantation looks pretty much

like another – but then suddenly you discover you are beside an area which has been harvested, and further on, and newly planted ‘field’. There are nice gentle slopes you can amble down without straining anything followed by almost the inevitable climb back up which might be short or long, steep or gentle. Life is like that – but what do you make of it? I don’t have an issue going down hill though most of the people I met worried about their knees. My challenge was going up the hill and catching my breath. Several people asked, on different up hill stretches, if I was alright as I paused. In-between gasps I say something and wave them on because with break, a short rest, a look around (preferably without being able to see too far ahead) all was fine once more. I have no idea what might have happened if I’d said, ‘no, I am not OK’ but am absolutely certain all that could have been done would have been. That was reflected when a cyclist misjudged the surface on a corner and both walkers and other cyclists all stopped to help patch up the grazed bits and check the bike over. Who is your neighbour?



Ships passing in the night. The statement might not be exactly what I mean but covers so much. I met many folk on the Camino. For instance, a couple of 10 years standing one of whom lives in Stockport and the other in Ashton. It makes for a very small world as I live pretty much between both places yet we met near Santander in Spain. I’ve already mentioned 3 Spanish girls taking years to complete the Camino – but enjoying each stage of it, their commitment to each other and the experience of meeting others as they/we travelled on. I met both these groups over 2 perhaps 3 days and then they were gone – different routes, different speeds, needs, strengths etc. There was a German lady who spoke 4 languages and I met her part way up an unpleasantly steep hill – and she offered me some advice about walking and the use of her walking poles. We met each other several times over several days but (being honest) when she no longer appeared I was not sorry to see her go. Her view, expressed quite vehemently, about the importance of Church (the building) and not wanting to meet the people left me rather cold among other less definable characteristics. Others also found her a trying or abrasive but could not quite identify why. A Spanish pair, only out for a walk in the countryside near his parents home – miles from theirs (Valladolid) – stopped and checked that I was ok (another up hill battle). I met them again several miles later and again days later in another town where they expressed their pleasure in seeing I was continuing the journey. Over time I found I flipped between Spanish and English – not always remembering which language was to be used. Conversations in English are easier – even when overlaid with a strong Irish accent from Eire and with quite different views on so many things. Much was explored and considered, mainly in Spanish, with the hostel owner/operators/managers. Three stand large in my memory. The gentleman in Navia when asked why he ran the hostel, expressed his desire to help and do all he could for every pilgrim passing through his hostel/home. I was persuaded, having had a pretty large (un popped) blister for several days further aggravated by a change of footwear, to avail myself of his offer. This was well out of my comfort zone but he seemed (and was) trustworthy and had the Spanish experience of dealing with blisters. Needle, and thread, both thoroughly cleansed and dunked (much more than dipped) in an iodine type antiseptic – and then through the blister. The difference was the thread was left in place to prevent the wound sealing and starting to fill again. He said I’d be able to walk comfortably on it in the morning and would have a ‘leather’ patch on my foot for some weeks to come – and that was the truth. Hurt a bit, wasn’t ‘normal’, but what a difference!



Hosts along the way. One already mentioned above, carrying out his stated desire and purpose to be there to help in anyway he could, was followed by, where to find a good deal for lunch, don’t pay to dry your clothes as there’s a washing line and you can borrow clothes pegs, and much much more. At San Esteban de Leces, the lady only spoke Spanish – unless you count her dramatised portrayal of various animals. Down stairs was the hostel, upstairs was home. Under the stairs was the ‘shop’ because the hostel was remote – but she stocked fairly basic food and drink at I believe very close to cost price

(rounded to not to need to worry about small change). Small kitchen with various pots, pans, dishes etc. The Dutch girls and I all had a chat, with the manageress over a free bottle of cider as her gift to us – very unexpected. We mainly talked about why she and her husband had decided to live on the absolute edge of everything. The answer came as something like, I have space for all the animals I like and care for – and actually, the world comes passed me, I don't have to go find it – it is new every day – laughing and indicating the three of us. And she encourages pilgrims to write on her walls – whatever words of encouragement they feel appropriate for other pilgrims – and for herself. We too were asked if we would add to the 'grafitti' and my two Dutch friends, nudged, niggled etc to the point that actually – yes – I did have something to add to a whole range of very, very good uplifting and encouraging statements, observations and comments.



