

Along the track

Buon Camino

On the way to Spain, I read an article about Stan Grant. He vividly remembers the day he and the other aboriginal students of his age were called to the principal's office and told that there was no place for them at that school. They were now at a legal age when they could leave school so, 'go now' they were told. Not surprisingly, that has stayed with him for the rest of his life – 'there is no place for you here'.

As I walked the Camino I could not get that out of my mind – 'there is no place for you here'. Why do we put up barriers, why do we make judgments, who do we see ourselves as better than others, our way as better than someone else's? The pilgrims we met along the way came from different countries, different races, different faith journeys, different ages, different cultures, different backgrounds, people with belief in God, and those who did not... and definitely different levels of fitness. There was a place for them all. The Camino has welcomed such pilgrims for hundreds and hundreds of years. It is surprising to find out how many have done this journey once or twice, even many times before. We met people who had been on the way for weeks, travelling thousands of kilometres. There was a shared genuine interest and curiosity in who we were and where we had come from when we walked together or shared meals in the evenings. On the Camino, it was not a case of 'there is no place for you here'. People take on this journey for many reasons. Over evening meals or a quiet drink, quite spontaneously and naturally we shared our very, very different life journeys. That was enriching. In the words of one fellow pilgrim... *all those treasured moments along the way as we got to know each other. Those moments were, at different times, funny, touching, supportive and always interesting.*

Pilgrims carry a scallop shell. There are many, many explanations for this symbol. The one that most appealed to me was that the shell is open and empty. The walk is supposed to help us open ourselves up to God, to others, to life itself. It is empty as the Camino calls us to empty us of our own preoccupations and problems. There is a peace that is quite unique to this journey. This journey gave flesh to Pope Francis' plea *I have a dogmatic certainty: God is in every person's life. God is in everyone's life. Even if the life of a person has been a disaster, even if it is destroyed by vices, drugs or anything else - God is in this person's life. You can - you must - try to seek God in every human life.*

The scallop shell also reminds us that sometimes at various stages in life we are nagged by questions that we find hard to answer, questions that, if we are open to it, are growth points, questions that faith enriches and gives new meaning. Not just the 'Who am I really?

What is expected of me now?' questions or 'there is more to me than this job.' In contrast, questions revolved around: What are 'the loves of my life'? Where is God in my life and what might God be asking of me now? Sometimes 'God' was replaced by other words, other concepts but the Camino invited us to go deeper, to share more deeply and to draw closer to God, as each of us understood that to be.

We greeted our fellow pilgrims with the universal greeting 'Buon Camino.' At first it seemed a bit artificial, a novelty but it became much more than a hollow greeting, the 'have a nice day' type thing. It became a prayer for each person on this shared journey. It crossed all languages. It became a word of greeting to the many of other cultures and languages, it became a word of shared experience, a word of encouragement when the going got tough. It reminded me of what Pope Francis said: 'How beautiful it is to support one another in this wonderful adventure of faith!' Faith certainly is an adventure, a journey of discovery, a step into the deep but our faith needs the support of others.

On our last evening in Santiago, by sheer chance, we came across a very memorable experience. It was the Feast of Corpus Christi and the Archbishop and all the priests of the Diocese led a Eucharistic procession through the streets of the old city. It was a very solemn affair. The crowds were silent and very respectful and the silence was only broken occasionally by a brass band that followed the official retinue. Flower petals were thrown from the buildings. It took us back to our childhood, to the Eucharistic Gatherings at Sunbury our family went to each year, and the Feast Day processions at boarding school. Pilgrims of many faiths and none from all over the world stood in respectful silence right across the city as the procession passed by. It was very moving.

There isn't a lot of time to read on this journey but one article I managed to skim contained a challenging question asked by a father of his daughter: 'What would you like me to be more of and what would you like me to be less of?' It is a very good question. If those close to us asked that question, how would you answer? And if God asked?

And whatever your answer, there is a place for you here!

Regards
Jim Quillinan

Email: jquillinan@dcsi.net.au