

Christian Life as a Pilgrimage

Timotei Rusu

ABSTRACT: The life of faith is interwoven with our domestic life. If people are relocating for a better life on this earth, there is a spiritual dimension present in their spiritual journey. What are the characteristic of a spiritual pilgrim? Looking at the teaching of Jesus, Apostle Paul and Apostle Peter our values can be shaped so that we are on mission as we travel to our permanent home.

KEY WORDS: Pilgrimage, faith, destination, mentality, treasure.

In recent years we have seen an unprecedented phenomenon of worldwide migration. Europe is still experiencing and is divided over the hot subject of immigrants. Michael S. Teitelbaum, a senior research associate with the Labor and Work-Life Program at Harvard Law School, stated that: “[a]s the world watches wave after wave of migrants and refugees pour into and across Europe, what was once shocking now seems routine. There can be no doubt that a major crisis, both humanitarian and political, is under way.” Teitelbaum continued: “In increasingly raucous political and press debates in Europe and elsewhere, recent movements are being described as new *disasters*, *policy failures*, and even *invasions* that the EU and its member states have proven incapable of addressing effectively.”¹

During these intense times, it is appropriate to add a theological approach to this subject. The closest idea to migration is the spiritual concept of pilgrimage. Since migration is physical, from one place to another, pilgrimage is necessarily spiritual. So, a pilgrimage is a journey with spiritual meaning. Dee Dyas, from the University of

York, explains the starting point of pilgrimages: “The Book of Genesis, part of the Old Testament scriptures inherited from Judaism, tells a story central to Christian ideas of pilgrimage: the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden after they disobey God by eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (Genesis 3). The Fall of Adam and Eve is shown to have profound implications. They and their descendants are condemned to live as exiles in a harsh and inhospitable world, alienated both from God and from one another by sin. Adam and Eve’s eldest son Cain later murders his brother Abel in a fit of jealous anger because Abel’s offering to God has been judged more acceptable than his own (Gn 4:1-16). As punishment, God sends Cain into further exile, away from his home and family.”²

The history of mankind can be seen as a history of pilgrimage. In every heart there is desire to return to the Garden, but there is no way back to the Eden. Abraham was the first one who made a migratory journey at God’s command. Prophetically, he was ready to sacrifice his own beloved son at the Mount of Moriah. Later, this mount, where Jerusalem was built, became the place of pilgrimage for many people. Three times a year, the Jewish people would take a spiritual journey to Jerusalem for national and spiritual holy days.

Besides moving toward a sacred place, there is also a new dimension in a Christian’s faith. It is an eternal dimension—moving toward a spiritual final destination. Peter Masters describe the pilgrims as “those who *seek a country*. Biblical pilgrims live in another country alongside the resident community, but they do not fully integrate. They are *alongsiders*, soon to go home. They may accomplish great things for the benefit of the country in which they live (as Joseph did), but they never cease to be pilgrims.”³ This approach is not new, but it is not popular either. It is not new because in 1678, John Bunyan wrote “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” the second bestselling of all ages, a book translated in over 200 languages and never out of print. It is not popular because the pilgrim approach is radically different from our “here and now” approach. The pilgrim message is different from what our society is promoting and what our hearts desire.

In the third millennia, the “pilgrim dimension” of Christian life is rarely taken into account; even if it is at the center of Christian theology. Talking about it, we have great information in the teaching of Jesus as well as Apostles Peter and Paul. A pilgrim has a special destination, a unique mentality, a well-placed treasure, a spiritual quality of life and a great mission.

Destination of a Pilgrim

Most of the time Jesus Christ was misunderstood because He taught about the Kingdom of God which is the Kingdom of Heaven. The religious teachers of his days did not get this perspective. They were afraid of Jesus’ influence and popularity, thinking that He would be an earthly king – a threat to their popularity, power and prestige. But the Kingdom of heaven is spiritual not material. And even there is a present aspect of it; the Kingdom of heaven is a spiritual, future destination.

This idea is clearly stated when Jesus spoke in His Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt 5:3), “Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Mt 5:10-12), “Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Mt 5:19-20)

In the last week of Jesus’ earthly life, He made it clear to His disciples, the final destination: “Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for

you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.” (Jn 14:1-4)

Heaven is where Jesus went after His death, burial and resurrection. He is busy now with building our house, as Apostle Paul declared: “For we know that if our earthly house of this tabernacle were dissolved, we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this we groan, earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven: If so be that being clothed we shall not be found naked. For we that are in this tabernacle do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life.” (2 Cor 5:1-8)

Mentality of a Pilgrim

Apostle Peter wrote a letter to Christians as sojourners, strangers. “Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers dispersed through Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, elect, According to the foreknowledge of God the Father, unto the sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you and peace be multiplied.” (1 Pt 1:1-2) He continued applying this mentality to their lives: “beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul;” (1 Pt 2:11). A stranger is a person who does not belong to a certain place; a pilgrim is the one who is in a march to a spiritual destination.

Steven J. Cole, in his article *The Pilgrim Life*, stated that: “Being a pilgrim just isn’t the dominant model of the Christian life for our times. Our view of Christianity is geared to the here and now: What will it do for my marriage? How will it help me raise my kids? Will it help me succeed in my career? Will it help me overcome personal problems? Will it help me feel fulfilled as a person? Heaven is thrown in as a nice benefit at the end of the ride. But heaven is not our focus. We want to enjoy life now and cling to it as long as we’re able. We don’t view death as the gateway to everything we’ve been living for.