The day before at the hostel near Pineres de Pria (where I first met the Dutch girls), the lady fed me as there were no shops at all nearby. She also offered to transport my rucksack the next day to the nearby hostel (above) as I was struggling. Her daughter studied a little way beyond San Esteban – and she simply wanted to help – as with the food. Wonderful folk – would our paths ever cross again? There was a very similar experience later on as well, someone volunteered because they could and did. (And at that hostel, speaking with a Spanish couple out for their weekly trip to the countryside, their daughter is going to work in St. Albans, close to where I used to live, either as a physiotherapist or within robotics as she had a dual career – and is moving from Holland where she learned English. VERY small world!)

The following paragraph 'belongs' with the above but gives a different insight to hostel manager/owners. One of the hostels was an old railway station and house. The English gentleman had been in Spain for sometime, teaching English, and 'fell in love' with the building and really did not want to see it fall into disrepair. His partner is an engineer but she lost her job as coal fired electricity generating plants were moth balled and then dismantled. Together, they decided to 'do up the place' and establish a hostel (mainly) for pilgrims. The amount of work, the decoration and atmosphere of their home clearly demonstrates their commitment. (I've never seen a shower with as many knobs and jets – except on expensive adverts – but installed for all tired visitors!) The work started in 2016, was just about to open as Covid struck, but they are now making ends meet – and providing very good meals at very reasonable prices as well. Hostel 'Anden' – meaning platform but could also be a play on 'walk'.



Back to time – and space – and slowing down – to actually notice things. I think most has been said already, the trees, flowers, birds, cattle etc. But for any number of very good reasons, my notes pick up on time and space and the pace again. Throughout the walk, various people remarked that it isn't a race. That comment was made several times over. I'll have to argue with Paul when I meet him, I'm sure (but in writing this, haven't checked) that he made some remark about 'run the race set before you'. There are two issues there. Firstly, run. Simply no way, not at all and I was regularly told to slow down, to not rush, to take the time and enjoy. Plus, there's that rucksack complication – perhaps you have tried to run with a rucksack. I haven't nor do I plan to run – however due to Paul (or my own internal thought processes) I did push on as quickly as I could to get to the end of the days journey. And the other is race – which infers to me a competition of some sort – whether against yourself or others. That certainly fits with my usual mind set – get the job done to the best of my ability. My theology and understanding may be incorrect or too restricted but through many conversations, several folk pointed out take time, space, breath – don't be so hard on yourself, enjoy the journey (not run nor race). Eventually, it began to seep in – in part because I over did things and could do nothing else. I learned of

a rucksack carrying offer from the Post Office (Correos, paq mochilla) and took advantage of it on different days and stages as I thought necessary. It made each days walk with a small day pack with essentials (waterproofs, water, first aid etc. but much lighter) so much easier. The complication was that you had to know where you intended to be that night and get there making the whole thing double edged. However, there was less discomfort, greater ease and time in which to appreciate everything around you, nature or company or refreshments – greater enjoyment overall.

Looking back was something suggested before I left England. And I made a point of doing so – periodically. You begin to appreciate where you've been, the up or down hill, the cove, beach, forest, farms and so much more that you'd walked passed but looks different from another angle. Looking back when that interminable, troublesome climb was complete offers an opportunity for some satisfaction and pride when you can see how far and what you have overcome. (Mind you, there is that saying, pride comes before a fall.) Looking back cannot change the landscape nor can we change the past – but perhaps something can be learned with an occasional and periodic glance back even if it is simply noticing the milestone. Remembering how vibrant the youth group was 50 years ago but keep looking back, what could be learned and applied in today's context? Remembering comments parents made about the importance of education, steady employment and other forms of prospects can be helpful but you have to live with the decisions and circumstances that have brought you to today. Wishing things were different is good if there is something you can do, with hind sight, the wisdom of experience, effort and plodding, that will bring about change. Would I pack less if I ever do another Camino (by whatever name), use the 'paq mochilla' service more, try and avoid a deadline cut off – yes, in everyway – it is a journey to be enjoyed. There is a fairly strong element of 'persevere' somewhere in here, don't give up at the first or any other hurdle – yet it is not a race to be run. Learn from experience, from your companions whether a one off encounter or a longer period of intertwined journeys. Look 'back' and learn, appreciate as you consider the next step (of many) and move on – looking forward before you fall over an unseen obstacle.



