



The Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela

The *Camino de Santiago* (known in English as the Way of St James) is a network of pilgrims' ways or pilgrimages leading to the shrine of the apostle St James the Great in the Cathedral.

The remains of the apostle were found on this site in the 9th century.

By the 11th century the shrine had already become a pan-European place of peregrination.

AN ADVENT PILGRIMAGE

Daily Reflections and Prayers for Advent

WEEK TWO

Introduction

This Advent we are invited to set out on a pilgrimage, a journey towards a renewed and deeper encounter with God. A pilgrimage is essentially something active, something to be done, not simply something to be read about. So each day there will be things to do: prayer exercises to try out, reflections to undertake, gifts to ask from God. We are not alone on our journey. We are accompanied by many who have, throughout the centuries, set out on their own faith journeys. Let us set out together; and may God be with us on the road.

Week 2

The Second Sunday of Advent - Food

A gift to ask from God

We ask God for the gift of being able to see beyond our own immediate needs and concerns, and to be sensitive to the hungers of those whom we meet during these Advent days.

A reflection for the road

At its most basic level, food is fuel, and this is how it can be experienced when making a walking pilgrimage. The difficulty in this situation is that food can come to dominate your thoughts, eclipsing any of the more worthy considerations that you might have as a pilgrim.

For most of us, most of the time, there is little difficulty in having enough to eat. It does no harm, then, to share for a short time something of the experience of those who have to spend their waking hours searching for what they need. And once again, the effect is to greatly increase our gratitude for things that in more everyday circumstances we might simply take for granted.

When was the last time you were really hungry? Has there ever been a time when you literally did not know where your next meal was coming from? As you ponder questions like these, do they suggest anything that you might want to address, either about the food that you eat or your response to those whom you know who have to struggle to find all that they need to live?

Scripture to accompany us

In Matthew's parable of the Last Judgement, when the sheep are separated from the goats, both sheep and goats are amazed to discover that they have been encountering and reacting to Jesus, in the course of going about their daily business. The goats (those who fail the judgement test) are horrified to realise that they have been neglecting him:

'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry...and did not take care of you?' ...'Just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.'

Matthew 25. 44-45

These goats are not obviously evil people. They bear no ill will towards those whom they have failed to help. But they are rejected, ultimately, because they failed to notice and to respond to the needs of those around them. Wrapped up

in my own concerns, it is easy for me to do the same.

Prayer for the journey

King of glory,
you who alone can judge the human heart,
make me more aware of the needs of those around me
so that I may feed those who are hungry
in body, mind or spirit.
Amen.

Monday of Advent 2 - Homesickness

A gift to ask from God

We ask for a deeper experience of our own longing for all that God promises, so that this might help lead us onwards to the eternal home that God has prepared for us.

A reflection for the road

Even on an enjoyable holiday, you can reach the point where you would like nothing better than to be back home in your own bed, in the familiar surroundings of your everyday life. This experience can be much more intense when you are faced with the uncertainties of life on the road. After a few days, you can end up questioning why you ever set out on a journey that, at its start, seemed like an exciting adventure or an invigorating challenge.

There is a strand in traditional Christianity that views heaven, eternal life with God, as our true home; and that time we spend on earth is a journey towards and preparation for that state. In such circumstances, homesickness for a situation that we have never yet experienced and can only glimpse obliquely is nonetheless possible.

Indeed, the fact that I experience such a powerful longing for such a state, and a recognition that that is where I truly belong, can become a strong argument for the truth of the gospel message.

'Homeward bound, I wish I was', Simon and Garfunkel sang, drawing on their own experiences of endless concert touring. Is there anything in your own life, past or present, that helps you to appreciate what they were feeling? If so, does it make any sense to you to let those feelings tell you something about the call Christ offers you to enjoy the fullness of life with him for ever, beginning now in your present life, but coming to its fulfilment later on in heaven?

Scripture to accompany us

Towards the end of his composition, the writer of the Second Letter of Peter is looking to the future, and the hope that he has for it. He describes how:

In accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home.

2 Peter 3. 13

This implies something that we know to be true, that righteousness is not altogether at home here in our present life. At best, it is attained fleetingly and in a limited way. But the passage also recognises in each of us a longing for righteousness, and a feeling that it ought to be more natural, to be attained more easily.

In short, we feel a homesickness for a situation that (we are assured) God has promised will come about. In turn, that homesickness becomes a powerful incentive to work for that righteousness that we can bring into being, here and now, with God's help.

Prayer for the journey

Just and generous God,
you have promised to fulfil the desires of those
who hunger and thirst for righteousness.
Meet our every longing here with your generosity,
and so bring us to that home that we long for.
Amen.

Tuesday of Advent 2 - Companions: the Magi

A gift to ask from God

We ask that we might share something of the watchfulness and practical determination shown by the Magi as they journey along the roads to Bethlehem.

