

"Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evil-doers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation. Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme; Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evil-doers, and for the praise of them that do well. For so is the will of God, that with well-doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men: As free, and not using your liberty as a cloke of maliciousness, but as the servants of God. Honour all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honour the king. Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward."--1 Pet. 2:11-18.

STRANGERS AND PILGRIMS
A Sermon by Theodor Zahn

THE words of the Apostle Peter which we have just read, appear at first sight like a string of pearls, each one of inestimable value, and the whole like a costly ornament for every soul that can appropriate it; while that which links them all together seems at first to be only the thread on which they are strung. There might be more of them and we should not consider them superfluous. In fact, the list of apostolical exhortations on Christian behaviour is by no means completed in our text. Even here how many portions there are, of which each is a whole in itself, a text apart, which might well supply us for an hour with food for meditation. It would be possible to preach on the war against fleshly lusts, on the right behaviour of Christians towards their calumniators, on true and false liberty, on the brotherly love and honour due to all, on obedience to the king and all in authority, on the right behaviour of servants to their masters. All these would be fruitful subjects for sermons in accordance with our text. If we wish to look no further than to single texts, the teaching we draw from them need not be especially Christian.

The Apostle speaks intentionally of duties which are considered duties by all civilised men; of virtues and good works which the heathen also praise. This was the natural result of the position of Christians in the world at that time. It was a time when everywhere in the Roman Empire, as never before, the hatred of the non-Christian world was directed against Christians. They were already hated and persecuted as evil-doers, dangerous to the State, and enemies of the existing order of society; for, under the cover of ignorance, all that was scandalous and shameful might be attributed to them, and find credence, even amongst highly cultivated and well-disposed men. There was no need to do anything remarkable, that had never been heard of before by Jews or pagans; but to fulfil all common duties faithfully, and to do the good which all men would praise even though they did it not themselves; for it was just this that was missed in Christians, and it is just by the acknowledgment and fulfilment of the same moral duties that common ground can be found where the professors of different faiths may live together in peace. Therefore the Apostle descends to everyday matters, and things obvious to all, and that had already been enforced by common custom and dictated by prudence; but he descends to them from the highest position a Christian can attain. All that Christians do must be good, if it is to be counted good in the sight of God and to work beneficially in the world. "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." It is useless and does not answer for a man to cherish Christian faith in his heart, and to cultivate a few human virtues in his outward life, which may supply the want of others. A man must bring all his strength to bear on the smallest point, and put his whole heart into the most trivial actions, for it is the only way in which all that is good as well as all that is great must be carried out. The art of a Christian life consists also in allowing our external actions to be governed by the holy strength which comes to us through our redemption by Christ, and which establishes peace, joy, righteousness, and life in the hidden depths of our inner being. This, too, is the meaning of the Apostle in our text, and it forms the

bond of union which binds all his exhortations together. Peter reminds his readers, before exhorting them to keep any one duty, of the position in which God had placed them by faith in Christ and by the spirit of grace. He exhorts them to do all that they have to do as citizens, members of the family, members of the State, and members of human society, as strangers and pilgrims.

We are in a very different position from the Christians of those days, inwardly, indeed, as well as outwardly. They had been powerfully affected by the absolutely new preaching of the Gospel, and by the spirit of the Christian community which till then had been unknown to them; and, torn from their native soil, they seemed raised to a higher sphere. Hence they could not at first realise that there were holy bonds which still linked them to the old world, and they were in serious danger of estimating too lightly all that was earthly, worldly, and purely human. The opposite danger lies much closer to us. We are very firmly rooted in our native soil; we are not very likely to doubt about our duties to this world and its ordinances. I can hardly say that we have become naturalised again in this world; I believe we have scarcely yet given up our citizenship. Because the requirements of the Apostle sound so very self-evident, as indeed they were intended to be, so that they might be understood by all, even by the heathen, there is all the more cause to ask, if we also allow the reason to hold good on which Peter grounds his requirement that all should walk honestly in this world. Do not let us err; we do not understand the apostolic exhortations aright, if we do not understand them in this way; and our Yea and Amen are of little worth if the motive from which they proceed, as well as our fulfilment of them, does not become in us the living motive power of all our actions. Otherwise the Lord might say to us also: "What do ye more than others? Do not even the heathen so?" I repeat: *What Christians do must be Christian*. Therefore the first question to which we have to find an answer to-day is: *What do we mean when we say we are strangers and pilgrims?* Then we will ask further: *What meaning does this position give to our whole conversation in the ordinances of our earthly life?*

I.