Which leads round to preparation. This too has been mentioned already. I am caught between wanting to be as prepared as possible (don't build without the necessary equipment and material – or you will look foolish) and never doing anything because you might fail, look silly or have to have several goes at the same time. How might you prepare? Education, friendships and fellowship, training and support, a vision or dream, a desire or compunction - and many others. In one of the conversations on the Camino, one of my Dutch friends was thinking out loud, 'what drives you?' We were chatting at that point about 'what is the purpose of life'. She did not intend for me to get hung up on the 'drive' question but it has stuck. I can answer at some level and for me it is also closely related to the purpose of life. While this may not be the best way of putting things, the purpose of life is to help others to have a better life – it drives me. There's a massive potential essay about 'better life' and what that means but not in this report. Is it enough 'to just live' – and remember I was 'on holiday' but conscious of the war in Ukraine (where they are struggling to just live)? Is it enough 'just to live'? One word moved – and for me such a difference. My answer to both is no. Life has a purpose, a goal, a task – it isn't simply enough to have children, food on the table, a number of friends – there is more. However, stopping to think about it and ask the question differently – 'is it enough to live'? Is that not enough in God's wonderful creation without driving yourself to distraction by human aspirations and desires? For me and my task orientated mindset, that leaves me with a puzzle and a work in progress.

Oh, so easy to follow that paragraph. Walking on the Camino, it is very well sign posted, your can follow the signs or the people and you'll get to the next hostel, cafe or whatever. Except when you are on your own, the app on your phone doesn't have the specific trail, and the signs disappear – you have no clear idea about the fork or turning. Was I off the path, had I taken a wrong turn, do I reverse my walk to check or press on hoping somewhere some guidance will reappear? Perhaps you are already tired, fed

up and the uncertainty niggles massively. Is that not exactly where I am? Where the fellowships and Missional Partnership are? Uncertain, wondering about the right path? It is very unsettling – but take a step in faith, weigh up (because I’m human) the likelihood of the direction, how well trodden this versus that path seems (both almost pristine untrampled) but you do have to get to where you are meant to be – so you press on. Sometimes it is simply - choose! I am quite conscious I’m thinking in at least two planes – of pressing on to find the bed for the night and serving to proclaim the Good News. Step out in faith – such an easy statement – but requires courage and determination. My Dutch friends sang as we were walking and ‘arm twisted’ that I should do the same. I spared them that but I did find the words to the song that I’d been humming, thinking and singing to myself for several days. “Keep right on to the end of the road” – which on some days was so very appropriate. Having sent them the words (after we’d gone our separate ways) they remarked on one line in particular “may courage be you guiding light always”. As Christians, we have a still stronger light – yet so many ‘fear’ to speak of Christian faith, journey, commitment perhaps lacking the courage in faith, step out and onward.

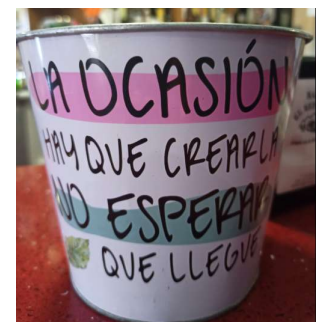


Stepping out in faith with courage – and what drives you? But I’ve covered that in some detail already – perhaps mixing paragraphs. What inspires, what encourages, through whom and how can I be more effective as the drive remains? I might need some, large or small, changes to enable all members of the different fellowships to be willing to bear witness in something other than a very practical, sensible social services way. How to enable and enthuse members of a congregation to have the confidence to speak of why they offer that service when the opportunity presents itself – and a desire to create opportunities because their ‘drive’ is to proclaim the Gospel and make Jesus known? During a long conversation with a Trappist (might have been Benedictine or even Cistercian monk – the monastery had changed human occupation and management a number of times over the centuries) we talked of England and Christianity. He left the UK at 22 – fed up with conversations about the weather – and has served in many capacities in Rome and now in Sabrado dos Monxes. Context and culture – were the two inhibiting things in Britain (he thought) and there continues to be an uphill struggle to break through or out. Add to that perceived relevance of faith and belief (thinking especially of Christianity) of both congregations and those yet to know Christ – the size of the challenge is actually larger. Let’s talk about the weather, it is immediate, local, in context and affects everyone. Christianity is not viewed in the same way which for some gives rise to frustration and disappointment. We didn’t leave it there as he continues to serve – welcoming pilgrims, explaining, chatting (at many different levels), playing the organ for vespers – and intends to continue to do so. I don’t think I used the word ‘drive’ while speaking with him but we did talk of God, the Trinity, desire, passion, commitment – and our wish others might have a door (perhaps window) opened to them to see the bigger picture. He has the world coming to his door (expressed earlier in a different context) but that isn’t my context. My step in faith, personally, with the congregations and Partnership and with the community – what is the next step in faith? Questions yet to be resolved in some fashion.

