

STRANGERS AND PILGRIMS

“So then you are no more strangers and pilgrims, but fellow citizens with the saints and household of God ” - Ephesians 2:19.

“These all died in faith....having confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” - Hebrews 11:13.

In 1678 John Bunyan published his PILGRIMS PROGRESS. Bunyan shared in the intense persecution of the dissenters under Charles II. For twelve years he was a prisoner in Bedford gaol because he would not give an assurance to stop preaching the word of God - of human depravity and means of salvation, through the death of Christ. He puts it succinctly in the immortal lines:

“Blest cross, blest sepulchre, blessed rather be the man who there was put to shame for me’

Being reminded recently of the title of Bunyan's epic PILGRIMS PROGRESS led me to ponder the texts from Ephesians and Hebrews.

The two passages, as often happens in Scripture, appear to be contradictory, but not so as we shall see. The “no more” of our first text must be read in the context of the previous verse 12. *“...alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers from the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world”*. The Apostle is saying, it is no longer like that, there is now hope because of your relationship with God and Christ.

The Hebrews passage saying that they WERE strangers and pilgrims has to do with chapter 13:14 *“...for we have not here an abiding city, but we seek one to come”*, it is said in the context of an alien world without God.

To be a stranger in the Ephesian context is the idea is that of a homeless wanderer, with no friends, no comfort, no joy, hopeless, aimless and worthless. In their unconverted days, without realising it, they were all these things because they were without God *“afar off”*. But now all is changed conversion has come. They have been apprehended by God, arrested on the downward path to perdition and endless despair. They have been given the gift of Eternal life and made a new creation in Him. So in the negative sense they are no longer walking aimlessly in the darkness of their sinborn nature, but on the

positive side they are as the faithful ones of Hebrews 11; they are strangers in a Godless world that will persecute them even to death.

Not now strangers because THEY were without God, but strangers to the world because IT is without God. To be a 'stranger' is to lose the flavour of the world and to switch off from things that deprive you of fellowship with God. We are told in Romans 12:1-2 not to be *"CONFORMED to the world, but to be TRANSFORMED by the renewing of our minds."*

We live in days of self assessment, filling in our own forms, truthfully or otherwise, but it is well to remember that the Lord is assessing us in the totality of our relationship with the world and with Him.

Now some thoughts on our PILGRIM character.

It has often been said that "to travel in hopeful anticipation is better than to arrive". But no sense of disappointment for the Christian PILGRIM. It is as Hebrews 13 tells us *"we seek a city to come"* Abraham *"sought for a city whose builder and maker is God"* .

The eyes of the Christian pilgrim is not on the route travelled, but on the destination awaiting - the CELESTIAL CITY! For the exiled Jews the destination was Jerusalem, for the Muslims it is Mecca and Medina, for many sick folk it is Lourdes in France.

The Saviour called it *"My Father's house"* - John 14. The Apostle Paul calls it the *"majesty on high"* - Hebrews 1. The seer John calls it the *"new Jerusalem"* - Revelation 21. The place of unsurpassing glory, the place of praise and worship; the place of unceasing service; the place of unalterable bliss! WHY? Because the LAMB is all the glory in Immanuel's land. At the end of the pilgrimage there will be REUNION; REJOICING and REWARD. This is the pilgrim's destination.

Now finally, let us think briefly on the JOURNEY itself.

It begins when someone awakes from the sleep of spiritual death, from being

dead in sins to being alive in Christ. The pilgrims beginning is not at birth but at their NEW birth! So we can say that the pilgrimage has to do with RELATIONSHIPS. As the Apostle John reminds us - I John 1:3 - that relationship is first of all, VERTICAL. That is we humans, are now linked to the Divine and Eternal, a quite staggering concept! Related to God the Father and His Son our Lord Jesus the Christ. Because of this, the Apostle concludes "*...we have fellowship (HORIZONTAL relationship) with each other, brothers and sisters in the Lord*". People in uncountable numbers in many lands and languages are now linked with us in a holy mystical union. Scripture calls it the "*church which is his body*" - *Colossians 1:18*.

As sons and daughters of God we are to pilgrimage as our Master did. The Apostle Peter refers to "*following his steps*" - *1 Peter 2:21*. Someone has aptly remarked that he did not say "IN" his steps! He was sinless, unique, we are of a fallen nature. But by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit, John 14:16-17, we can walk with confidence the pilgrim path in conformity to His will. Whether that pathway is level or steep, rough or smooth, straight or twisted, He, our Lord and Master will be with us until the final step.

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