A reflection for the road

Traditionally, the Magi have been referred to as 'the three Kings'. And yet the gospel account of these wanderers, found only in Matthew, nowhere refers to their number nor to the fact that they are kings. They are Magi, wise men, closer to contemporary astrologers than to national leaders. They follow signs that are found by scanning the heavens, and it is these signs that both lead them to set out on their uncertain journey and dictate the paths that they take. Only by staying alert to these signs, and by following them closely, will they be able to eventually meet the infant King of the Jews, pay their homage and present their gifts.

If you think of your own life's journey as one in which you hope to meet Christ, not simply at its end point but day by day along the way, the Magi might act as useful companions and models. Consider the careful lookout they keep for signs leading them onward; their determination to keep going, despite the hardships that they encounter on the road; and the joy that they feel when at last they encounter Jesus. You might like to prayerfully consider today how these same characteristics are, or could be, a part of your pilgrimage this Advent.

Scripture to accompany us

The only incident the gospel describes on the Magi's journey to Bethlehem is their encounter with the duplicitous King Herod. We have to imagine the challenges that they would have faced in the course of their long journey. What Matthew does offer us, however, is their delight on reaching their goal:

When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage.

Matthew 2. 10-11

Looking back, this suggests that they might have felt that they had, in their journeying, achieved a good job well done. When you look back over your own life as a disciple of Christ, can you at times share something of that experience of times when you carried out a difficult task well, and knew the satisfaction that this awareness gives?

Prayer for the journey

Lord Jesus Christ, King of kings,
may the prayers of the Magi
support me on my journey, strengthen me on the road,
and lead me to share their joy when I encounter you.
Amen.

Wednesday of Advent 2 - Mountain-tops

A gift to ask from God

We thank God for the peak experiences of our lives of faith, and ask that we will not lose touch with their meaning in more ordinary times.

A reflection for the road

Which do you prefer, peaks or plains? Much can be said for the wide skies and straight roads of a flat and level landscape. But few of us, I suspect, would be happy to wholly give up more challenging terrain, with its opportunities of

climbing to points where the view opens up and the landscape unfolds before us like an animated map. Even if you are no mountain climber, gentler hills and ridges can offer a similar experience.

In the journey to God, there are also days and seasons when we feel on top of the world. Distractions and petty annoyances are left behind, and we feel that we can see clearly both the path ahead and the goal we are seeking. C S Lewis called such experiences 'joy'; and Ignatius of Loyola, more prosaically, called them 'consolation'. Whatever we call them, such moments can be a powerful incentive to keep on going when these clear visions pass.

For pass they do. Few are called to live on mountain-tops. Much of our life is passed with necessarily more restricted views. If you can recall any of these peak experiences in your Christian life, the chances are that you will also recall coming 'back to earth' afterwards. But if the experiences were true, a gift from God for you, they can continue to shape your life even after you move on.

Scripture to accompany us

One day Jesus led three of his closest friends up a mountain. There they had a clear view, not just of the Palestinian countryside, but of who this man Jesus, their friend and companion, truly was, and of the role that God had for him.

Understandably they were confused, and it would take a long time before they fully understood what it was that they had seen and heard.

Suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, 'This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!'

Matthew 17. 5

You have probably not had an experience as powerful as this Transfiguration scene. But can you remember one or two of your own peak faith experiences, the kind of thing that you could point to if someone were to ask you why you choose to be a Christian?

Prayer for the journey

Jesus, beloved Son of the Father,
with whom he pronounced himself well pleased,
help me to treasure my own moments of clear sight.
May I allow them to guide and shape my journey
even when I leave the mountain-tops.
Amen.

Thursday of Advent 2 - Blisters, bruises and bumps

A gift to ask from God

We ask for the confidence to stand before God just as we are, presenting our small pains to his loving and healing touch.

A reflection for the road

If the image of a journey is one that is useful in understanding the nature of Christian life, for most people it is not the kind of journey that is made with five-star luxury. Few get far along the way without the odd bump, bruise or blister, the kind of minor injury that nevertheless benefits from the opportunity of healing. Small resentments and grievances, insults real or perceived, unrealised hopes and unanticipated failures - none of these may be enough to make us give up the journey or take another course, but all can add to the everyday challenge of living as disciples.

Today you are invited to look at the minor injuries that make your journey the more taxing. Sometimes, even the naming of them can make them easier to bear. Certainly it is worth holding them before God in prayer. Perhaps God will want to offer healing, or lead you to places and people who may be of help. Perhaps simply recognising that Jesus also knew his own rejections and failures will help you to draw closer to him.

Scripture to accompany us

The gospels contain numerous accounts of Jesus healing people by his touch. One, near the start of Mark's gospel, is particularly interesting. A leper has, against all convention, escaped his enforced social isolation to stand before Jesus. He says to him:

'If you choose, you can make me clean.' Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, 'I do choose. Be made clean!'