Injuries are likely to happen when you walk a long distance, carrying a pack or not. Careful preparation can minimise some of the potential injuries. Blisters (base of big toe to middle of instep) has already been mentioned. A calf muscle that was performing fine – suddenly ‘twanged’ – I couldn’t put any weight on the leg of a very long hour. It was very painful for the rest of that day and never really fully settled down because I had a task to complete so couldn’t put my feet up. (And some people suggested walking it off). And my hip or right buttock muscles started playing up sometime – and continued to do so – but you have to carry on. It may have been caused by the camber of the road, always with the left leg stepping slightly lower than the right which threw the calf out giving rise to the blister which also contributed to the hip issue. Do you push on with whatever infirmity you might have? Would I have done so without having ‘the task’ to do with a deadline? Did pushing on make things worse, temporarily or permanently? Each of the three ‘injuries’ could be considered as metaphors for Christian discipleship and for fellowships. When something is rubbing and producing discomfort (blister) does it

mean that you are out of step, going about things in a way that makes life challenging for yourself/others? Would the 'twang' be trying to tell you that you need to ease off a little, take a break, rest the idea or project for a while so you (and others) might have a chance to recuperate? And the hip issue – is that when you might actually be doing permanent damage? Might it be time to give thanks for what has been done and to stop? All three ideas contribute to a question yet to be answered, if there is an answer to metaphors. I heard a phrase which strikes a chord and seems right, 'if you (person or fellowship) are not growing, you are dying' and it formed part of discussions with the monk, my Dutch friends and my chauffeur. I am not in the dying business but the fullness of life business (here and eternal) but somehow I'm not putting it across in a way that everyone leaves the church building, Bible study, other activity with a great big smile and such enthusiasm they really cannot wait to tell others of their faith and experiences. Injuries, caused by wear and tear, equipment failure, poor communication, lack of understanding or perception happen often – but hopefully, we have the sense to rest, address, repair (forgive, reconcile) and reach out in care to support and heal the injuries (our or of others). Or do we?

Who would you like to accompany you? It was asked on the Camino about the Camino but I hear it in a much wider context and with so very many different levels. I'm widowed and part of the time was wishing I could speak with my wife, show her some of the sights, relay the conversations and discuss the journey. She never liked walking so we would not have walked together – but someone there, perhaps on the end of the phone, perhaps at the next hostel wait to hear all – yes, would have been great. Would I wish the Camino on anyone – no, it needs to be something that appeals to them – but there are a number of people I did think about and to mention just a couple. An elderly gentleman who knows so much about life, work, community where he lives (and probably a lot more) but on the Camino it would have all been new, different, a learning experience. He has shared his knowledge and views freely and helpfully and I would have liked the opportunity, perhaps a bit of pride here, for the shoe to be on the other foot as I might have helped him understand, explore, discover something of a quite different life. There's a younger lady who has been very supportive in training, preparation and companionship almost weekly and we chat about all sorts of subjects, situations, work, friendships etc. We get along well – on a weekly basis but would a month together, pounding along, day in, day out, survive the rigours of the trip? Their lives with many other commitments, along with all the other people I considered, made the question unanswerable. Somewhat different with the Dutch girls – partly as they were already committed to the Camino. However, I was concerned that we got along very well for the short time we were together – including their singing and energy. Would the friendship spoil and become a hindrance over a longer period – or perhaps survive and grow? On the return journey, I was shown somehow I make a good, friendly, open and interesting impression. We stopped at 6 or 8 places to say hi, thank you, look the coves, hostels, bars etc – and in everyone where we met the people – they all smiled and remembered me. I found that really challenging because I didn't think I'd done or been anything special. The number of folk on pilgrimage is lower than most years – but even so. Several people who 'disappeared' on the Camino to reappear five or six days later, similarly remembered. However, to answer the question from a faith perspective, the answer is Jesus but my hearing must be to pot as conversing with him seems a little one sided. *(Picture of a table top rubbish bin, rough translation: The event, you have to make it, not wait for it to happen.)* I was asked if the Camino, especially the really difficult bits, was like the poem 'Footprints'. No, I didn't experience it that way at all – yet Jesus was there throughout causing me to continually question why was I walking the Camino, trying to complete a task (set by?) and to meet folk along the way. However, I think the question was intended to be considered at a human level, about relationship and companionship. Who is it you turn to when there's something you need to think through, the person you trust, and with whom may you walk a while and grow? Company for a season, or longer?



