

Pentecost 6
8/7/2012

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 5:1 – 5, 9 – 10
Psalm 48
2 Corinthians 12:2 - 10
Mark 6:1 - 13

Sermon preached by Rev Dr Morag Logan

One of the highlights to me of our time living in Europe was the opportunity we had to walk the Camino de Santiago – the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostello. I guess I had always been inspired by the great pilgrimage hymn. I had read Bunyan, and spent many of my adult years in the church hearing how we were a pilgrim people, always on the way.

So there was a great attraction to me in the idea of a pilgrimage. In the process of stripping back my life, my priorities, at least for a time. It was an important process of being realistic about assessing my needs, what was physically possible, what was physically necessary. It was valuable, for a time to be letting go of all of the things that I thought I needed, simply letting go, reducing, until I had reached a point where what I needed equalled what I could carry, and we set off to travel as pilgrims – to travel, I thought, as the disciples were sent, stripped back.

That, of course, was in essence a holiday – but it is an attractive vision for the whole of life. A vision of Poverty, of simplicity, Asceticism. A vision of a thought-through life – for an individual or a church – a life lived with a clarity of vision, of purpose, with a stripping back of the trappings of church, social, financial, career life, stripping back to the bare essentials.

It has its attraction here at North Melbourne, when we read about disciples sent out to live on the way – a vision, perhaps of what we could give up our Buildings / our comfort/ our stability. A chance to think through what it would mean for us to strip back to the essentials, to live independent of structures, on the road, always on the way.

Of course, all the people we met along the way had chosen a different amount of stuff to carry. Some were slogging along under heavy loads, struggling to make their distance because of all of the things they carried. Others carried much less than we did, travelling more easily, but choosing to be less comfortable. On our camino, our pilgrimage, we didn't agree about the essentials – we each carried very different sorts of stuff.. Some of the things people carried surprised me enormously – I, for example, had just never considered a hair dryer, or an iron to be an essential to life, to be worth carrying.

In my turn, I was given a great deal of grief about the 1kg volume I had insisted on carrying with me. It was a cultural guide to the Camino – all 900 pages of it, and I would not have done differently as each afternoon, after we had arrived where we were staying, I read from it. Often aloud, and collecting quite a group of listeners. This volume – this dead weight - was surprisingly enriching to a number of people. Without it, we would not have known why there was a chicken in the church at Saint Domingo, housed above the nave in what is probably the world's only early gothic chook house. We would not have paused at roman ruins, or Romanesque churches along the way, seen the Michelangelo pieta tucked away in the back corner of a small country church, lit up when you put your 2 euros in the slot, known what side trips to take, what were the implications of alternative routes to travel.

This was one of the various lessons of the road – that carrying less was not always better, that the journey was more than the stripping back and the travelling on. It was greatly enriched by lingering, by a broader vision, by a heavier load.

There was also different learning on the road. Early in the second week of our pilgrimage our wallet disappeared. It was not there one morning, when we were packing up. Theft is, of course, another time honoured pilgrim experience, like being held up by bandits, robbed by gate-keepers, being trapped in the snow, being eaten by wolves. Thankfully, these last four were not part of our experience, remained only the experience of medieval pilgrims experiences, not modern ones, but we were having enough of a pilgrim experience dealing with this loss.

We discovered through this loss that our stripped back independence was a myth. We were, in fact not independent after all. We were not always as aware of it, but on that morning – without wallet, credit cards, passports, ID – we were scared, but we were also at the time very painfully aware that we were surrounded by a supportive, loving, caring community, amongst all of those others who had gone through this stripping back to the bare essentials, for themselves and their needs. People we didn't know reached into their scanty supply of money, and pressed it on us. People gave us food, money, helped us find the police station, encouraged us on, made sure that rooms for the night were held for us. We, being well prepared, independent minded sorts, had some back-up supplies, and walked on. When we came to the next small refuge town, and for several days afterwards, we were surrounded by people telling us: you must find Hans. Hans is looking for you. Hans has got to find you. Hans, it turned out, had picked up our wallet by mistake – two black bags look very alike in the early morning light.

So our very medieval pilgrimage experience ended well, and we walked on, finished our pilgrimage. But from then on I remained very aware that we were not independent pilgrims, travelling alone and self-sufficient on our way to our promised goal. We were not sent out, or sending ourselves forth with the food, the resources we needed for our journey. Our exercise in renunciation, in stripping back, however important a spiritual exercise it was, was not the greatest point.

The greatest point was that we were not called to independence. We, as disciples are not called to independence. We are not called to the renunciation of all unnecessary things in themselves. We are not called to be stripping ourselves and our lives back to the bare essentials as an ascetic exercise, or as a renunciation of the limitations of things.

No, we are called beyond that – to steps beyond just letting go of our obsession with things, beyond stripping back to minimal needs for our own independence, we are called to go beyond that to the point where we must, where we are forced to realize that we are not independent, to the point where we realize our true and utter dependence on others. This is how the disciples were sent out.

Stripping back, removing or reducing a dependence on things has a long history – there were patterns of this at the time of the disciples. Dominic Crossan discusses this as he compares and contrasts the Cynic missionaries of the time, and the Jesus missionaries, the disciples.

The Cynic missionaries followed a pattern, as ascetic of reducing their lives to a minimal dependence on things. The Cynics were to carry "a bag," "a wallet," although "knapsack" or backpack is probably the better translation here. Crossan writes: "What it symbolized for the Cynics was their complete self-sufficiency. They carried their homes with them. All they needed could be carried in a simple knapsack slung over their shoulders" – sounds like my pilgrimage. [p. 118]. In contrast, he writes about Jesus' missionaries. They were sent out without "a bag": "...they could not and should not dress to declare itinerant self-sufficiency but rather communal dependency"

The disciples are not sent forth with the smallest possible backpack, the 13 kg load you one can carry all day, that keeps you feeling safe. They are called, as we are called to not taking one at all. To a forced, undeniable reliance on others. This is the nature of their calling, the nature of the calling of the whole Christian community. We are not independent, self-reliant, journeying pilgrims; but dependent, trusting, travellers – finding their own sustenance, and their own healing around the shared table.
