



## REFLECTION ON THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

I committed to walking the Camino de Santiago de Compostela on an impulse. A friend casually asked if I would be interested in walking it with him one day. Immediately, without thinking it through, I was hooked and determined to make it happen. This is not normal behaviour for me. Although I still can't fully explain it, I think there was something of a tug from the Holy Spirit involved. Yes, there was an appeal to my sense of adventure, but the Camino is not just any old walking trail. This is a bona fide *pilgrimage* - one of the big three that date back to medieval times: Jerusalem, Rome and Santiago de Compostela. So perhaps I was also motivated by my love of history and connecting with ancient practices of discipleship. And yet I knew in some visceral way that my urge to go on pilgrimage was far more than an educational history excursion. It was to do with working out how I would follow Jesus right here, right now.

Getting ready to go took me two years. I'm sure others could manage to get themselves organised more

quickly but that's how it was for me. Those two years form the boundary between my ministry in the past and my ministry in the future. It's been two years of realigning myself to a new call, and the Camino was to be a pivotal moment in that transition. When getting ready for a major pilgrimage, there are four major areas of preparation to be attended to. I'll go through them one by one because each of these areas has direct relevance to disciplines and practices that may sustain and develop a missional life in our communities. I won't tediously spell out specific applications of implied principles but I encourage you to make the connections that relate to your particular context.

Firstly, you have to prepare your schedule. That means clearing the necessary time in your diary. In my case that was five weeks - not an easy task! And it involves researching and planning your route. There are several Camino pathways. They all end in Santiago de Compostela but you can start in many different places. I ended up choosing to walk the 800-kilometre Camino Frances route, which starts in St Jean Pied de Port on the French side of the Pyrenees. John Brierley's *Pilgrim's Guide* was very helpful in planning daily stages. Preparing your schedule builds anticipation and resolve. As your imagination gets fired up you start enjoying the journey before you have even taken one step.

Secondly, you have to prepare your kit. I was not at all experienced in outdoor pursuits and had very little of the necessary gear. On pilgrimage, when you're carrying everything on your back, you don't want to be lugging stuff you don't really need. And you want whatever you do take to be efficient, light, strong, durable, multi-purpose and easy to use/wear. Some obvious life lessons to be drawn from that. My biggest surprise in this area was to realise the usefulness of walking poles. In my vanity, I thought they looked a bit silly and a bit unnecessary for an able-bodied man, so I almost didn't buy a pair. That would have been a serious mistake.

Thirdly, you have to prepare your body. I had only a basic level of fitness when I decided to walk the Camino, so my body needed some serious training. My schedule for the Camino required me to walk an average of 27 kilometres each day. The first time I tried walking that distance in one go in training I really hurt myself. There was so much to learn about hydration, stretching, massage, blister prevention and so on. I began walking 5 kilometres daily in the boots I intended to wear on the Camino. I built this up to 10 kilometres per day over the course of a year, with the occasional longer walk. By the time I headed to Spain I was confident I had done the necessary preparation. I was wrong. Three days into the Camino I was in a lot of pain with dreadful blisters. If not for the help of the Spanish woman who ran one of the albergues I don't know what I'd have done.

Fourthly, you have to prepare your soul. Well, maybe you don't *have* to. But if you want to approach the Camino as a pilgrimage and not just a long walk, some soul work is crucial. My processes for preparation were reading, praying and conversations. I devoured several books to get in touch with the issues. Martin Robinson's *Sacred Places, Pilgrim Paths* is full of fabulous quotes arranged around some thoughtfully crafted themes. In terms of soul preparation I was especially grateful for Charles Foster's *The Sacred Journey*. I can't recommend that book highly enough. I also read through Exodus and spent many hours meditating on Psalm 84. My prayers centred on the question of what God wanted to do in me over the month I was away. Early on I was keen to be prepared to witness to others on the Camino

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but I became convinced this was not the first matter on God's agenda. My soul work in prayer was to get to a place of receptivity. Conversations with a few people who had walked pilgrimages were useful, mostly for dispelling romantic expectations of Damascus Road experiences!