One last comment (perhaps) as I round off the Camino. Three people said, “the Camino gives you what you need” over two days. The conversations were separate and only the third was guided to the phrase. All three firmly believed it for different reasons, no blisters, meeting and make friends, and having time and space. I spent several days puzzling at the phrase, believing it to be fortuitous superstition – but also wondering what it was that I needed. Had I received it and not noticed, was it yet to be encountered further along the way, or was it something that would only come to light after completing the walk? I do not believe the statement as given nor did the monk who was quite vocal about ‘faith’ superstitions (especially about his own denomination). Did I know before, during or even now what I need? I did suggest a new pair of feet or legs and everyone laughed. But, the time to think, to see and do something very different, to meet people from all sorts of places and most continents, varied experiences and generally extremely good hospitality, to reflect, take my foot of the accelerator (in some ways – while also having a task that needed some ‘gas’), to see beyond the trees – I definitely received something but what exactly eludes me.



My phone was stolen on the last day in Spain – all my text conversations and the photos were lost. There’s a reflection for you! A whole month, roughing it, in communal dormitories with people you probably never meet again, stored in the outside pouch of rucksack to hand to take photos when needed – all fine. But the last day at the end of the journey – stolen. The fault may well have been mine, lulled into a sense of security, safety and trust – but destroyed in an instant. Was that what I needed? To distrust people, start guarding and protecting things once more? I don’t believe so. Thankfully, I had emailed some pictures (and kept a diary) and others hearing about this have ‘back filled’ segments of text chat. So to finish this section:

The purpose of life is – to live and help other to have a better life which definitely includes pointing them toward Jesus as the Son of God somehow.

My sabbatical was planned to have three segments, the Camino, reading about leadership and team building and visiting a number of Fresh Expressions of Church in Cumbria. Due to postponements, especially COVID, the latter will not happen. There has been a change of personnel, not all are up and running again and I simply did not get round to organising it. The reading has also taken something of a turn but I firmly believe a positive one.

Three years ago, I participated in the Church Leadership Programme (CLP) – but unfortunately at the point my wife was diagnosed with cancer. Operations and treatments, her well being which slowly declined and then fell through the floor effectively meant I did not pay as much attention to the course as it deserved, my priorities were elsewhere. It wasn’t the intention nor plan and I retained the books provided by the course – and purchased others discussed when considering the Sabbatical. I skim read Covey’s “The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People” between the two halves of CLP but very little caught my attention and I retained even less. However, I did decide it deserved a ‘proper’ read – and I have and am doing so. It is taking time, even with full concentration.

My sabbatical, because I had to start it before April 2022, has been split into three segments. Two weeks early in the year to comply with the instruction, two months of which a month is described above followed by thinking and reflecting time and another two weeks in July. I have found that Covey’s views and ways of expressing things have really, really caught my attention. I wish I had heard, read, appreciated and absorbed much of his teaching years ago – and so much of it can and does apply not only to the individual but to teams with purpose – i.e. the church.

During my first two weeks reading – I only managed to get through the introduction, and first two chapters of that book. There was so much there – and thinking through how it might be lived, used, applied, taught and demonstrated took time. And I kept having to go back and think again, clarify once more, see the path more clearly every time I thought I had a handle on things. Toward the end of that first two weeks, I reached a conclusion. The material was presentable in a worship service context where the congregation were expected to contribute. Everyone is meant to contribute to worshipping God, it is our thanksgiving – but sometimes it seems very formulaic.

Effective v efficient. Actually, it is only the first word that Covey really works on – and surely, all disciples of Christ want to be as effective as possible? Perhaps that is too direct a statement or question but does touch on the passion, the drive, the enthusiasm and the task. How could I help, enable, encourage, equip the individuals and through them the congregations to be effective disciples?