We see it as something to be postponed and avoided at all costs. We don't view ourselves as pilgrims."⁴

As a criticism of our worldly mentality, Peter Masters points out: "Today's new teaching says we must love it here, do the things that the world does, sing their songs, play their genre of music, watch their films and plays, dance their dances, and wear their most daring styles, along with other compromises that would have horrified believers throughout the last two millennia."⁵ This is opposite to what the whole Bible teaches and illustrates.

Abraham is a type of pilgrim. He is offered as an example to us in Hebrews 11:8-10. "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God." Abraham literally left his home and home town to follow God's instructions. But his pilgrimage is one of faith and perspective. That is why the author of Hebrews concluded: "All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them." (Heb 11:13-16)

Bob Hoekstra noticed that "Abraham understood that spiritual sojourners and heaven-bound pilgrims must stay away from earth-bound cravings that undermine one's godly quest. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. Abraham and his seed had many tests and trials in their pilgrimage with the Lord. If they had set their attention on the country they forsook, they would have been tempted to return there."⁶ We are not called to leave our country and immigrate, but to have a mentality of a pilgrim; to not

settle, to not develop roots, to not live for here and now and forget about our country!

Perhaps one of the most accurate descriptions of Christians as pilgrims, and one of the first apologetic writings is the second century letter to Diognesius. An unknown author, named Mathetes (Disciple) wrote to the roman emperor the following truths.

“For the Christians are distinguished from other men neither by country, nor language, nor the customs which they observe. For they neither inhabit cities of their own, nor employ a peculiar form of speech, nor lead a life which is marked out by any singularity. The course of conduct which they follow has not been devised by any speculation or deliberation of inquisitive men; nor do they, like some, proclaim themselves the advocates of any merely human doctrines. But, inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers. They marry, as do all [others]; they beget children; but they do not destroy their offspring. They have a common table, but not a common bed. They are in the flesh, but they do not live after the flesh. They pass their days on earth, but they are citizens of heaven. They obey the prescribed laws, and at the same time surpass the laws by their lives. They love all men, and are persecuted by all. They are unknown and condemned; they are put to death, and restored to life. They are poor, yet make many rich; they are in lack of all things, and yet abound in all; they are dishonored, and yet in their very dishonor are glorified. They are evil spoken of, and yet are justified; they are reviled, and bless; they are insulted, and repay the insult with honor; they do good, yet are punished as evil-doers. When punished, they rejoice as if quickened into life; they are assailed by the Jews as foreigners,

and are persecuted by the Greeks; yet those who hate them are unable to assign any reason for their hatred.”⁷

Treasure of a Pilgrim

One of the best ways to tell if someone has the pilgrim mentality is to see how they think and act about possessions. Jesus had radical teachings about treasures. He was very explicit when He commanded: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Mt 6:19-22)

Jesus knew that our heart follows our treasure and shapes our mentality and our lifestyle. In this context Jesus brought the discussion about the eye. Our vision about life and eternity will dictate what we will do with our money, time and influence. Money is not a problem, but how we administrate it tells about our values. A pilgrim seeks those things which are above, where Christ sits on the right hand of God. He set your affection on things above, not on things of the earth. (Col 3:1-2)

Jesus didn't preach to be poor or financially bankrupt. He had a great volume of teaching about stewardship, about faithfulness in small things, about investment. A pilgrim is not necessary a poor person (only if God decides them to be so), but he is using his possessions to serve his purpose, to obey Jesus' command to make disciples. He invests in God's Kingdom, he invests in relationships, and he is God's hands and feet in this world. He is certainly not worshiping money but mastering it. A pilgrim is in a journey and he travels light.

In conclusion, in our materialistic world, the disciples of Jesus must resist the temptation to be like the world. We are in the world but not of the world! The pilgrim mentality gives a needed direction

to so many who are shipwrecked through the seas of materialism, lust and nonsense. It also gives a light to the eyes blinded by the lights of egotism and immorality. And necessarily gives a fulfillment of a life worth living when a person not only follows Jesus, but helps others to do the same.

NOTES

¹ Michael S. Teitelbaum, "The Truth About the Migrant Crisis: Tragic Choices, Moral Hazards, and Potential," *Solutions*, September 14, 2015 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/print/1115410> (Last accessed on July 16, 2016).

² Dee Dyas, "Pilgrims and Pilgrimage, Pilgrimage in the Bible" <http://www.york.ac.uk/projects/pilgrimage/content/bible.html> (Last accessed on July 17, 2016).

³ Peter Masters, *The Pilgrim Concept*, Sword & Trowel 2014, No.1, <http://www.metropolitantabernacle.org> (Last accessed on July 17, 2016).

⁴ Steven J. Cole, "Lesson 10: The Pilgrim Life (1 Peter 2:11-12)", 1992 <https://bible.org/seriespage/lesson-10-pilgrim-life-1-peter-211-12> (Last accessed on July 17, 2016).

⁵ Peter Masters, "The Pilgrim Concept, Sword & Trowel 2014, No.1, <http://www.metropolitantabernacle.org/> (Last accessed on July, 17, 2016).

⁶ Bob Hoekstra, *Day by Day by Grace*, October 28th <https://www.blueletterbible.org/devotionals/dbdbg/view.cfm?Date=1028> (Last accessed on July 30, 2016).

⁷ The Epistle of Mathetes to Diognetus, <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/diognetus-roberts.html> (Last accessed on July 30, 2016).