

The Road Seen, Then Not Seen

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 25 July, 2021

A Reflection by Rev Dr Sarah Bachelard

Pentecost 9B

Contemporary Reading: *Santiago* by David Whyte; Matthew 20: 20-28

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Earlier this week, and for only about the 15th time, my partner Neil and I watched the movie, *The Way*. Perhaps some of you know it? Directed by Emilio Estevez and starring his real life father, Martin Sheen, the film tells the story of four pilgrims on the Way of St James, known in Spanish as the Camino de Santiago. One piece of dialogue struck me in particular. Joost from Amsterdam and Jack from Ireland who've just met, are beginning to walk together. Joost remarks that Tom (the character played by Martin Sheen) had not intended to come on pilgrimage – it seems, says Joost, like it was an accident. And Jack responds: *'I've been walking three months, Joost. I started this pilgrimage in Paris. And if there's one thing I've learned about this Way of St James, no one walks it by accident – no one'*.

Well, today we celebrate the Feast of St James. I've walked his Way (or parts of it) three times in the past 8 years – the Camino Frances from the French Pyrenees, the Camino Portugues from Lisbon, sections of the Cluny Way in France, and the Camino de Levante from Avila. Hundreds of kilometres by foot to the sacred destination of Santiago, where the bones of the saint are said to lie.

Participation in this pilgrimage has waxed and waned over the centuries. It was among the most popular of the mediaeval pilgrimages, and in its heyday the Camino attracted up to half a million pilgrims annually. It declined during the time of the Protestant reformation, and even further during the Age of the Enlightenment. In 1867 only forty pilgrims attended the Feast Day of St James in Santiago. A century later, in the 1960s, things weren't much different, with only seventy-odd pilgrims arriving in Santiago.

But in the 60 years since (at least pre-Covid), the figure has grown to over 300,000 pilgrims per year. Australian author, Dee Nolan, wrote: *'There was no celestial brightness to herald the extraordinary ... rebirth of the camino. No angels came bearing messages, but it would seem to be nothing short of a miracle that, in our modern times, people from all parts of the world and of every religious persuasion (or sometimes none) increasingly feel the need to retrace the steps of the mediaeval pilgrim'*.¹ So what's going on here? And what might it suggest for our journeys and the journeys of those among whom we live and work?

¹ Dee Nolan, *A Food Lover's Pilgrimage to France* (Melbourne: Lantern Penguin Group, 2014), p.7.

Of St James himself, we know very little. He and his brother John, sons of Zebedee, were among the earliest disciples called by Jesus (Matthew 4.21; Mark 1.19-20). Together with Peter, they seem to have been particular intimates of his. They're the three Jesus takes with him up the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17.1; Mark 9.2; Luke 9.28), and they're the three he called to watch with him in Gethsemane. The episode we've just heard seems to reflect their (or their mother's) sense that this intimacy should count for something in the longer term: a cabinet position, no less, places at Jesus' right and left hand in the coming kingdom. But of course, they've misunderstood the nature of the 'kingdom' and so what it means to be 'great' in it.

The legend that brings this scriptural James to western Spain seems far-fetched to say the least. It involves the claim that he had preached the gospel in Spain as well as in the Holy Land, and that after his martyrdom in Jerusalem (Acts 12.2), his disciples carried his body back to Spain, where they landed on the coast of Galicia, then took it inland for burial at Santiago de Compostela – Compostela meaning '*field of stars*'. There are no early sources corroborating this account. It's easy to believe the alleged 're-discovery' of James' bones in the 9th century and the subsequent ecclesial marketing of a pilgrimage to his tomb had more to do with a desire for greater Christian presence in northern Spain at a time of conflict with the Moors, than with anything more spiritually uplifting.

So does this undermine the whole enterprise? Is the Way of St James just a mediaeval con, and the contemporary fascination with it sentimental or fanciful? Or, regardless of whether his bones are actually there, is there something about James and his way that does truly speak of and draw us into the way of transforming faith?

