

Thoughts from a sabbatical

'Buen Camino!' are the two words that have been ringing in my ears for the last 5 weeks. Walking across northern Spain (beginning in the French Pyrenees), following the ancient medieval pilgrimage route to Santiago, I clocked up nearly 500 miles. Every time I passed a fellow pilgrim we would exchange those words, 'Buen Camino' which roughly translated means, 'safe travelling' or 'go well'. Since returning from Spain I find myself musing on what it was all about; indeed why did I choose to make the journey in the first place?

I first heard about the Camino to Santiago de Compostela about 10 years ago from a friend in the Yorkshire Dales. 'It clears out all the rubbish and puts you back in touch with what's really important to you', I remember her saying and her words came back to me when I was considering what to do on my sabbatical. It seemed a good plan. So having done a minimal amount of research on what the route was like, what to take, key Spanish phrases and the like, I set off.

The physical route took me through four regions: Navarra and Rioja, with mountains and forests, crops and vineyards, then Castilla y Leon with the relative wilderness of the Mesata and finally Galicia with its mountain streams and lush pastures. I walked in temperatures of high 30's through numerous medieval villages and a number of imposing cities. But alongside the physical route there was the mental and spiritual journey to be made. This, so they say, falls into three sections: you spend the first part of the journey concerned with your body - obsessed with the state of your feet - counting the blisters and the aching muscles. Then (if you haven't given up and gone home) your attention shifts more to the mind: why am I making this journey? What am I needing to focus on? What am I needing to get out of this? But the third part of the journey is perhaps the most crucial - the journey of the heart. Having relaxed into your body, having given up on attempting to 'sort' your life (I speak only for myself of course!) it becomes a journey of trust and acceptance. I found myself experiencing an inner freedom that I have only glimpsed before; a way of being in the world that enabled me to delight in it and see it as though for the first time. In a strange way I felt I was being stripped of all my usual preoccupations and felt a deep sense of being at peace or you might say, 'in tune' with myself.

St James, Patron Saint of Spain, in whose honour the pilgrimage is made, makes many appearances along the way. Tradition has it that he landed on the west coast of Spain shortly after Christ's death intending to take the Christian message to the people of Spain. But he received a hostile reception and ended up returning to Jerusalem, only to die a martyr's death. His body was carried back to Galicia and according to tradition he was buried in a field near Santiago. It was fascinating to see how his name and his image has been moulded, re-moulded, used and abused through the centuries. In some places he is the gentle pilgrim, bearing his scallop shell (the symbol of pilgrimage), a staff and a gourd (to hold his water), offering encouragement to present day pilgrims. In other places he

emerges as the aggressive 9th century Moor slayer - the knight in shining armour, spearheading the re-conquest of Spain for christianity.

The story of St James, my story, the stories of the many thousands who walk this route every year, all converge in Santiago. What an amazing moment to stand in that cathedral at the end of the journey surrounded by fellow travellers and pilgrims, adding my prayer to the prayers of so many who've made that same journey over the centuries. The swinging of the giant thurible, originally used presumably to fumigate the sweaty and disease ridden pilgrims, makes an appearance at the end of the mass as 6 men take hold of the ropes and swing it across the cathedral. What a sight to behold!

Walking the Camino was 5 weeks very well spent! I have no doubt that I will continue to muse on all that it has meant to me and will enjoy chatting with anyone who thinks they may just be interested in making the pilgrimage.



