

Some Camino Thoughts for Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> May 2020, Easter 5:

I would like to suggest that you begin by reading the Gospel for today, John 14, 1-10.

*THE JOURNEY PRAYER*

*May God be with you through the passes.*

*May Christ be with you through the corries.*

*The Spirit with you through river and rapid,*

*By hill, by headland and hollow.*

*By sea, by land,*

*By moorland and meadow,*

*When you lie down at night,*

*When you rise in the morrow.*

*In the trough of the wave,*

*On the crest of a billow,*

*Each step of the journey you follow.*

From CARMINA GADELICA, collected Celtic prayers

Traditionally, in the Scottish West Highlands and Islands, when someone went on a journey, all the family met and walked the first steps with the traveller, reciting the above prayer. The tradition was witnessed still in northern Scotland in the early twentieth century by Alexander Carmichael who worked for many years as an exciseman which involved extensive travels in the area and who collected the volume of Carmina Gadelica.

Today, May 1<sup>st</sup>, William, my husband and I were due to start our eagerly anticipated journey for our first stint as volunteers at the Camino Chaplaincy in Santiago. We would have set out with the good wishes of several local friends who are Camino aficionados, yet I doubt whether they would have walked to accompany and bless us on our first steps. Apart from anything else, the first stages were to have been courtesy of British Rail.

It had all seemed a pre-ordained route, 'meant', however one cares to express it. Just a year ago we walked our first section of the Camino in a group of seven members of our family only to return home to find a Diocesan mailing inviting clergy to volunteer as Camino Chaplains. But now instead of turning our faces towards Plymouth, Brittany Ferries and that lovely sea crossing to Santander, we remain in self-isolation, at home in Scotland.

Our village lies approximately two thirds of the way along the St Andrews Pilgrim Journey which begins on the holy island of Iona and runs south-eastwards across Scotland to the powerful pre-reformation centre of St Andrews, scene of much of the bloody struggles of the Scottish Reformation. In Donald Smith's book, PILGRIM GUIDE TO SCOTLAND, he describes St Andrews as a 'centre of medieval and modern pilgrimage...a Celtic place of prayer, Columba and Andrew, Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant conjoin, ...a place where religious conflict in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries claimed victims on all sides.' I invite you to think about this in the context of today where religious conflict, suspicion, mistrust of 'the other' continue to bedevil our world and to pray for

tolerance and understanding between peoples of different persuasion and tradition. May we see ourselves as fellow pilgrims on a road whose destination contains the 'many rooms' of our Gospel for today.

Dunkeld, our home, was the former capital of Christianity in the southern Highlands. Unfortunately, that fervid reformer, John Knox, did not approve of pilgrimages. He saw them as luring the 'peasant' (his vocabulary) worker away from his toil in the fields to indulge in wanton licentiousness to name but a part of his objection. Pilgrimage was frowned upon and actively discouraged by the reformed church. What a joyful rediscovery in recent years to have this venerable tradition revived and reinstated in the life of the established church here. We are so grateful for the work and writings of Richard Frazer and others who have opened up the way again.

It so happens that I am a hopeless map reader, invariably depending on others, chiefly my long-suffering husband, to point out the way. So it was good to read of Richard Frazer's struggles with wrong turnings when he set out on the Camino [Travels with a Stick]. I tend to travel anywhere with vague pictures in my head or verbal instructions ( eg: ' when you see the MacDonalds sign, drive on until you see a slip road with a twisted, dead oak above the bank' ). It mostly works for me but it can be somewhat hazardous. I have tried to change but it is no good. Maps remain a mystery.

I admire the efficiency of those members of my family who appear to glance casually at a map and it all makes sense. It makes me vulnerable, dependent on others and prone to stray. On the other hand, I find people generally like to help and, so far, I have managed to arrive at my destination in the end. But for now, the way which seemed to lie so clearly ahead, the journey to Santiago de Compostella, is denied to me and to all of you Pilgrims who will surely have had your individual hopes, excitement, expectation and a sense of challenge and purpose. Have plans been cruelly dashed, causing you disappointment, frustration and upset? Have you been able to find other routes, perhaps volunteering in the community and thereby discovering new ways and new purposes hitherto undreamed of? We surely all have our own stories, not just of now, of the unforeseen detour, the mistaken way, that offers new insights and valuable experiences.

Last May on one of our Camino days, William and I left the rest of the group to explore an alternative route. We came up behind an elderly lady who was shuffling along very slowly but with dogged determination and concentration. She did not want to talk beyond the barest courtesy greeting and we soon left her behind. We found ourselves wondering anxiously if she would be alright. I was so glad to catch sight of her a few days later in Santiago looking fresh, relaxed and none the worse for wear. This made me question my own judgement in assuming that this lady was not going to be able to achieve her goal. Her walking and my map reading skills may both be defective but they seem to get us there in the end. Perhaps we could all reflect on our own imperfect ways of dealing with the path ahead? Our skills and capacities may vary and we may need help or not.

Mapping the way, making our plans, assuming, prejudging – all these are common and understandable human activities. Perhaps we could all reflect on our need for a lack of hasty judgments about the capacities of others and equally on our need to believe in ourselves and in what we are capable of achieving even if we do have to ask for help.

The words that stand out for me in today's Gospel reading are simply:

*Let not your hearts be troubled....*

And

*I go to prepare a place for you.*

I would like to suggest that you use either of these words of Jesus from the Gospel as an aid to a peaceful time of reflective prayer. Perhaps you could repeat the words silently to yourself and meditate on them or use them to lead you to pray for whatever needs are on your mind at this time?

We are all familiar with the dual symbolism of pilgrimage: the path we travel at a special time and place, such as the Camino or any pilgrim route, set against the lifelong pilgrimage with the one final destination. So it seems helpful to me that we are asked to focus on the larger picture in our Gospel, with the final purpose and destination of 'My Father's House'. We might think of this present time of great anxiety as one of those unforeseen detours, certainly with setbacks and anxieties, with fears for the future about so many things but also as a time that contains many unexpected vistas and rewarding unforeseen encounters hard as that may be for so many who have been experiencing great tragedy.

So finally, another 'Journey' prayer from the Carmina:

*Petition*

*Be Thou a smooth way before me,*

*Be Thou a guiding star above me,*

*Be Thou a keen eye behind me,*

*This day, this night, forever.*

*I am weary, and I forlorn,*

*Lead Thou me to the land of the angels,*

*Methinks it were time I went for a space*

*To the Court of Christ, to the peace of Heaven;*

*If only Thou, O God of life,*

*Be at peace with me, be my support,*

*Be to me as a star, be to me as a helm,*

*From my lying down in peace to my rising anew.*