If I think about the James we glimpse in the synoptic gospels, he seems to represent what it's like to be caught up in a reality that so far exceeds your capacity to grasp it, that you constantly mistake its meaning and invitation. Just think of the clumsy lobbying of today's passage; or the story in Luke's gospel of James and his brother offering to call down fire from heaven to consume an unwelcoming Samaritan village – an offer summarily rejected by Jesus (Luke 9.54). You just don't get the journey you're on. There's the radical incomprehension at the Transfiguration and in Gethsemane. If this is a journey of transformation, progress seems pretty halting. And that's not so different from the experience of physical pilgrimage. '*The road seen, then not seen, the hillside hiding then revealing the way you should take*', writes poet, David Whyte.

Yet James also stands for that absolutely essential quality of faith – a responsiveness to call and the willingness to keep going in the face of unknowing, when an old way of being is showing itself inadequate, but it's completely unclear what the new one could be: '*the road dropping away from you as if leaving you to walk on thin air, then catching you, holding you up, when you thought you would fall*'.

And in the end, James' persistence is rewarded; he is transformed by his journey. But it's a transformation that leads, not to dominion, but to an even more radical self-giving. His death is reported in the Acts of the Apostles with complete lack of fanfare. King Herod, it's said, '*laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the church. He had James, the brother of John, killed with the sword*' (Acts 12.1-2). And that's it. No dramatic last words like Stephen. James simply drinks (almost anonymously) the cup that Jesus drinks; gives himself to be bodily handed over, following the road '*that brought you to this place, no matter that it sometimes took your promise from you, no matter that it had to break your heart along the way*'.

Like Jesus, James has come to the point of trust that, whatever befalls, his life is already held in God. He's let go the egoic ambition attached to his early discipleship; he's discovered *'that you were more marvellous in your simple wish to find a way than the gilded roofs of any destination you could reach'*.

In my experience, the practice of pilgrimage symbolises this journey of transforming faith. And not only that, it joins us to it bodily. Most of those we met on our way did not identify as Christian – or indeed 'religious'. Nevertheless, overwhelmingly, they were responding to a call that seemed to come, as it were, from beyond themselves: *'something that seemed to stand both inside you and far beyond you'*... Most spoke of having felt compelled in some sense to put themselves on this way. It had become an imperative, a ripeness – *'the only way in the end you could follow'*. As if something in them (and why not call it the Spirit?) knew they needed to be drawn beyond an old way of being, not quite knowing why, or how the journey was going to change them. And they were there bodily, their whole selves handed over, vulnerable to what came – day after day of heat, rain; mud, cobblestones and miles of foot-pounding asphalt; hunger, thirst, tiredness, despair, elation, solitude, community.

The sheer physicality, dailiness and single-mindedness of pilgrimage takes you at times to the edge and to unpalatable knowledge of yourself. As I discovered, despite years of meditation, if I'm cold, tired and hungry – I'm just cranky. To be a pilgrim is to encounter your ego-ic self, to be humbled. It brings us to poverty of spirit.

More and more people in our world are being drawn, one way or another, to this pilgrim way – not only to Santiago, but to Rome, Jerusalem, and here in Australia to Songlines pilgrimages, pilgrimages to the centre.

I've read recently that pilgrimage is contemplation for extroverts, and contemplative prayer involves the same dynamic. The call of something *'both inside you and far beyond you'*, the yearning for the same radical self-giving into fuller life. It's the yearning of the human spirit to discover the deep truth of ourselves and of the reality in which we live and move and have our being, *'like a person and a place you had sought forever'*, Whyte says, *'like a broad field of freedom that beckoned you beyond; like another life, and the road still stretching on'*.

I know that Pitt St Uniting is exploring the possibility of entering more deeply and opening access to this way of contemplation – this pilgrimage in place. It seems to me a profoundly important invitation to offer our world and this city, an invitation many are yearning to hear and accept.

I look forward to exploring more of it with you, as Covid permits us to gather in person later this year.