Exactly what makes walking the Camino de Santiago so impactful is hard to express. Part of it has to do with being away from the myriad of annoying little details that complicate normal daily existence. A decision has to be made about how 'in touch' one wants to be on pilgrimage. It's a very personal matter, with no right or wrong. Apart from a phone call to my wife every few days, I chose to switch off all my devices - no phone, iPod or computer, no Facebook, Twitter or email - and I was very glad of that choice. Life became very simple on the Camino. It gave space to think, space to talk with others without the pressure of time or agenda, space to simply be. Another source of the deep impact is the earthiness of the experience. Walking is an effective way to get connected to a landscape and the people and culture embedded within that landscape. It's a very different experience than travelling in a car or bus or train. And, of course, when walking significant distances you become very aware of your body - both the pain and the strength - which is an experience that gets pretty earthy. Engaging in pilgrimage as a deeply spiritual exercise is a powerful antidote to Gnosticism.

Walking through Spain on this pilgrim path creates wonderful memories, but the deeper value of it is in the personal transformation that takes place. No doubt this is slightly different for everyone who does the Camino, with, perhaps, some common threads here and there. What was the personal transformation that happened in me? I need to be a bit careful here because it's too early to tell whether, in fact, I have undergone personal change or have simply become aware of areas of my life that are in need of transformation. I hope that at least a start has been made in certain aspects of my character. So, at the risk of setting myself up, I'll have a shot at naming them. Something in me is shifting in terms of patience, perseverance, tolerance and acceptance of others, gratitude for simple things and resisting drivenness so I can manage my energy levels wisely. I cannot transform myself in these areas through the effort of will, but God's Spirit can change me. The Camino has focussed my attention so that I am now tuned in to cooperate with his power at work on those things. It's the process Paul was talking about in Colossians 1:29.

For the first 24 days of the Camino I read slowly through the gospel of Luke, one chapter per day. I expected that my different context would cause me to come to the text from a different angle. But I was not prepared for the degree to which this was the case. It was as if I had never read this gospel before; there were new insights and perspectives popping out at me every day. The most impactful and enduring of these was a fresh appreciation of how direct Jesus was in his dealings with people. There was no beating about the bush. He was, as we sometimes say, "in people's faces", with challenge, confrontation, even provocation. To my middle class, western sensitivities he seemed a bit rude at times - lacking in tact. Yet I felt drawn (and disturbed!) to consider how I might emulate this aspect of Jesus character. That was not a comfortable thought at all.

At the same time I was reflecting on the conversations I was having with people along the road and being convicted by the Holy Spirit about my tendency to be judgemental of others. Later I shared this

with one of my friends in the UK and she said, “Rick, that can’t be right. I’ve never known you to be judgemental.” Well, that just shows how cleverly I hide my inner thoughts. But there’s no pulling the wool over God’s eyes. He sees it all very clearly. Anyway, being challenged about being less judgemental and more direct at the same time put me in a bit of a tangle. I realised that my way of being more direct with people usually involved a dose of being judgemental along with it. And I could work on being less judgemental, but that would usually result in me being less direct as well. I can see that Jesus was both non-judgemental and direct at the same time, but I don’t see that in me. Plenty of room for growth then! Then I realised this is simply a restatement of John 1:14, that Jesus came full of grace (of which non-judgement is a part) and truth (of which directness is a part). This has been a personal paradigm for ministry practice and character development for me for well over ten years. Here I am STILL working on it! Lord, help me to make some progress.

I was able to have spiritual conversations with others doing the Camino every single day, and several times each day. This is not my normal experience in day-to-day life. I would think I’m doing well if I have a spiritual conversation with a stranger once per week. Why was it such a rich time of deep conversation? There are several factors. Firstly, the Camino de Santiago is consistently presented as a spiritual pilgrimage, both by those who offer support services for pilgrims and also in the literature. Over a thousand years of history lies behind this walk, and those who follow the route can’t help but be affected by that history of religious devotion. Secondly, physical pilgrimage – taking a long walk – is a very apt metaphor for the inner journey of spiritual seeking that is common to all human beings at some point in their lives. These first two factors, taken together, explain why pilgrims will routinely ask one another, “Why are you walking?” The question makes perfect sense and drives immediately to the inner journey for which the outer journey is a symbol.