One of the fellowships has experienced ‘Cafe style worship’ for several years but with the changes brought about with the establishment of the Partnership much is unknown. How well might it be received elsewhere? People actually having to think for themselves, discuss in groups of 4 or 5 around a table – with a drink and cake or biscuits – would any take to it?

It is and is likely to continue to be a challenge. Some members have asked to know when there will be a ‘cafe style worship’ service – so they can avoid it – really disappointing. Others have said, the biggest benefit is that there is time during the conversations to relate one to another in fellowship – which had been difficult and then compounded by Covid. The majority have commented how refreshing it is to have a change – but let’s not do it every week. Due to commitments across the partnership, it won’t happen every week – and I recognise that tried, tested and traditional format for some is really important. (Sometimes it seems to stifle and constrain as I prepare but it is far, far easier than being on your toes with ‘cafe style’.)

The order of service for cafe style worship isn’t that dissimilar to ‘tradition’. I begin with a brief explanation which gets shorter as fellowships become more familiar with practice. The explanation includes a request to respect each others views and opinions even if they are not aligned with yours. A reassurance that no one will be put on the spot and forced to give any form of feed back. Conversations stay on the table though some views might add a touch to the message later in the service. Worship then ‘begins’ with a call followed by responsive opening prayers and a hymn. The ‘introduction to the theme’ (children’s talk?) is presented and is immediately followed by an opening conversation starter type question for discussion around the tables. A further song/hymn followed by, often quite short, Bible reading(s). Normally, there are 4 questions ranging from ‘easy’ to ‘deep’, all exploring something within the passage(s), and each is introduced with a few very brief comments, including don’t try and discuss all four. For around 15 minutes there’s further table discussion and throughout the option to have more tea/coffee/cake at need – until the next hymn. After which there is a ‘sermonette’ that may be adjusted and flavoured from the overheard conversations. Then prayers of intercession and a closing hymn/song and blessing.

I worked with ‘Cafe style’ before Covey’s book – but am now persuaded that it is much more important than a once a every couple of months ‘thing’. What opportunity does the ‘average’ member of a congregation have to explore what a passage in Scripture might mean, in context, in their context? What chance do ‘average’ members of a congregation have to think through how they might phrase something related to faith, belief, practice? How effective are they (and myself) in expressing the importance of faith in their lives? Are opportunities for conversation noticed and then is there the courage to grab it?

If any individual cannot speak in some form or other about the importance of Christ in their lives, I find it difficult to think they are effective disciples who are able (and willing?) to go to the world and make further disciples. There are several advantages (as I see things) about ‘cafe style’ worship. No feed back, you will not be caught out by the minister (or others on your table hopefully) by your lack of knowledge and understanding – but it is an opportunity to contribute and to learn. You are no longer ‘bums on seats’ because you are participating in a more direct way – not being ‘sermonised’, ‘lectured’ or ‘preached at’ by whomever. It does stop the dozing and working out the week’s shopping list -

actually heard a complaint about that once. Everyone is involved – and it is a safe environment. Perhaps if congregations do reach out and fellowships grow (rather than die) there would need to be a little bit of a change. Everywhere I've been, the congregation has been together as a slowly shrinking family for decades – everyone knows everyone else (at some level) and everyone is there to worship God. Except, years ago a comment made to me was, 'no, not here to worship – just to meet my friends'. We all come from different places and have different agendas but I thought we were all on a very similar page to worship and fulfil the promise within us though starting and having different abilities. I was naïve and overly optimistic.

Am I following a pattern that is acceptable, Scriptural, effective? It is certainly Scriptural, Jesus asked questions, often responded with questions and moved the questioner to think about things. Acceptable – seeming not – not to everyone – too informal, too different, too intrusive – you are the minister, have had the training – do your job. Yet, almost exactly the opposite also applies to the majority, informal, engaging, fresh air, opportunity for fellowship and learning – with no 'feedback' – and I am doing my job, equipping the saints, sinners et al but in a different way to 'traditional worship'. Expectations can be put out of kilter because it is different. In some venues, the sanctuary does not allow for the more intimate table fellowship. Similarly, some of the more recent songs are better with a band or piano rather than the pipe organ. The setting can be more comfortable which should put people at ease and often the service is a little shorter. Also many folk continue the conversations after the service because they have more to explore and may want to talk to other disciples on different tables – along with more general fellowship.

