

## **Saint James' Day – 25 July 2010**

**Sermon preached by The Very Revd Robert MacCarthy  
in Saint Patrick's Cathedral**

Today is St James' Day and therefore it behoves me to talk about the camino of Santiago di Compostella. " Sant Iago" is the Spanish for St James and this year is a jubilee year for the camino as only once in 7 years can St James' Day fall on a Sunday.

So what is the camino? Essentially it means "pilgrimage" and the camino of St James is one of the last medieval pilgrimages to survive in Europe. By the way, Ireland has a good record in medieval survivals – today is "Reek Sunday" the most popular day to climb Croagh Patrick while there is also St Patrick's Purgatory in Lough Derg – many thousands still frequent both of them and have done so since medieval times.

But to return to the camino of St James, Goethe has said that Europe made itself by taking the road to Santiago and throughout the middle ages pilgrims walked from Parish, Antwerp, Cracow, Vienna and any other medieval town you care to name, to flow in slowly coalescing rivers down through France and across the Pyrenees. By the 11th and 12th centuries when the pilgrimage was at its height, perhaps half a million were making it each year and still thousands are walking it. Even across Northern Spain the camino runs to almost 800 kilometres and takes at least a month on foot. I did only part of the camino last May taking a mere 12 days.

Why did people do it and why do they still do it in such large numbers? For earlier pilgrims the lure was a reduction in the soul's time in purgatory; for modern people the motives are more usually historical and cultural, but also for deeply personal reasons – maybe a life change like retirement or recovery from some unhappiness or illness. Indeed for all who undertake this magnificent walk there has to be a spiritual dimension and the walk takes us through economic history as well as the religious and cultural.

On the side of architecture there is a great deal of Romanesque to be savoured including the cathedral of St James at Compostella which is a Romanesque masterpiece while the cathedrals of Burgos and Leon are finer Gothic examples than anything we have to show here.

St James is supposed to have made his first land-fall in Spain at a town called Padron and the cathedral in Compostella allegedly houses his remains in a silver casket in a crypt beneath the high altar. Whatever about that, the huge cathedral has standing room only at the Pilgrims Mass which takes place at 12 noon every day and I had the amazing experience of seeing the Butafumeiro being swung at the end of the mass. This is the largest censor in the world and it takes 8 men to swing it.

Today being a jubilee year there will be no fewer than a few hundred thousand through the cathedral: clearly the Roman church in Compostella has none of the problems that we are becoming familiar with in Ireland. This afternoon in Trinity College there will be a seminar on the camino of St James.

Whatever about all that there are just two episodes in the New Testament in which James figures prominently. The gospel spelt out the attitude of the sons of Zebedee very clearly.

The episode is very striking: James and John seem to have done everything including putting their feet in it together: no wonder some scholars think they may have been twins.

Clearly, in spite of their proximity to Jesus, the twins have learnt very little of what he stood for: they think only in terms of status and privilege (just as I'm afraid many of us in the ordained ministry are only too prone to do).

Very gently Jesus says to them "you do not know what you are asking" – even then they don't get the point: "yes" they agree eagerly: we'll do as you do: we'll do whatever you have to do. James and John have entirely failed to grasp that there is no short cut to God's favour; for the disciples as well as for their master. For us just as

for them; the path to glory, to our ultimate fulfilment is through suffering; and that is something we all have to learn the hard way.

Then comes a revealing little scene: the other 10 disciples are furious with James and John because they have been so brash. But notice how Jesus doesn't take sides – he makes peace in his little group by sitting them all down to hear a few words from him on basic Christian attitudes: unselfishness is to be the keynote – even the son of Man came not to be served – but to serve. How the Christian Church down the ages has so often failed to put that lesson into practice – and how gloriously some members of the church in every age have done just that – one thinks of St Francis of Assisi in the 13th century or maybe of Mother Theresa of Calcutta in the last century. But its not all a matter of heroics in far-off places. Each one of us in the week ahead will have dozens of opportunities of doing something for someone – instead of demanding some sort of attention for ourselves. “The son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

But you may be thinking: “if James was such a wash-out, why is he a saint with a special day to himself and all the rest of it?” Two things are important here. First, I find it immensely encouraging that our Lord's own disciples made such slow progress in grasping what it was all about – because we too – if we're at all honest with ourselves – must know that we are mostly wash-outs when it comes to putting what we believe into practice. Jesus doesn't lose patience or write his disciples off when they behave as James and John do – and Christ doesn't write us off either – ever. The only person who can write us off is ourselves. We have to go on from defeat to defeat, knowing that God is always there helping us, if only we will let him.

Secondly: James sticks by Jesus – right to the end even though he may not have been very clear why he was doing it. He at least knew the meaning of loyalty and trust. And following his heart led him to a martyr's death – there is just a passing reference to it in the Acts of the Apostles. “It was about this time that King Herod attacked certain members of the church. He beheaded James, the brother of John.”

And if we stick with the attitudes taught by Jesus – by all that we know to be right; we will have many deaths to die: to self-promotion; to self-satisfaction in a dozen different ways. May God keep us trying right to the end.