

Via Francigena: Day Ten – On Seeing Your Destination

Reflection 11: May 23

I have undertaken a few of these long walks now. Some daily destinations, simply rise out of the ground in front of you. Others you can see coming a long way off - or more to the point, they can see you coming. Towards the end of day's walk, the answer to the question of whether it is beneficial to be able to see your destination in the distance is an ambiguous one. The question - and answer - is ultimately more existential than geographical. The experience of seeing the end-point before you generates both a sense of orientation and disorientation. While you can see where you are heading, the destination often remains in the "distance" no matter how many steps you take. This reality in itself contains some life lessons.

A day's walk is necessarily from point A to point B, and generally, at some stage along that journey, you are able to catch a glimpse of where you are headed. Or at least where you think you are heading. Walking in unfamiliar terrain, even with identified paths, signs, GPS and digital maps, means that your surrounds are always new. And because it is foreign, there is no instinctive direction for where you should be heading, and mostly, you just a name or a dot on the guiding digital line. If this is true for the unfamiliar, it can also be strangely true for the familiar environments that we take for granted. So, given the slow turns of finding my way to Point B on any given day, I have had enough time to consider some "life lessons" and on the ambiguity of being able to see one's destination in the distance.

Life Lesson #1: What is true of the unfamiliar is also true of the familiar. Even familiar surrounds can have surprises, moments of disorientation, and unexpected turns. Life unfolds, often steadily, and even our "home environment" can have surprises if we are looking. Or even if we are not.

Experience has taught me that it is unhelpful to spy your destination too far out. The main reason being that the anticipation of being tantalising close is often an illusion - a lure in which the next few metres can disappoint. Especially in walking as the path unfolds more slowly, there is invariably another twist, turn, hill, ascent or descent which brings the finishing line no closer.

Life Lesson #2: To see the destination is to be drawn into a form of mirage: the misconception that the journey is about the end-point rather than the unfolding experience; a completion rather than a continuum.

On the road as in life, “destinations” are never an end-point. They are a pause, a moment of recollection, a time of recalibration, of some refreshment, nourishment, and rest.

Life Lesson #3: Destinations must then become a new starting point or way point that marks a stage but never the whole road. We begin again - not afresh but having travelled some distance with baggage new and old and some different insights and experiences. The term “destination” is only partially accurate and in this sense, it can also be deceptive. Whatever it is we see ahead of us is in truth a threshold to another road, an extended path, until that day when the road will run out for each of us.

So, this is what I have learned:

- “Destinations”, even familiar ones, always have elements of surprise or newness.
- “Destinations” are always further away than we think, be it a walk, an event, a celebration, a project or a work of any kind. Often we are better off being taken by surprise that we have come to some kind of completion.
- “Destinations” might work in the travel industry, or as a portion of our daily routine, but they have limited use in gaining life perspective. The way that real life works is not a series of segments to be conquered or tasks to be completed (leave that for the diary). Real life is about realising that road is open and simply to continue is the genuine task. We continue from a different space but we continue nonetheless and yesterday’s destination becomes the starting-point for tomorrow.
- “Destinations” obscure the fact that there is really one only destination for us all. Depending on what you believe, it is either the grave or something more. If it is only the grave, then perhaps we are walking away from something. If it is something more, maybe we are walking toward something. In one way or another, this destination is inevitable and the only one that matters, and the only one that can give any sense to our next step.