

Camino Graffiti – A Reflection for Sunday 11th October 2020 by Revd Tim Daplyn

This week, (thanks be to God for electronic media!) I have been able to share in the safe arrival in Santiago de Compostela of a dear friend. Peter and I have known each other since childhood and have shared quite a bit of history together. Despite the challenges posed by pandemic to international pilgrimage (he had postponed his journey twice before finally starting out) my old friend had persisted in his intention to earn his *compostela* the hard way: on foot from St Jean Pied de Port following the yellow arrows of the Camino Frances.

It is now five years since I completed the self-same journey. I could easily picture my friend's last few kilometres from O Pedrouzo; past Lavacolla – a traditional bathing place and now the modern airport; his ascent and descent of Monte de Gozo; and then following the pavement scallop markers up through the suburbs: Rua dos Conchieros to Plaza do Obradoiro and finally, arrival at the Cathedral of Santiago and exchanging his *credencial* at the Pilgrim Office for a certificate of completion. Mission accomplished, he is now planning his return home and all those quarantine regulations.

As I followed Peter's footsteps in my mind's eye, memories of my own Camino experience were awakened. Specifically, I saw with great clarity some of the graffiti that, according to one's prevailing mood and the ingenuity of the author or artist, have the ability either to inspire or (sadly) more often to appal the pilgrim all along the way.

I'd like to share with you some of those wayside writings that served to uplift me and take my mind away from more immediate anxieties, aches and blisters. At the time, they assumed something of the significance of that line in Paul Simon's song: *'The Sound of Silence'* where he notes: *"...the words of the prophet are written on the subway walls and tenement halls..."*

In reverse order (in terms of their location) the following are my top 3 favourites. The first of them is (or was) on that final stretch through the eucalyptus groves as you approach Santiago itself. The Friends of the Camino had placed large litter (trash) bins at regular intervals along the path. Each bin was inscribed with a stanza from John Lennon's song *'Imagine'*. As I limped past each succeeding verse towards my own dream destination, the words became something of a mantra.

Here's an abbreviated version but I hope you'll get an impression:

On the first bin written in black felt-tip pen was:

*"Imagine there's no heaven, it's easy if you try,
No hell below us, above us only sky..."*

Pause for puffing and panting before I reach the next instalment on the next bin:

*"Imagine all the people – living for today.
Imagine there's no countries, it isn't hard to do..."*

Another pause and more struggle:

*"Nothing to kill or die for, and no religion too,
Imagine all the people, living life in peace..."*

Yet more laboured breathing before...

*You may say that I'm a dreamer,
but I'm not the only one..."*

And then for the finale:

*"I hope some day you'll join us
and the world will be as one..."*

"Amen!" I said and say aloud to that kind of thought, through sweat and some tears!

My second graffiti choice is taken from an earlier stage in the journey, where the route of the Camino crosses and recrosses one of Spain's new motorways. Literally inscribed on a subway wall was what amounted to a poetic installation. In large letters, clearly and accurately punctuated, was the text of a familiar poem by R S Thomas, a Welsh priest-poet, famous for his questing faith journey in which he seemed to be aware as much of the apparent absence of God as by his presence. It is entitled 'The Other'. It's quite short and so I'll quote it in full:

There are nights that are so still
that I can hear the small owl calling
far off, and a fox barking
miles away. It is then that I lie
in the lean hours awake, listening
to the swell born somewhere in the Atlantic
rising and falling, rising and falling
wave on wave on the long shore
by the village, that is without light
and companionless. And the thought comes
of that other being who is awake, too,
letting our prayers break on him
not like this for a few hours,
but for days, years, for eternity.

I wondered then and still do, just who was inspired to place that poem there but very sincerely I thank my God that they did so.

My final and favourite offering came at a moment of real anxiety for me. Like many other pilgrims I had gone too far and too fast, far too early in my journey for my body properly to adapt to the demands of daily walking. I wasn't sleeping well and was drinking far too little of the proper sort of liquids. With alarming suddenness I ground to a halt with acute joint and muscle pain. Stopped in my tracks, I thought that my pilgrimage was over and bitterly contemplated the abandonment of my camino. Limping along an exposed stretch of Roman road under a scorching sun I was feeling very sorry for myself. But just then I saw it: A small sign indicating a hunting preserve in Spanish but which also bore a terse instruction written in English:

"Don't quit before the miracle!"

So, I didn't. Soon afterwards, from the wayside I retrieved a discarded broom handle and a broken-tree branch to serve as makeshift walking poles and struggled to the next town where I could seek help. Then, rested and recuperated and with pharmaceutical advice and assistance, I adjusted my plans, mended my habits and journed on.

"Don't quit before the miracle!" This could be our watchword today in this time of international and personal anxiety. Let's hold on to our dreams and like John Lennon, imagine a better future where the 'new normal' might be a spirit of unity and peace for all peoples on the earth. And, with the poet RS Thomas, in the real isolation of insomnia, loss and bereavement that can sometimes threaten to engulf us, may we be aware of 'that other being' (however we may conceive of them) keeping vigil with us and who has infinite capacity to allow all of our cares and all of our concerns to break upon Him for all eternity.

May God give you peace. Amen.