

## The Ascension of the Lord

The Spanish word *camino* means way. Walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain is a popular vacation destination these days. There are many ways a person can experience this pilgrimage way depending on how robust you are. Regardless, even the most user-friendly version of the *Camino* is said to be a life changing experience.

Traveling the pilgrim way that leads to the tomb of St. James in Campostela Spain has become extremely popular in the past few years. I have heard from those who have done this, that the days or weeks they spent disconnected from social media and the immediacy of our electronic age restored to them a centeredness and pace of life that gave them clarity of peace. They often talk about shedding pounds on the way but more than that they shed anxieties, preoccupations and of the defenses that have kept them from receiving what they need to thrive. And while the destination has always been the tomb of St. James itself, the popularity of the Camino today probably has as much to do with the walk itself as it does to the spirituality surrounding the cult of that saint. That this pilgrimage which has been walked for more than 10 centuries is a testimony to the value of pilgrimage.

I bring this up today to help us take a fresh look at Jesus' great commission:

**“Go, make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you.”**

Most English bibles translate this Greek passage “*make disciples*” which is not precise. The word “disciple” is not a noun in this sentence but rather a verb. A more accurate translation is: “Go out and *disciple* all the nations.” This is important for us as it changes the way we have traditionally looked at this passage, or should I say the way we have traditionally avoided dealing with it.

We avoid it because we don't think we can do it. The way it has been given to us in its less accurate translation implies that we have our act together *before* we can go out and tell other people to get their act together. So often we think that before we can become missionaries of Jesus Christ, we must first overcome our doubts and hesitations, become strong in faith, and conquer all our failings and sins, learn everything there is to know and be able to answer all the questions that come at us. Then, and only then, we assume, can we begin to be missionaries for Jesus Christ. With a more careful reading of this passage it becomes clear that rather than manufacturing disciples of Christ, we are really being asked to bring people along on the same journey that we are traveling. We are not finished products and so neither will they be.

St. Paul tells us in 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 12:

**Now you are the Body of Christ and members of it. And God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, then healers, helpers, administrators, speakers in various kinds of tongues. Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles? Do all possess gifts of healing? Do all speak with tongues? Do all interpret? But earnestly desire the higher gifts, and I will show you a more excellent way.**

There's that word again: “way.” He is not offering a destination but a way. This is easier for us to take if we take ourselves out of the position of being an authority and instead become fellow walkers allowing ourselves the chance to experience a more excellent way.

Our pastoral plan for the parish is based on this great commission of Jesus Christ. If we would embrace it with the better translation I think we would be more inclined to engage in it.

If we are looking for background for this way of looking at the great commission all we have to do is look at the first disciples. Those first missionaries for Jesus Christ included many who were weak in faith, they were not confident that they had what it takes to get the job done. That has been true in every age and it is true today.

Jesus summons us to his missionary service just as we are: weak in faith, with all our doubts, hesitations, and faults, and sins. He sends us as his messengers to an unbelieving but spiritually hungry world not because we are fit, because we are not. Rather he calls us so that he may make us fit. In sharing with others, the faith that is in us, our own faith is deepened and strengthened. Jesus does not call the equipped, he equips the called.

The disciples always talked about their work in the context of a journey. St. Paul was constantly on the go covering more than 10,000 miles before he was finished. He and his various companions and the people they encountered along the way were people “on the way.” As I think about it, the disciples who encountered Jesus on the road to Emmaus were “*on the way*.” The destination wasn’t the thing it was what happened as they were “*on the way*.” In fact, they never even got to where they thought they were going. What happened to them “*on the way*” changed them so much that they went back to where they came from as completely different people, as totally recharged for sharing the story of Jesus. It is all about being “*on the way*.”

**“Go and disciple all nations...”** In this more faithful translation of the Greek we are given instruction to walk along side, to journey with, to be “*on the way*” with those who are also seeking something more in life than the anxiety that drives them to fruitless pursuits of pleasure, profit and pointless living. The implication being that we are not that much better off than they are, but that we have heard the call, we have been offered a more excellent way. And even though the goal of the pilgrimage for those people on the Camino is the Cathedral of St. James in Compostela, that isn’t the most important thing. If it were, you would just book a flight to Santiago de Compostela Spain and grab a taxi for the Cathedral. Walking the way is how we let go of that which weighs us down and holds us back. Offering someone else the chance to walk with you can be the lifesaving gift that Jesus wants to offer them through you. He will take care of the rest. All he asks of us is to walk the way. Just like those two guys on the road to Emmaus, it was Jesus who did all the work.

Few of us are called to preach sermons about Jesus Christ, even fewer to do all those marvelous things St. Paul talks about in first Corinthians, but every one of us is called to proclaim him through the testimony of daily living and our apostolic action. That way of sharing the great commission becomes something all of us can do wherever our own way takes us. We just need to remember that where two or three are gathered in Jesus name, he will be with us. The task of bearing witness to Jesus Christ in daily life is only difficult when we place or imagine barriers of inadequacy. With our own resources alone, the task is too difficult.

But we are not alone. We have an unseen companion in our missionary pilgrimage: the same divine master and Lord who says to us in this hour, as he said to that little band of weak sinners and doubters on a Galilean mountain-top twenty centuries ago: “Know that I am with you always, until the end of the world.”