Mark 1. 40-41

Now obviously, if this man had leprosy, he was in a much worse state than the minor injuries and inconveniences we are considering here. But it is the immediacy of Jesus's response that is worth pondering. 'I do choose,' he insists. Another version translates this as, 'Of course I want to!'

How can we doubt, the passage implies, that Jesus wants to help us in any way he can as soon as we present ourselves to him in our need? Can I take this seriously, and make my way today to stand before Jesus, asking for his help with all my blisters, bumps and bruises?

Prayer for the journey

Lord, this leper was not ashamed
to stand before you in his poverty,
confident that you would give him what he needed.
Help me to share his confidence
so that I may walk your way with renewed vigour.
Amen.

Friday of Advent 2 - Short cuts

A gift to ask from God

We seek the gift of being able to let go of our plans and projects, whenever and wherever God suddenly opens up before us new paths and challenges.

A reflection for the road

If you have ever relied upon a map or satnav to guide you on a journey, you will know that the reality can be very different from what you expected. Perhaps your map was a little out of date and new roads have been constructed. Or maybe the satnav data was simply wrong. Whatever the reason, this kind of situation demands of you the flexibility to adapt to conditions on the ground.

Sometimes this may be to your advantage. The unexpected conditions suggest the possibility of a short cut, cutting minutes or even hours off your journey. A new road appears to halve the distance you have to travel, or an unmarked footpath looks as if it will avoid a long detour. What do you do? Embrace the short cut, or stick to your original plan?

Your answer is likely to be guided as much by your temperament as by the confidence that you have in your mapping system or orientation skills. Some of us are natural risk-takers, revelling in the opportunity of facing new challenges. Others are more cautious, preferring tried and tested ways. All this applies as much to our journeying to God as it does to our route planning.

If God suddenly presents you with new and unforeseen opportunities, how do you react, with panic or excitement?

Scripture to accompany us

An old parlour game invites you to quote contradictory proverbs. 'Look before you' contrasts with 'He who hesitates is lost'. Even if there is no formal contradiction here, the two sentences point in radically different directions. At times, something similar can be found in the Scriptures, and even in the sayings of Jesus.

No one puts new wine into old wineskins...New wine must be put into fresh wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine desires new wine, but says, 'The old is good.'

Luke 5. 37-39

The first part of this seems, in the context, to commend the new, calling for the thorough change needed to accommodate it. The second part implies that many will nonetheless prefer things as they are. Behind all this lies the suggestion that with the coming of Jesus, something new has burst into our world; and the preservation of the *status quo* (however much desired) is no longer an option. How do you react to the kind of faith revolution that Jesus seems to be advocating here?

Prayer for the journey

God of surprises,

treat gently that part of me that prefers the tried and tested,

and entice that part that loves a challenge

with the new ways of your Spirit

who blows wherever he wills.

Amen.

Saturday of Advent 2 - Hospitality

A gift to ask from God

We seek the gift of recognising the presence of God in the hospitality that we receive from others, and the hospitality which we offer to them.

A reflection for the road

There is a famous Russian icon originally composed by the fifteenth-century painter Andrei Rublev, which shows the persons of the Trinity sitting at three sides of a table. The fourth side, nearest the viewer, is left open, a clear yet wordless invitation to join them at their meal. That ability to make space for a guest to be at home, without necessarily having to say a word, is perhaps the essence of hospitality.

Many established pilgrim routes have hostels along the way where travellers can eat and sleep. On the famous trail to Compostela these are known as *refugios*. Although the accommodation may be somewhat spartan, this is more than made up for by the chance to rest, recuperate and mingle with other pilgrims. Hospitality depends more upon the spirit in which it is offered than on the quality of what it has to give.

Hospes venit, Christus venit ('When a guest comes, Christ comes') is a phrase the Benedictines use to explain their characteristic hospitality. In your prayer today, you might reflect on situations in which you have freely offered hospitality to others. What was that experience like? Recall, too, the times when you have been on the receiving end of warm hospitality. What might that tell you about the God who wishes to invite you to his table?

Scripture to accompany us

The image in the Rublev icon is ultimately derived from the story told in Genesis of Abraham and his wife Sarah, entertaining three strangers hospitably in the wilderness, unaware that it is God who is their guest. Their kindness is repaid with the assurance of a longed-for child.

Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.

Genesis 18. 14

Without their hospitality to the three strangers, the passage implies that the promise would not have been made. The Bible has many stories of God appearing in unexpected places and going unrecognised. It takes a generous heart to be always ready to meet the God who approaches us without warning. Of the people who cross my path today, might the way I welcome them have something to show me of the face of God?

Prayer for the journey

Hidden God,
appearing unexpectedly in the face of friend and stranger,
help me to receive all those I encounter today hospitably,
and so perhaps to come to recognise you
in each encounter and in kindness.
Amen.