Effective is a different question in some ways. I don't really know – and wish, really wish, there were some seeds beginning to germinate that I might see some sign of how effective I have been. The way church has worked, promoted Christ (or itself in the need for money), invited people to meet in a building – 'come to us' adverts – hasn't worked for years. A Methodist mission advocate (with no connection to the URC to avoid confusion) said approximately, it hasn't worked for 50 years, what makes you think it will work now or into the future? And I agree – hence my desire to explore Fresh Expressions (having done the course) – but you can only do so much – and for the moment it is enough to explore 'cafe style'. Much from the Camino remains to be considered as does an amount of reading that I may be the most effective servant of Christ I can be.

A very short, inaccurate and inarticulate summary of a point made extremely well in Covey's writing. When you die, how do you hope to be remembered? And how are you going to get to that point? And the answer for me....

To be an effective disciple so that people may come to know: **The purpose of life is – to live and help other to have a better life which definitely includes pointing them toward Jesus as the Son of God somehow.**

Appendix:

Questions for / about the Camino

Why am I doing this?

For whose benefit, in what way?

What do I hope / expect to learn / experience?

Are there new / different ways of 'being / doing'?

Why are others walking, purpose, aim etc?

Am I becoming more bias, less accepting and tolerant? Expecting too much?

Life in all its fullness means?

What does it feel like to walk a pilgrim walk – shared goal, path with others (past and present)?

How to relate the experience(s) to the people back home?

Others – in groups, alone? How does that work? If alone – thoughts? Group dynamics?

Who was the Jesus you met today?

(*) = Below thoughts/questions that occurred during the walk

What is the root of evil? Money, sex, politics, self? (*)

Purpose of life (answered above) but what if I'm wrong? (*)

Why task, goal, purpose orientated? (*)

Where, when, how do I 'live' (outside task requirements)? (*)

Being v Doing – we are human beings (made in God's image), so why is 'doing' so important? (*)

Why did I find the 'queue' 'column' of pilgrims distressing, unwelcome? (*)

Don't Wait Too Long Lyrics

You can cry a million tears
You can wait a million years
If you think that time will change your ways
Don't wait too long

When your morning turns to night
Who'll be loving you by candlelight
If you think that time will change your ways
Don't wait too long

Maybe I got a lot to learn
Time can slip away
Sometimes you got to lose it all
Before you find your way

Take a chance, play your part
Make romance, it might break your heart
But if you think that time will change your ways
Don't wait too long

It may rain, it may shine
Love may age like fine red wine
But if you think that time will change your ways
Don't wait too long

Baby you and I got a lot to learn
Don't waste another day
Maybe you gotta lose it all
Before you find your way

Take a chance, play your part
Make romance, it might break your heart
But if you think that time will change your ways
Don't wait too long
Don't wait
Mmm... don't wait

(Jesse Harris, Madeleine Peyroux, Larry Klein)

(Translated from Dutch – italic to help understanding of some terms)

You only live for a very short time.
You live only once.
And if you want to do otherwise, you no longer can.

Man, dare to live.

Don't ask every day of your short existence:
How did my dad or my grandpa do?
What does my cousin or what does my friend?
And who knows what the neighbor might think about that?
And what has decency dictated?
Man, dare to live.

The people determine the color of your tie,
the shape of your pants and your coat.
And of your life.

They point out the paths on which you can go.
They shout: go on! if you stop for a moment.
They choose your future, they choose your job.
They find you a pub, they find you a church.
They tell you what to give to the poor.
Man, is that living?

The people they prescribe rules for your life.
They give you advice and they cry in unison:
This is how you must live.
You can be friends with that one, but not with him/her.
You must marry this person, whether you like it or not.
And you have to live there, decency demands it.
You will be ignored if you do otherwise.
As if you had done something wrong.
Man, is that living?

Life is wonderful, Life is Beautiful.
But fly out into the sky, don't stay in a cage.
Man, dare to live.
Your head up high and your nose into the wind.
And patch on your boot (*it's a saying which means something like: don't give a f****) what someone else thinks.
Keep a heart full of warmth and love in your chest.
But be a king on your own square meter (*or foot/yard?*)
What you seek no one else can give you.
Man, dare to live.

(Dirk Witte / Ramses Shaffy – translation other)