

Hebrews 11 and 13, Hannover International Worship, 17th November 2013

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13 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.

14 For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country.

15 And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned.

16 But now they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.

Intro

We hear a lot about the Jahreslosung at beginning of the year, but around October calendars for the next year appear and the verse that is meant to accompany us through the whole year is generally forgotten about. Last Sunday was Remembrance Day in the UK and this Sunday in Germany Volkstrauertag. It seems a good time to take up our verse for this year – we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come – reminding us of the transience of our life and the fact that it is a journey. This verse from the letter to the Hebrews is in fact a repetition and summarizing of what the letter-writer has already stated more drastically two chapters earlier – that as Christians we are strangers and pilgrims. Can you identify with those two words? Would you call yourself a stranger or a pilgrim?

When my wife and I came to Germany from England in the summer of 1977 we had the status of strangers, or more exactly, foreigners which is what the Greek word in our Bible verse could also be translated as. Foreigners: we needed a permit to stay, we were not yet totally at home in the language, there were many things we did not understand about life in this country. But over the years we've come to like most aspects

of German life and are in the mean time so at home here that we feel like foreigners when we're in the UK!

Having already become familiar with the meaning of being a foreigner, in the summer of 2002 we decided to move up a gear and try out the word pilgrim. My wife and I had three weeks holiday and decided to experience for ourselves this Camino de Santiago de Compostella that everyone was talking about. I remember the day we left as if it was yesterday. We had a lovely house on the edge of Hamburg with a beautiful garden, and on this sunny August early morning it was looking more beautiful than ever. I had mown the lawn the day before, the flowers were in full bloom and the birds in full song. I remember the nagging question in both our minds as we trudged down the roads to the station with two heavy rucksacks on our backs. "Why are we doing this?" We have everything here we need – why are we leaving it behind? This doesn't feel much like a holiday. Setting off into the unknown with a few necessary things in our back pack. But this was the first lesson we had to learn in order to understand what the Bible means, when it describes our status as that of pilgrims.

Lesson 1: We leave the garden and start on a journey into the unknown.

This is the way the Bible begins, with a beautiful garden and a man and a woman who have to leave it. It continues with the **story of a people journeying** and journeying until they reach the so-called Promised Land.

Then they were forced to leave that garden flowing with milk and honey and go into exile. Having many years later returned to their homeland, they experienced it as a place of oppression by foreign rulers. They were not at the end of their journey, as the writer of Hebrews makes clear – they were looking for a city whose founder and maker is God. This is the essence of the Christian message, beautifully summed up in the song by U2: I still haven't found what I'm looking for.

The biblical story merely mirrors the story of our lives. We are born into the innocence and (hopefully) paradise of childhood. Receiving for a brief amount of time the love and support we need from parents and family, but in the course of our youth realizing there is no way back to

childhood innocence, there is **only the way forward**. As young people and those in the middle of life we can often experience this way forward as a vitalizing adventure, but as we move towards old age we become more conscious that we are inexorably approaching the ultimate unknown, our own death and whatever lies beyond it.

Lesson 2: We do not walk this path alone

I was pleased not to make the pilgrimage alone. When two walk together they can share the good experiences and encourage each other when the going gets tough. And then there were the interesting encounters with other pilgrims on the different stages of the journey. This is also true when we think of our life's pilgrimage and those closest to us who accompany us on our way. But some time we also have to part company with them. When our husband or wife dies, or a very close friend becomes ill and passes away. That is when it can get really difficult and lonely.

Christians believe that God is not only waiting for us at the end of the way but that he accompanies us during the pilgrimage. In a few weeks the Christmas story will remind us of the fact that Jesus was to be called Immanuel, God with us. And this same Jesus before his ascension promised his followers: Behold I will be with you always, even until the end of the world.

Recently I read in the newspaper about the results of a survey into people's beliefs. The paper claimed that only 62% of Germans believe in God, but that 64% believe in a guardian angel. I'm very distrustful of surveys in general and this one doesn't seem to make much sense to me. Do 62 of the 64 percent who believe in angels also believe in God, and think it's nice to have a guardian angel as well. And 2% believe in angels and not in God? Personally I find it easier to believe in God than in a guardian angel. Especially in a God who became flesh in Jesus. A God that was prepared to suffer and die for us, and thus to identify with us in our suffering. A God who does not merely look at death from the beyond, from the safer side, but comes over to our side and walks with us.

Lesson 3: Being a pilgrim means living in trust

That for me was the most difficult part of pilgrimage. Starting out each day and not knowing where we could purchase food and drink on the way. Above all, not knowing where we would be spending the night. Will there be a hostel? Will they have any beds left? I was used to having everything organized beforehand and I found it disturbing to have these certainties taken away. And yet it was amazing to experience how all these things sorted themselves out from day to day. Some places were more comfortable than others, but we always found a bed for the night.

I would like to think I could transfer some of this attitude of trust on to our life's pilgrimage. Especially as we get older. We see friends become ill and die. And so it is natural that we become anxious, and wonder how much suffering our own particular path will involve. How will we experience our own dying and what will come after?

The writers of the New Testament are in no doubt about the fact that death is not the end. And they were certain of this because they had experienced Jesus' resurrection. When everyone thought that death had had the last word in the Jesus' story, the real story was yet to begin. Jesus himself had tried to prepare his disciples for this when he told them: "In my father's house are many mansions; I go there to prepare a place for you."

In other words the pilgrimage through life is a search for a deeper reality, a search for a place we can be at rest. Sometimes we have a foretaste of what this feels like; we settle down in marriage, in the family, in the place we live, but it is never permanent – life moves on. As Christians we believe that we carry something of this "being at home" inside us, but know that we will never experience it fully in this life. We believe that God has prepared a place for us and that death is a sort of coming home. Home is not just where we set out, but also the goal of our pilgrimage, summed up by T.S.Eliot in the Four Quartets:

"Home is where one starts from.
As we get older the world becomes stranger...
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring

Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.”

This is a source of great comfort to me. We are not moving towards a complete unknown; there will be something familiar, a sense of coming home and being made welcome. I'll never forget the last day of our pilgrimage. We had planned to walk back to a town on the French side of the Pyrenees, spend our last night in a hostel there and return to Germany by train the next day. It was supposed to be the culmination of our three-week pilgrimage, but everything went wrong. We lost the way several times, in the afternoon it started to pour with rain. We eventually arrived wet and bedraggled in the town we had chosen, because it sounded so picturesque and romantic (Oloron de Sainte Marie). In fact it was full of cars and lorries, loud and dusty, and we had problems finding a hostel to put us up for the night. The one address we still had on our list was our last hope. With some trepidation we rang the bell. The door was opened by a friendly French Canadian who owned the hostel; he welcomed us in, and took us into a dining room, where the table was laid out for supper. I asked him whether he was expecting guests, to which he replied “C'est pour vous”. A wonderful way to end a journey.

Why should it be different at the end of our life's way? The God who has prepared a feast for us, stretches his hand out over the threshold and welcomes us home. Everything is ready, and we are the guests.