

## "PILGRIMS AND STRANGERS"

### INTRODUCTION

"Who am I, and what am I doing here?" - we have here two very basic, fundamental questions that modern man faces and asks about his life....

And the answer which comes to us from the Bible is summed up in the phrase which forms the title of this sermon - "pilgrims and strangers". This was how the people of Israel understood the meaning of man's years on earth. And to substantiate this assertion, the Hebrew would point to the record of his own religious history. The history of his nation and of those who led it was one great pilgrimage of a people toward God. The narrative usually began with Abraham, going out of the city of Ur to a land which the Lord had promised him, and because he trusted in God, rising up and going, not knowing whither he went.

This theme of a pilgrimage was reinforced by the crucial event in Israel's religious history known as the Exodus from Egypt. Trusting only in the power of the God who had promised to be their God, this little band of slaves challenged the mightiest power of the ancient world. They left Egypt in the beginning of a pilgrimage that would take them in search of their "promised land". Throughout their difficult journey, they felt the sense of God's leading and believed their lives to be in God's hands. They lived in the confidence that he was guiding their destiny. Later on, the writers of the New Testament rejoiced that, in the coming of Christ, the pilgrimage had been made easier and the way more clear. They reminded men that in God, and him alone, should be their trust, and that men's hearts would always be restless until they found rest in Him.

### DEVELOPMENT

"Pilgrims and strangers" The figure of speech is still with us today - in the hymns we sing, the prayers we say, and in the traditions of our own country. The word "pilgrim" touches off deep echoes of our own religious history. We think of the Pilgrim fathers. We understand a pilgrimage in the sense of a religious questing and we sing hymns like the one we sang a few moments ago and the one we will sing at the close of the service, "Guide me, O thou great Jehovah, pilgrim through this barren land". We revere Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" as a classic because it speaks to something very deep in the life fabric of us all.

But having said this by way of introduction, I would suggest that if we are honest with ourselves, there are not many of us today who have this view of human life and its meaning. We are not accustomed to think of ourselves as either strangers or pilgrims, nor do we view life as a journey to anywhere. We prefer to think of ourselves as those who have arrived rather than those who are in transit. But - if we are not pilgrims and strangers on the earth, then what are we? On the other hand, if we are - then what does our pilgrimage mean and where does it take us. These are questions we do not often take the time to consider, but if we do, they will not let us go, for they are basic, fundamental questions related to life and death. Suppose we consider then just what it means for us, in a more modern sense, to be called either strangers or pilgrims.

### NO SETTLED AND SURE DWELLING PLACE

The first thing it means is that we have no settled and sure dwelling place on earth. This may sound like irony to some in that we live in a city where housing is increasingly difficult for us to find at prices we can afford to pay - but it is a true fact of life in a larger sense. We see it in many places. We are all aware that we live in an era of rootlessness where families pick up and move halfway around the world at the bidding of a large corporation.

Each Fall we come together as a church family, but always we find that we are never together again in just the same way we have been in a previous time. There

They stopped just long enough for the next move. They were unable to relate themselves significantly for any period of time to the settled dwellers of the towns. They had no part in the settled, stable, responsible relationships of the community, for they could not afford to get involved. Tomorrow they would be on their way, and they would not be missed, for they were strangers in the land - nothing more.

The people of our time who are strangers in the land seldom live in tents, but their pattern of behavior is similar to those of ancient times. They react to the impermanence of life by keeping frantically on the go. Many there are in this city who in a sense are only passing through, taking short-term leases on a room and a half in the 70's or the 80's or the 90's. Many of them are gifted, privileged, educated, earning good salaries, but they do not take the trouble to relate themselves in depth to their community, to the permanent, settled structures of the community in which they live. Many prefer not to get involved; they're here for the short-term experience - living it up and loving it up - taking from the community, but not putting much back in to it. And the only place they relate to with any depth or commitment is apt to be the local weekend hang-out. For the most part, they are on the go, moving, swinging, twitching, gyrating and for a little while, at least, filling the aching void of a somewhat empty, purposeless life.

Another attitude that betrays the stranger in the land is his or her need for immediate gratification. They are people on the go, on the move and constantly on the make. Their old cry is that since life is uncertain, the best way to live is to get now all that you can get and worry about tomorrow later. They want what they want - now and are not willing to wait or to postpone. Their hero is the prodigal son saying, "Give me now what is coming to me" and throwing away not just a financial inheritance, but an inheritance of love and affection which is of even greater value. Maybe they call it love, but it isn't - not really - it is passion...animalistic. They cannot truly give themselves to each other because they have no idea who they are as individuals and no sense of a common purpose or a deeper union. Strangers in the land. Or as Sinatra sings it, "Strangers in the night".

