

Sermon preached by Canon Philip Banks
St Edmundsbury Cathedral
Sunday 30 July 2017

Pilgrimage of life

Well, we've got the Certificate and the t-shirt (two certificates, in fact)! I've finally done it... With Janet and Ben and 15 others, family and friends, I've finally walked from Santiago de Compostela, the burial place of St James the Apostle, for five days to Finisterra – in medieval times thought to be the ends of the earth of the known world in northern Spain. The path is the last leg of ancient pilgrimage pathways – Caminos – that millions of people walk each year, and have done for so many centuries.

Walking the Camino is a truly fabulous and deeply spiritual thing to do. And I love the city of Santiago, walking or not: it is such a vibrant place, music and theatre and a constant flow of different nationalities arriving each day, celebrating in the great square outside the cathedral – and then going to the daily pilgrim mass to reflect quietly on their journey. The square is named Obradoreiro – after the stone-cutters and workers who built the cathedral. And the name 'compostela' (*compos* meaning field, *stella* meaning stars) referring to the tradition that the vision to the monk of stars above the field marked the place where the shrine to the apostle was to be built.

I could wax lyrical for far too long about the pilgrimage, but one image which has stayed with me is of the path which

takes you past enormous wind turbines on the mountainside – I've never been 'up close and personal' to a wind turbine – such massive structures towering above you, nature's force driving the sails... and down below at the bottom of the valley the sound of water escaping from the reservoir – nature's power driving the hydro-electric turbines... and further along the path the roar of the great Atlantic ocean breaking on to the Spanish coast, the first bit of the European mainland which the sea meets – the sound of the roar of the ocean meeting the land, the sight of the misty spray hovering above the rocks from the constant breaking of the waves. Surrounded by God's creation and nature's power.

It is a unique part of the world, on the cusp between climates: oranges and lemons, kiwis and palms, the beautiful oleander – intertwined with common brambles, bracken and nettles. And all weathers – we had sunshine nearly every day. But I spoke to one pilgrim who described wearing one of those one pound rain ponchos up on the hills – and the storm being so violent that the combination of pelting rain and violent wind tore the thing to shreds within a few minutes. He was struck nonetheless by the beauty and majesty of creation and nature's power – and in any case, it was warm summertime and he said he knew he'd soon get dry again!

Could you not get all that in the Lakes or Highlands here (though maybe not the oranges and oleander)?

Those who have been to Santiago will tell you that you get a deep sense of place. The spiritual writer Eugene Peterson¹ speaks of how “holiness does infiltrate a place”. In the case of Santiago, not just *one* place (an amazing city and cathedral and pilgrimage shrine) but the place where pilgrims have walked: the hundreds of miles that countless others have trod over so many centuries: there’s a great sense of walking the same path/place that others, prayerfully, have walked before you.

The great sense of a shared endeavour to -
yes, come up for air from busy lives;
but also intentionally to find and learn more about yourself and to find and learn more of God, and to reflect on your own pilgrimage of life and how – God has been part of it. Giving time to reflect on the deeper things. Thinking about questions:
CS Lewis (in his Screwtape books) says “don’t tell me *what* you believe: tell me what *difference* it makes that you believe”.

or

One of the quotes which apparently Einstein had on his study wall: “not everything that counts can be counted, not everything that can be counted counts”.

Now: we shouldn’t have to go on a pilgrimage to build into our own rhythm of life time to reflect on these things. In the fourth century Gregory of Nyssa, one of the ‘Fathers of the Church’, said:

“Ye who fear the Lord: praise him in the places you now are, for change of place should not effect any drawing nearer to God”.

So – whether on pilgrimage or retreat or not:
What difference does your faith make (CS Lewis) – to your relationships, to your way of life, to your changing the world for good?

Not everything that counts can be counted.... what are the things that count for you, what are your priorities in life?

I love Romans 8, St Paul’s letter which we heard today: what’s dear to St Paul’s heart bubbles out, and speaks to these things. I don’t think that anywhere else does St Paul come so close to saying that the person *trying* to lead a Christian life (however faultingly) takes on something of God’s nature: it is a beautiful image of the intimate relationship which we can have with God and which God desires to have with us.

As Christians, people of faith, we’re called at root to be people in whom others may see God *because* of that relationship. Desmond Tutu² puts it like this: “There’s a great hunger for God himself. You are called first of all to God and his *heart of love* – so that the world may also know God and his love for all that he has made”.

Yesterday (29 July) in the church calendar we remembered Martha, Mary and Lazarus, the companions of Jesus. Lazarus was the one brought back from the grave by our Lord. I always think that Martha gets a bad press in their story in

the gospels: Mary is commended for being with Jesus and listening at his feet – whilst Martha is battling in the kitchen preparing lunch. Yet... it's Martha, when Jesus says "I am the resurrection and the life, do you believe this?", who says "Yes". Martha is the one earlier in the gospels who calls Mary ("the Lord is here and needs you") into discipleship.

What we're seeing is a way in which both are role models for you and me:

Mary – reminding us of the contemplative spirituality which we're called to: listen, pray, go deeper, get to know ourselves better and God's will for us.

Martha – reminding us of the active spirituality to which we're called ("tell me what difference it makes that you believe"). How will my faith help me when I'm faced with personal crises, traumas and bereavements? How will my faith make a difference when I'm faced with the news headlines of human cruelty and appalling egotism?

Faith and belief has survived such tests again and again – not because it comforts or explains, but because people of faith – you and me – can't deny what's been given to us: that out of our faith we come to see the world as a gift. That out of faith we come to see ourselves as open to a calling and presence outside ourselves – to respond to God's *heart of love* for his world and its peoples (Desmond Tutu). The Christian faith has Christ's own suffering and death as central to our belief and so we cannot be accused of being unaware of suffering and injustice and our call to respond to it.

In our contemplative moments and times of reflection, of course, which of us can say with real certainty that we know we're doing God's will? We can't, on any day of my life. That's what it means to "bear the mystery" of the cross: Gregory of Nyssa, in another place, said that "God is met not as an object to be understood, but as a mystery to be loved".

Of course it would be neater if God simply spoke to me each morning with a to-do list!

The trouble is that is not the Christian way, that's not the way of the cross.

Thomas Merton, the great theologian and mystic, expressed the doubt and uncertainty we all face in this familiar prayer which I leave you with:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always... for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

So, whether on pilgrimage* pelted by rain or walking in the sunshine, or on retreat, or in your quiet times of prayer – may we be drawn towards lives of inner depth, of prayer of healing and love.

Take moments to be still and quiet, to allow your ‘deepest desire’ (Thomas Merton) to well up within you and come to the surface of your awareness. In the silence, connect with that longing for union and intimacy with God which Desmond Tutu speaks of.

That we may, together, be people of prayer, may we grow to be the people God would have us be, and do the things he would have us do.

*BTW in talking to our cathedral wardens, watch this space as I’m hoping to offer a pilgrimage next summer for those who’d like to walk as well as those who prefer not to walk.

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Philip Banks, July 2017

¹ Eugene Peterson: *The Contemplative Pastor*

² Desmond Tutu quoted in Ian Cowleys’ book: *The Contemplative Minister*

* A Pilgrimage for those who would like to walk and for those who prefer not to walk is being planned for 2018



Camio path from Santiago de Compostela to to Finisterra, 2018