Talk 04

The Omega and the Alpha

The Jesuit Examen

We begin with a prayer called Patient Trust be Pierre de Chardin

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.

We are quite naturally impatient in everything

To reach the end without delay.

We should like to skip the intermediate stages.

We are impatient of being on the way to something

Unknown, something new.

And yet it is the law of all progress

That it is made by passing through

Some stages of instability—

And that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you;

Your ideas mature gradually—let them grow,

Let them shape themselves, without undue haste.

Don’t try to force them on,

As though you could be today what time

(That is to say, grace and circumstances

Acting on your own good will)

Will make of you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit

Gradually forming within you will be.

Give Our Lord the benefit of believing

That his hand is leading you,

And accept the anxiety of feeling yourself

In suspense and incomplete.

We pray to Christ our Lord, Amen

A few years ago, a Brazilian author named Paolo Coelho emerged on top selling books list. One of the books people were buying as fast as possible, when reading enjoyably was *Alchemist*. The book tells of a young southern banished Shepard named Santiago, who dreams if hidden treasures in the far away pyramids of Egypt. He leaves a heart adorn place for a journey of momentous proportions and colorful characters, some holy and wise, others shifty and troubling. The journey offers challenges that makes Santiago adapt and adjust to new environments and alternative conditions but it also creates some traps for him, times when he falls into a routine of complacency and comfort. Staying alter, on the move, dedicated to the pilgrim quest then seems unattractive. At these times Santiago is unemptied to remain stuck so to speak. And then at other times his journey persist, changing his environment or moving to new ones usually including others and asking for help he adapts. He carries with him lessons learned and continues to learn new ones so he also employs something of an ongoing examination of possibilities in his life. He is a practitioner of discernment. And in a bit I’ll talk about Jesuit discernment. I won’t give way too many details of Santiago’s story. I’ll let you discover rather our not he reaches his destination and what the most important lesson for him is. What is important though is the journey, the pilgrim quest and Coelho wants us to know this. The journey was crucial and essential and existential experiencing his life. And it is through it where self-understanding and religious insight are noticed. What the author Coelho also wants us to know that the journey of Christian living in not necessarily a physical one. Sailing over oceans or scaling mountains, a pilgrimage might be the sincere search we engage close at hand. Pilgrimage is not about miles but a mindset, openness of the heart a great search of religious quandary right where we are.

The question where pilgrim lies is before God and put own personal journeys to him are all different and unique. As we journey toward him, we find him along the way, walking with us or sometimes carrying us. Santiago the main character in the *Alchemist* is named symbolically by the author. The El Camino de Santiago in Spain is a pilgrim walk “4:19” to the barrel sight of Saint James, one of Jesus’s apostles. At the Spanish city of Santiago de Compostela, Santiago is the Spanish version of the name James. The Spanish word El Camino de Santiago means literally the walk of Saint James. While the walk began for many, near the cathedral church of Notre Dame and Paris “4:45” the French version of James’s name. The Spanish route of this pilgrim walk begins at “4:53” at a Spanish town on the border with France. It stretched across the top of Rocky, Spain toward northwest of the country’s edge. Prior to knowledge beyond land of Europe’s west, Santiago de Compostela was thought to be close to the world’s end just beyond it on the high clip above the Atlantic Ocean at the smaller villages in a “5:18”, a French word for land’s end, the world in deed seem to end. Getting to Santiago de Compostela was no easy task for pilgrims but they went in droves regardless.

The pilgrim again El Comino, the walk, was for centuries to most popular pilgrimage of all of “5:39” surpassing the height of its popularity the Christian journey to St. Peters was Basilica in Rome. El Camino is today experiencing a renaissance. Many think of it as Europe’s best hike but most this in bark upon it with existential remarkable desire with questions about good and meaning in their our lives they head out from the base of the French “6:03”, across the vineyards of Rio “high? 6:05” much else to the far western edge of Spain as a pilgrimage that is distinctly Christian it end is marked with the famous Greek signs the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. There symbols in the Christian world that speaks to the life of Jesus referencing as the first of all things and the last of all things. We see this in the book of revelations, in its first chapter and later in the 22nd chapter were Christian references are masked in codes and metaphors. However in Santiago de Compostela pilgrims notice something interesting when they arrive at the journey’s end. The symbols the Alpha and the Omega are inversely presented as the Omega and then the Alpha. This was not done to diminish or denigrate Christian reality but upon up spiritual symbols perhaps they were flipped above the doors of the cathedral on one of its sides. Instead of greeting pilgrims with the sign which say, the beginning and the end, as Omega and Alpha, the say the end and the beginning, And this is what they newly communicate, you have finished the significant journey to get to this holy place for navigating rocky difficult terrain or glorious days of sunshine or cold and wet days of rain, for your determination nation to get here in the name of something greater than yourself. You have reached an end and because of this pilgrimage which you may have discovered along the way about yourself, your companions and your God, you now begin anew.

Some of you might be familiar with the American intellectual, Ralph Waldo Emerson. As Henry David Thoreau went out the Walden Pond for an experiment to live more simply and reflect more sincerely, Emerson represents of special movement of think and moving in nearly history of the United States. One of Emerson’s writings echoes the message at the stone carvings on the Cathedral of Santiago. In an assay named circles Emerson reminds us what Santi Gustine said about God, that God’s nature is like a circle whose center was everywhere and its circumference nowhere. But Emerson persists and he says that human life is also like this. He says I quote “Our life is an apprentice to the truth that around every end there is a beginning there is always another dawn risen on mid-noon and under every deep a lower deep opens.” Emerson and Thoreau represent a religious tradition and theological thinking which are a bit different from Catholic practice and belief. But Emerson’s sentiment here is quite appropriate for us and quite Christian. A bit later in the retreat I’ll come back to Emerson. I’ll introduce him here to reinforce the new beginnings life constantly offers.

Our talks so far have continued to stress the pilgrim experience of our lives and focus upon God presents along the way it is such a uniquely Jesuit interpretation of the spiritual life but also an easily recognized and long practiced devotion of Christian living. Being on retreat is not dissimilar; it is an important aspect of your own pilgrim quest. For many who come to retreat once a year, it is a beach mark in the year and annual and wonderfully ritualized way to stay inventory of life but for anyone here at manifest religious commitments longing for God, wisdom for seeking rest and prayer and perhaps readiness for grace in full and the fuel you.

10:08