

## Francistide and The Camino – “Let us go then in the name of the Lord”

October 4<sup>th</sup> marks the annual Feast Day of St Francis of Assisi (AD 1182 – 1226). In more usual times this anniversary has been marked by special events, in and out of church, commemorating the life and patronage of *Il Poverello* (The Little Poor Man) who has been acclaimed to be the world's favourite Saint. Pet services and celebrations of Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation have proved popular in recent years: themes which echo ecological and conservation-minded concerns of our modern era.

St Francis appears to have been distinctively counter-cultural to his early medieval world. Born into a successful merchant family he rejected his privileged upbringing and having experienced a mystical calling to 'rebuild' the Church, adopted a Rule of Life embracing Poverty, Chastity and Obedience for himself and a small band of followers. Initially subject to ridicule, his movement of 'Poor Penitents' soon attracted friends in high places and were recognised as a Religious Order rapidly spreading throughout Europe.

In his short lifetime (he died in his early 40s) Francis founded 3 separate Orders of Religious: Friars Minor (Little Brothers) who travelled, taught and preached; Conventual Houses of Prayer for women living under the Rule of St Clare; and many Chapters of a Third Order for lay people who, living in the world under a rule of simplicity, met regularly for worship, prayer and charitable works.

The Camino de Santiago is rich in Franciscan associations and foundations, connections that continue into the present day. The modern city of Santiago de Compostela is proud of its twinned status with Assisi, Italy the place of Francis' birth and death which shares a centuries-old tradition of hospitality to international and domestic pilgrims travelling to venerate their patron Saints.

Along the pilgrim routes to Santiago de Compostela one may see icons and frescoes depicting St Francis alongside St James reflecting their close association in people's minds. St Francis visited Spain at a time when he was at a decision point in his life and ministry. After hectic first years of active evangelistic work in Italy it appears that he may have been beginning to yearn for a quieter, more contemplative life. After consulting trusted friends he followed their advice to go on with his preaching ministry. Turning to his travelling companions he declared: “Let us go then in the name of the Lord!”

Francis' journey to Spain (his intention was to reach Morocco) probably took him, not across Southern France but by sea from one of the Italian ports to Barcelona. Thus he would have then travelled up the Ebro valley to Logrono (where he is reputed to have cured a sick boy) and on to Burgos where Alfonso, King of Castile was the person most likely to have been able to give the missionary band permission to enter Morocco.

After Burgos the saint apparently decided to make his way to Compostela and the shrine of St James. Local tradition has it that Francis stayed in the house of a miner called Cotolay, who lived on a hill-side above the town. There is no record of Francis preaching in the city and it would appear that was not his purpose. Like so many people, all down the years and from all across the world, he came to pray and to commend himself and his project to the prayers of the apostle. It is said that while praying at the shrine that he first became aware that he must establish houses for friars in Spain.

Recurring ill-health (he lost his voice – a significant handicap for a medieval preacher!) prevented him continuing his Morocco mission but what happened at Compostela had given him a new vision.

His brotherhood was to be no longer simply a band of evangelists moving about the towns and villages of Italy, but a great religious Order spreading into all parts of the world.

Over the next few months in Spain, Francis made new disciples and with the assistance and co-operation of the Benedictine Order, founded small Franciscan communities in such places as Compostela, Burgos, Barcelona and elsewhere. At Burgos and Ciudad Rodrigo the friars were housed in disused hermitages while in Barcelona the hospital of St Nicholas became their home; in many other places an empty house or disused attic or cellar was enough for the very simple needs of the friars.

Francis' experience provides an early example to those of us who are travelling our own Camino journeys at home and abroad. This year of pandemic may have prevented many of us from starting, continuing or completing our physical pilgrimages to Compostela (I abandoned my own journey in France in March). What we had planned has been interrupted and has had to be put aside. So many of us are experiencing a real sense of disappointment in terms unfulfilled ambitions and perhaps fear that any opportunity to journey has finally passed us by.

800 years ago, St Francis must have felt the bleakness of disappointment too at being forced to give up his Moroccan mission. After all, he had done all the right things, consulted the appropriate people, sought the correct permissions and had gone public on his decision: "Let us go then in the name of the Lord!" But then, struck dumb before the shrine of St James and unable to go on with his pet project he is guided into fresh pathways and opportunities to do the Lord's work in a new way.

This Francistide, as we celebrate his memory under the restrictions (and opportunities!) of 'the New Normal' may we also seek to follow Francis' example, to take time to reflect on the realities of our life situation and to be open to new directions and ways in which we may be being called to travel. May we have some of St Francis' spirit of Humility, Love and Obedience to follow that vocation and to joyfully answer in our own way: "Let us go then in the name of the Lord!" Amen.