

Daniel's reflection for Sunday 30th May TAKING YOUR LIFE FOR A WALK

'Wet and weary we entered the Cathedral at Santiago de Compostela. The 100 km Camino walk was over and our bones ached during Mass. As we got up to leave, a huge thurible (the *botafumiero*) was let down on a thick rope on to the sanctuary floor. A tangible frisson of anticipation stirred throughout the packed pews. The censer weighed 80 kilos and stood 1.60 metres tall.

The Camino de Santiago, the Way of St James, is a spiritual journey that pilgrims of all backgrounds have travelled for over a thousand years. About 800km in all, it can be as long or as short as you like. On summer days past, the dusty, jaded pilgrims would be sweaty and smelly as they stumbled into the Cathedral pews. That's why thuribles were waved about to spread some perfume. Hence the name *botafumiero*.

Suddenly eight red-cloaked men, the *tiraboleiros*, appeared around the gleaming container, easing it off the ground, getting it to move and sway. The much-loved spectacle had begun. Higher and wider it swung across the aisles of the transepts almost touching the curved 21 metres high beams above us. By skilfully manipulating the pulley mechanism the *tiraboleiros* controlled the heart-stopping sweeps and swoops of the silver bird, from vault to distant vault, almost touching the floor at the centre of its magnificent 65 metres loop. Packed with incense it was billowing smoke, and you could see the flames inside. Plummeting from on high at 70km per hour, scraping the ground, elegantly rising again, it was a dance between heaven and earth. The artistry of it, the wild energy of it, the wonder and excess of it all touched something asleep within me and made my spirits soar.

Many of us had no single reason for 'doing the Camino'. But *solvitur ambulando*— we learned as we walked. Six months later the impact of it remains vibrant. I'm still walking the Camino. And I suppose I always was, and always will be — blessings and blisters, being lost and found - the ultimate metaphor for life.

If your heart is open the Camino will be your inner teacher. It calls us out of our many hiding places. Fr Augusto Lopez, parish priest of Triacastela in Santiago, writes: 'On the Camino you need to believe that the mistakes you make along the way are only signs of your humanity, that love is all around you, that those yellow arrows (the Camino signposts painted on walls, trees, gables) in your own heart are pointing towards your freedom . . .'

It was his reference to a certain freedom, openness and bigness of heart that brought a focus to my post-Camino reflections. It was what the long Galician vistas, the wild soaring of that silver censer was revealing to me — that it was time for my small soul to grow bigger, my trapped spirit to fly free; time to finally reject an early indoctrination about an original shame, and replace it with the most astonishing love-story. It is never too late to recapture the original song of blessing in our souls.

After honest, daily conversations with my companions I realised that the pilgrimage was not just towards Santiago; it was towards each one's true, essentially divine self. This daily discernment needs constant vigilance, we agreed. Something sinister within us is hell-bent on scrambling our sense of direction, our true north. For me, I began to realise, it was fear, as invisible as the ego, insidiously, unconsciously influencing my every response and decision. A lot of re-focussing, re-connecting, re-alignment went on during those Camino nights and days of slow grace.

There is a bigness about the Camino. The 'magnanimity' so often mentioned by Pope Francis came into my mind, the unexplored countryside of my own heart. I was discovering a larger self, more free and easy, more ready to let go. I am who I am, I reflected as we walked along, created in all my shadows and lights, the fleshed creation of Unconditional Love itself. I have nothing to prove, to earn, to bargain for anymore. I am free to live, to love, to trust the God who is already in my deepest being. I like to think that this new and liberating feeling was connected with what happened the following day.

From the start of our walk, handicapped by an emerging hernia, waiting for an operation, I was feelingsore and anxious. My companions noticed my new limp and discomfort. One evening we discussed whether I should continue. Still, the following morning I set out, gingerly testing every step for the ache to start again. But no pain came. Instead I felt a blessed power and energy, and walked faster and for longer than I had ever managed before, without the slightest inconvenience. And every experience was heightened – the umber of the earth, the sun on my face, the taste of water. And thus it lasted for the rest of the Way. Grace surely belongs to the senses!

Most of us cherish, in the imagination of our faith, a picture of a beckoning Santiago up ahead, an Ithaca, an Omega of final belonging. We have, I suppose, been travelling small Caminos since we could walk. Remembering a picture of beckoning water, trees and a hill on the wall of his childhood home, Tablet columnist Jonathan Tulloch asks what picture hung on our walls, and what magic door still waits for us to press open. 'Where do you dream of losing and finding yourself?' he wonders.

As we reflect on this question, it is good to remember first that we are somehow already at one with God - tiny flickers of the fire that is Life itself, Love itself, Being itself. But then we forget; we keep missing those yellow arrows of belonging, finding ourselves lost, alone, in unfamiliar places.

But *nil desperandum!* 2021 may be the time for your next new adventure – with a different life-map! The Compostelainvitation is always open. Is your heart up for it? Is your name down for it? 'Buen Camino!'