And I think there were other conditions, not general ones like the two I’ve mentioned but particular ones relating to my experience, which helped me to have so many spiritual conversations. I was practising being non-judgemental. I’m sure that opened some doors. I was not seeking to ‘sell’ my point of view. I was having genuine, mutual interactions with people whose stories and perspectives were of real interest to me. At the same time I was prepared to ask fairly blunt questions of others. You could call it being nosey, but my conversation partners were up for it. It was as if they had been longing for someone to open up these lines of discussion. Further, I was trying to be as honest and vulnerable as I could about my own uncertainties and frailties. I was not saying, “I’m a Christian and have it all together and wouldn’t you like to be like me?” Finally, I was trying out some different language. If I had said, “You know, God really loves you”, that would have been dismissed as religious claptrap. Instead I tried saying things like, “The universe is a friendly place, don’t you think?” I found this engaged people far more readily and we would be away into an interesting chat within seconds.

The people who were so open to have spiritual conversations with me on the Camino, had only days before been in another setting and undoubtedly were not nearly so open to have those conversations. On the Camino the right conditions were created that put people in the sort of headspace (heartspace?) in which they were ready to talk. Now I’m asking myself if those conditions can be replicated away from the Camino. The first two factors above – the environment that reflects a history of devotion and

participation in the powerful metaphor of walking – cannot be readily reproduced in daily life. However, I do think that if I am non-judgemental, have a respectful, listening stance, take the chance to ask probing questions, am willing to be vulnerable and carefully choose my language to use interesting turns of phrase that avoid religious jargon – if I do these things, then perhaps I might have more Camino-type conversations in my daily life.

Arriving into Santiago 30 days after setting out, my feelings were mixed. My heart was yearning to be with my family and friends once again, and yet I had come to love the road. There was a sense of accomplishment, but that was swallowed up by the prospect of a new beginning in which I wanted to weave the best of my pilgrimage experience into my everyday way of life. I went to the midday Mass they hold for pilgrims at the Cathedral. I was touched by the hospitality shown to me and all the other non-Catholics there. Technically, I don't think they are supposed to offer communion to us, but they don't ask questions and all are invited. I didn't participate. Not because of any problem between the Lord and me or because of any negativity toward Catholicism on my part. I couldn't put my finger on it, but something was not yet finished.

With a few days up my sleeve, I took the bus out to the coastal village Finisterre, a place name which means, 'the end of the earth'. In medieval days pilgrims would burn their clothes at Finisterre in a cleansing ritual. Those threads were probably so dirty, worn out and flea-ridden that's all they were good for! These days many pilgrims still burn something they have worn on the Camino, or leave it behind under a rock when the weather is so cold, windy and wet that they can't get a fire started (which is often). The most common items burned or left behind are shoes/boots. That might be less about cleansing and more about exacting revenge for the pain that footwear has inflicted. Glorious weather prevailed the day I was there and as I sat on a rock overlooking the Atlantic Ocean, I experienced a sense of being initiated into the next season of my ministry. The transition of two years was complete, and I stood up released from the past and ready for the future.

Arriving back into Santiago on a Sunday morning, I had a few hours left before my flight back to the UK. I had just enough time to attend a service at the Baptist Church near the bus terminal. What a delight to gather with this small but lively bunch of disciples! It was their first service in their brand new facility and the place was full of joy. On my way inside I saw their sign, which reads, '*Iglesia Bautista: Jesus Es El Camino*' (Baptist Church: Jesus Is The Way). I was hugged and kissed and fussed over and had multiple invitations for lunch even before the meeting began. Six adults who had been baptized the day before were welcomed into membership. I had just enough Spanish to get the gist of the preaching – a message about living hospitably. When it came time for communion I was eager to celebrate the end of my Camino with these folks with whom I share the same passion for living on The Way.

Not everyone can go on physical pilgrimage. But if you can possibly manage it, I encourage you to give it consideration. Of course, the heart of Christian pilgrimage is not essentially a matter of geography but a matter of walking with Jesus. Yet I have found that getting out on the road has opened up a fresh imagination for that journey of divine companionship.



## Rick Lewis

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