

The Request of James and John

Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to Jesus.

“Teacher,” they said, “there is something we want you to do for us.”

“What is it?” Jesus asked them.

They answered, “When you sit on your throne in your glorious Kingdom, we want you to let us sit with you, one at your right and one at your left.”

Jesus said to them, “You don't know what you are asking for. Can you drink the cup of suffering that I must drink? Can you be baptized in the way I must be baptized?”

“We can,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink the cup I must drink and be baptized in the way I must be baptized. But I do not have the right to choose who will sit at my right and my left. It is God who will give these places to those for whom he has prepared them.”

When the other ten disciples heard about it, they became angry with James and John. So Jesus called them all together to him and said, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the heathen have power over them, and the leaders have complete authority. This, however, is not the way it is among you. If one of you wants to be great, you must be the servant of the rest; and if one of you wants to be first, you must be the slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served; he came to serve and to give his life to redeem many people.”

Not a proper pilgrim?



Welcome dear friends to this reflection on the theme – not a proper pilgrim? What does this mean? Well you probably are familiar with the idea of being a pilgrim through life – we sing *Guide me O thou great Jehovah – pilgrim through this barren land* and *We are pilgrims on a journey and companions on the road*. As Christians we are journeying through life as pilgrims of faith guided by God. Do you ever compare yourself with your fellow pilgrims and wonder if you are a proper pilgrim?

Let me share with you about a sabbatical from ministry I took some years ago. Whilst on my three months sabbatical leave I walked some of the pilgrim way to Santiago de Compostela in Northern Spain; studied how best to spiritually support people suffering from dementia and each Sunday worshipped in a different denomination church.

Now a proper pilgrim on the road to Santiago is someone who walks 500 miles from the French Pyrenees to Santiago carrying everything for the whole journey on his or her back, staying in pilgrim hostels each night - which cannot be booked in advance so there is a sense of uncertainty about where the pilgrim might find a bed.



I went on the pilgrimage with my friend Wendy and we did not consider ourselves proper pilgrims as it was in fact a walking tour with 16 walkers and a tour leader. We were pre-booked into a hotel or hostel each night and a coach carried our luggage onwards while we

just carried our water and picnic each day. During our 12 day stay in Spain, we walked some of 7 days, in total 70+ miles the rest of the time was sight-seeing. It is so tempting to compare ourselves to others. We may decide we are better than someone else which can make us feel superior or we may feel we are not so good as others which may make us feel small or of less worth. Along the camino – the pilgrims’ way to Santiago – our group (of mixed abilities) was frequently overtaken by proper pilgrims who were very fit after walking for weeks or by cyclist pilgrims. The greeting was always a companionable ‘buen camino’ meaning ‘Good Way’ there was no competition – everyone travelled in the same direction towards the same destination at his or her own pace. However in a group you have to keep up! Our young leader would at times hurry us along as there were deadlines to meet and as some of us panted and struggled up the hills or gingerly picked our way over treacherous rocky downhill paths he’d say: *there is no pilgrimage without pain!*



The image of Christ on the cross was seen in the many Roman Catholic churches we passed on the way and came often to my mind. While on the most challenging stretches of the camino I would think how my pain and discomfort was negligible compared with Christ’s on the cross. After the first few days, which were a blur of sightseeing and travel, we got into our stride and later the lofty quiet rural areas of Galicia prompted me to reflect on the beauty and wonder of God’s creation.

Maybe I was not a proper pilgrim but I still found my journey a means of grace and found fulfilment in my perseverance – it was possible to opt out of a day’s walk and take the coach but I never did that. The aim for me was exercise, time away, new experiences and spiritual renewal. For the early medieval pilgrims the aims were veneration of Saint James relics to seek healing or forgiveness of sins. Along the route were horrific images of hell hence the reason forgiveness was so important.

It was believed you needed to walk 100 kilometres at least to qualify for forgiveness! I was pleased to discover that dispensation was given for those who were ill or unfit to walk the whole way and that they could merely pass through the doorway of a particular church to have their sins forgiven.

I wonder do we expect everyone to conform to our expectations of Christian pilgrimage through life and not remember that we do not all start with the same advantages or opportunities? There are several starting places for the pilgrimage to Santiago but they all end at same destination the Cathedral at Santiago. There are different ways of reaching the Cathedral: as a day tripper or on a walking tour or as proper pilgrim but for all there is the opportunity to encounter God in that amazing Cathedral – strange and alien as is its theology and imagery.



I remember good ecumenical experiences of worship while visiting other churches on my sabbatical but decided I know why I am a Methodist! Of course I am used to Methodism but I do feel we have the right balance in our worship, work and witness on our faith pilgrimage. However we need to be humble about our chosen way – remember the story about James and John we heard from scripture, who wanted greatness in God's kingdom – best seats beside Jesus! There is a traditional tale that St James, who after being beheaded in Jerusalem in AD 40, miraculously travelled to Spain in a stone boat helped by angels. When his bones were discovered much later a Cathedral was built to house them. If you have visited the Cathedral in Santiago you will have seen an enormous gilded statue of St James bedecked with jewels behind the high altar, larger than life size, which to me dwarfed the much smaller crucifix of Christ. Remember St Mark tells us Jesus said: *whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant.*



In the eyes of many greatness is measured by growth, wealth, success and power. I reflected that perhaps what is needed is a theology of patience, suffering and of seeming failure – depicted by Jesus on the cross. This reinforced what I learned about supporting those with dementia those who are not going to improve, those whom the world might consider worthless. Indeed the elderly in Care Homes did seem to be neglected during the early days of the corona virus pandemic. As Christians we believe that although those with dementia may have forgotten or can no longer comprehend God they are not forgotten by God or outside God's love and so must be valued and be cared for spiritually by the church.

So let us not compare ourselves with others but seek encourage each other to follow Jesus' way of the cross, remembering whoever we are we have worth because God loves us. On our faith journey through life we may not all travel in the same manner or at the same speed. At times the going will get rough and difficult and we may stumble but as long as we travel along with Jesus we will keep going in the right direction and will find the kingdom is near.

One more step along the world I go keep me travelling along with you.
God bless you and keep you until we meet again. Amen.