Christians are strangers and not citizens, pilgrims and not settled inhabitants in this world. This distinguishes them from all who are not Christians, and it ought to give a peculiar impress to their conversation in all the forms and regulations of life on earth. They must be conscious of the difference between themselves and their fellow-men who have their home in this world, or imagine that they have, and who consider it the work of their life to make their birthright tell in this world. Peter did not think it necessary to begin by explaining, first of all, to the Christians living in little communities scattered over the wide territories of Asia Minor, why and wherefore they were pilgrims and strangers, no matter where they lived. He had only to address them by this name, in order to awaken feelings in them to which they were all accustomed. We, the Christians of to-day, have to consider more carefully why these are the right words with which to describe our position in the world. It is true that these words are accepted to a certain extent by every man. Who can deny that we all have no abiding city here on earth; that we must wander ceaselessly whether we will or no; that we cannot bid any moment that pleases us to tarry; and that we shall have to leave every dwelling-place that we should like to make our home, even though we do not wish to do so? And, even if we lead the quietest life, if we sleep and dream away our time, is it not as though we sat in a chariot which carries us away with the speed of a storm? The world flies past us, and no wish can hold it back.

All human life is like a journey. Many a one starts on this journey full of joyful hope; he looks upon life as a pleasure trip; even though he knows of the struggles, privations, and disturbing incidents which may arise, yet in his youthful strength he considers all of little moment. But at the end most men allow that they have had more gloomy days than bright ones, more heat and dust, more deceit and injustice than joy and enjoyment. Weariness and disillusion are often the end of the journey. But when the love of wandering has not ceased, then it is all the more painful to realise that the journey must have an

end. Are these perchance the thoughts that the Apostle wishes to awaken in us? They are certainly useful thoughts, which may preserve us from many a folly. They are like the thoughts of the Psalmist, who confessed, "I am a stranger with thee, and a sojourner as all my fathers were," and who said in the same prayer, "Lord, let me know mine end, and the number of my days, that I may be certified how long I have to live." The thought of the end of our life's wandering, and of our involuntary journey hence, may make us wise, may preserve us from the folly of looking upon the transitory blessings of this life as our lasting possession. It may also admonish us to do our daily work as long as it is day, and also to employ the time granted us for the development of our powers, and for gaining strength for our further journey. But no invigorating and sanctifying power is contained in these self-evident lessons, which can be drawn by every man from his daily experience. The same considerations may lead to crime, which bids us enjoy the pleasures of the moment just because they are so fleeting. Verily, it is by no means the noblest men, who really pass through life as travellers, without any sense of their duty towards their surroundings for the time being, strangers everywhere when it is a question of fulfilling a duty, and at home everywhere if an enjoyment or an advantage can be seized in passing. To others it seems sad that here on earth they can find no abiding city that they can truly call their own. They feel strangers in this world, which mocks at their pretensions, and are even astonished at themselves because they can be joyful again, and take an interest in the events of the day, that they can waste their strength on a world in which they must remain as guests and strangers, till they are at last banished from it. This is pessimism, and it is not the most ignoble men of whom it takes possession. If only we could say of all those who are the prey of such melancholy, and who acknowledge, in their way, that they are strangers and pilgrims in this world, what the Scriptures say of the patriarchs of the Old Covenant, who also confessed that they were guests and strangers upon earth: "For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a better Fatherland."

Pessimism has no more right to a place in the inner life of a Christian than frivolity. Besides, the Apostle is not a preacher of change and of death, but of hope and of life. He begins his Epistle with the praise of God, "which according to His abundant mercy hath begotten us again unto a lively hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you." Nothing is feebler than pessimism, nothing stronger than Christian joy, which springs from faith in the Resurrection of Christ. We kept Easter three weeks ago, and we, with our church services, are still in the midst of the Church's joyful season which follows Easter. Have we been strengthened afresh, by the renewed remembrance of the Resurrection of the Lord, to a lively hope, and confirmed in the joyful possession of our heavenly inheritance? Then, and then only, can we sympathise with him, and understand what it means when the Apostle exhorts us to conduct ourselves well in all the ordinances of our life on earth. Whoever lives in faith in the Resurrection of Jesus is a stranger and pilgrim on earth in quite another sense from the patriarchs and righteous men of the Old Covenant. And he is so chiefly because he is a citizen of another world, and an inhabitant of a heavenly city. If it were only by our own self-made thoughts that we sought to raise ourselves above this present world, and to build ourselves a state and a city of God in the clouds, perhaps we might then be strangers in this world, but our citizenship in another and better world would be as much a dream as the other world itself. We should have to make our involuntary journey through the world, without any knowledge of the world in which God has placed us, without the presence of the Spirit, without any steadiness and safety on our way. For what can our thoughts do in opposition to the rude realities with which we must daily come into contact! But thanks be to God, He has not given us over to our own thoughts, but has carried out His own.

