

A Sermon for the Third Sunday after Easter, April 29, 2007

The Reverend Stephen C. Scarlett

“Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (from the epistle, 1 Peter 2:11).

The title, “strangers and pilgrims,” alludes to Abraham (cf. Genesis 23:4). God called Abraham to leave his native land and go to the Land of Promise. God promised Abraham that his descendants would take possession of the land, but that promise was in the future. Abraham lived as a resident alien, an inhabitant of the land who had no rights of citizenship.

This is like our status in this world. God has given us certain promises. In the liturgy we thank God that we are “heirs through hope of thine everlasting kingdom.” As 2 Peter says, “According to his promise, we look for a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells” (3:13).

As with Abraham, the substance of what God promises us is in the future. We cannot receive the full inheritance God has for us in this world. Thus, we are, in this world, strangers and pilgrims, resident aliens, whose true citizenship is in heaven and in the world to come (Phil. 3:20-21).

Now, it is a bit of a challenge to live this way in our time because the popular tendency is in the other direction. There is an inclination among Christians not to look at this world in the light of the coming kingdom but, instead, to assess the kingdom of God in terms of its impact on this world.

If we see ourselves as strangers and pilgrims, we will look at life here in the light of eternity. Temptation and trial will be seen as a purifying of the soul. Pain will be seen as a sharing in the Cross that leads to a sharing in the Resurrection. Good things will be seen as a taste of better things to come.

But many people see things the other way around. They are fully focused on this world and faith is seen as a way to make life better here. When things go well, such people are thankful to God. But temptation, trial and pain are all occasions to ask, “Why is God doing this to me?”

For people whose focus is on this world, disappointment is a challenge to faith. But, for the stranger and pilgrim, disappointment is part of spiritual growth, for it teaches us that this world is not meant to fully satisfy us.

Material well-being relates to our attachment to this world. The better off we are, the greater is the temptation to connect our happiness with our possessions and status in this world. This is why Jesus, speaking of the rich young ruler, said, “It is easier for a camel to go through a needle’s eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:18).

This is why the spiritual disciplines of tithing and generosity are so important. By giving God the first part to acknowledge his ownership, we detach ourselves from our wealth. By the practice of generosity, we live with an open hand, using temporal things for eternal good, laying up treasures in heaven rather than on earth. As St. Paul writes:

Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they may be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life (1 Tim. 6:17-19).

St. Peter says that as strangers and pilgrims we are to abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul. These fleshly lusts are the misdirected desires of our fallen natures. They are deceptive. They promise us a fulfillment that they do not deliver. For if we indiscriminately partake of whatever we desire, the end result will be a kind of emptiness.

The stranger and pilgrim, the citizen of heaven, already knows this. When our hope and our happiness are rooted in the coming kingdom, we don't expect things here to be more than they are. And we understand that we have desires for many things that are not God's will and will not make us happy. We abstain because wisdom is aware of the deception.

Paradoxically, once we are detached from this world, once it is no longer the place in which we expect ultimate fulfillment, we can enjoy this world in the right way. We can enjoy the good things God has given because we see them as gifts and signs of eternity and not as idols.

It is through the life of prayer and grace that our peace and joy come to be rooted in God. As we live in communion with the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit, we realize that we are strangers and pilgrims who live here but long for a better place.

We gather around the altar as the earthly outpost of the kingdom of God. The sacrament is a taste of the future banquet. It continually directs our desires towards the ultimate thing.

As Hebrews says of the Old Testament saints, "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth...Wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he has prepared for them a city" (11:13-16 KJV).