In some adults the same reaction takes another guise. They have to keep on the move - going up. If you aren't on the way up, they say, you aren't anything. A friend of mine tells me in all seriousness that if a man hasn't reached the top echelon of his work by the time he is forty-two, he will never amount to anything, and I know of a lot of people who are scrambling to prove him right. They have a goal in life - to move up, financially, socially, in status, in position. They may not be sure exactly where they are going and why they have this need to move up, much less what they are going to do when they get there, but they know that they ought not to be today where they were yesterday or they have failed. Before we get moving in the frantic scramble to leave where we are, we might do well to stop and ask ourselves where it is we are really going and why.

#### PILGRIMS ON A JOURNEY

But there is another alternative that is more constructive than this frantic, frenetic futility that characterizes so much of life today. In the face of the fact that our existence is precarious, and our life transient at best, we can react by choosing not to live as strangers in the land, but rather as pilgrims on their way to a worthy goal.

Our ultimate concerns in life do not have to be centered on this world, and we can look upon the events of this life - the sorrows, the sufferings, the heart-aches, the defeats, the disappointments that get woven into our lives and recognize them not as hostile incidents in an irrational world, but as events through which we pass in our pilgrimage to a higher end. We can see the meaning of our lives as a part of a larger plan, a higher goal, an ultimate purpose. The pilgrims knows where he is going and what his goal is. Dr. Fosdick once wrote these lines which tie in to all of this:

"A Christian has a spiritual interpretation of life. He knows that human history is a river - not a whirlpool or a pond, but a river, flowing to its end. Just, far inland, we can tell that the Hudson River is flowing to be the sea because the waters when the tide comes in, are tinctured with the ocean's quality, so now, we believe that we can tell that the river of history is flowing toward a higher end - toward the Kingdom of God".

The pilgrim also knows, as he goes along, that his whole life is a mission given to him by God. He cannot be a stranger in the land living without a depth of commitment or purpose, for his mission means that he is involved with the world of men and as committed to it as the creator himself who loves that world.

One of the movies of this past year that I enjoyed was a thriller that played over here at the RKO last February. It was called "The Spy Who Came In From the Cold". Perhaps you saw it or perhaps you read the book. It was a best-seller two years ago. The central figure, played by Richard Burton, is an agent in the British Secret Service, who is ostensibly cashiered out of the service in disgrace in order that he may go back into East Berlin as a defector. He allows himself to be recruited by the Communists and gives them information that will make him valuable to them. But his real task is to act for the British Secret Service and to break up all the spy rings that he possibly can. When he has achieved this task, he will be finished with espionage and can go back to his quiet, civilian identity. This is known as "coming in from the cold".

The climax of the movie comes as the spy is at last betrayed and forced to make his escape over the Berlin Wall. He has with him a girl who has been drawn into his plot and whom he has pretended to care for as a part of his plan. She, however, is genuinely in love with him. The two reach the wall and he scales it and reaches down to help her. But at the last moment, bewildered and confused by all that has happened, she hesitates, just long enough for the searchlights to find them and then the guards begin to shoot. The voices of his friends on the western side urge him to jump to safety, but he looks down at the helpless, fallen figure of that innocent girl, lying in a pool of blood, and he knows what he must do. He leaps down to the ground on the eastern side and stands there for a split second before the searchlights pick him up and then the guns roar again and his body crumples to the ground beside hers. In that moment of self-sacrifice, he has "come in from the cold".

I think the application for those of us who would be pilgrims in a greater mission is so clear that we cannot evade it. Yes, we too are on a mission and will continue to be until the kingdom of this world shall become the Kingdom of God. And until we have done all that is to be done on that mission we too cannot come in out of the cold. We do not like to think that it might ever cost us our lives, but in our time it may even come to that. His mission nevertheless is a costly mission, involving the sacrifice of self. We, too, shall one day come in out of the cold and receive the Father's warm embrace remembering some words of Christ, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these, my brethren, ye have done it unto me".

Strangers in the land - living without a depth of commitment to anything of value. Or pilgrims on a mission. "Who am I" "What am I doing here". The answer is yours to write....it is a matter of choice. Which will it be... Taking up space...

Let us pray: Grant, we beseech Thee, O God, that the words which we have heard this day with our outward ears may, through thy grace, be so grafted inwardly in our hearts that they may bring forth the fruit of good living, to the honor and praise of thy name.