God has satisfied the longings of the restless wanderers and the homeless strangers with His deeds of love and peace. He sent His own Son into the world that was estranged from Him. The Son knew whence He came and whither He went, and yet He did not estrange Himself from the world and its citizens. He showed us the way from the far-off country of this world to His Father's house; yea, and He smoothed the way for us, in that He travelled over it Himself, through the world to God, through

death to life. Since He rose from the dead and went to His Heavenly Father, His Father's house in heaven has become the home of all those whom the Son of God was not ashamed to call His brethren.

If Jesus had gone the way of all flesh, and ended His life, like all other men, by death and the grave, then surely all that has been said of an eternal home, a heavenly Jerusalem, and of death as going home, would only be a pleasant picture of pure fancy. But now is Christ risen from the dead, and has gone to His Father as our Leader and the Captain of our Salvation. The risen Prince of Life is Himself the beginning and the firm foundation of a new world. The city of God is built in heaven, and it numbers amongst its citizens not only those who are already safe in it, but those also who are journeying towards it in faith and hope. The kingdom of God, which the Lord Jesus founded, embraces heaven and earth, the living and the dead, the wanderers and those who have returned home; but the centre of gravity of that eternal kingdom is now in heaven; for where the King is there also is the centre of the kingdom. Now the kingdom of which we are speaking plants itself also in this world with its invisible forces, and it has received us all into itself. On the day of our baptism our names were entered on the list of the citizens of this kingdom. But how different is the citizenship of that world and of this! The kingdom of this world does not ask its citizens whether it pleases them or whether they wish to belong to it. The heavenly kingdom of Christ is a kingdom of liberty. No man can ever really become a citizen of this kingdom, and cannot remain in it, unless he wishes it from his heart, and is fully conscious of his position. The world in which we are born keeps us in the dark as to the object and goal, the means and ways, of our unstable life in it. The kingdom of Christ is in itself the clear and definite goal of our lives; it does not leave us in uncertainty about the way that leads to this goal, and more than this, it gives us the strength to assert our heavenly citizenship in this world where we are strangers and pilgrims. The one is inseparable from the other; full citizenship cannot be held at the same time in two kingdoms; our home can be in one only. In the same degree that we familiarise ourselves with the kingdom whose King, Christ, lives in heaven, we also separate ourselves inwardly from this material world and give up our right to its citizenship. If we do this absolutely, we do it without any fear of suffering loss; we do it also in the confidence that thus only we can maintain our liberty in this world of violence; and we also do it in joyful thankfulness to God, who has saved us from this present evil world, and has made us strangers in it by calling us into His kingdom.

II.

My beloved, the fear is unfounded which many Christians seem to cherish, that it is dangerous to separate too sharply the citizenship of the kingdom of God from the citizenship of this world, as though any danger really existed of our being induced simply by religion to transfer the centre of gravity of our lives to the invisible world, and thereby to lose our balance in this material world. This fear is vain, for as long as we are creatures of flesh and blood, we are in much greater danger, in the visible reality, of forgetting and losing eternal blessings than the reverse. The fear, too, is foolish that a man who feels himself a stranger in this world must lose the sense of all that is beautiful and good, and which, after all, as the creation and gift of God, adorns the world and enriches the earthly life of the children of men. The figure itself under which the Apostle teaches us to view our earthly life refutes any fear of too much piety. May not the wanderer who passes through a strange land see anything beautiful there, and may he not rejoice in its blessings? I should have thought that he would have been better able to value them than the settled inhabitant who clings to the soil. The notion, too, is absolutely wrong, that Christians who know and feel that they are citizens of another world, and therefore only look upon themselves as strangers and pilgrims here, must therefore be less skilful and eager to fulfil their tasks in this material world, and to carry out its ordinances. Men have judged thus of Christians since the days of the apostles, and the baptized and unbaptized who are not Christians, and who think thus, can only be refuted by practical proofs to the contrary. This is the way shown us by the Apostle Peter. It is by proving ourselves to be strangers and pilgrims in all the human ordinances of the State, in our life as

citizens and at home, that we may at last succeed in presenting a picture of life to the heathen and the Jews, which will no longer rouse them to slander and blasphemy, but to the praise of God.

Two men may do the same thing, and yet it is not the same. It cannot and ought not to be the same whether a godless citizen of the world, or a pilgrim of the heavenly Fatherland, obeys authority, honours the king, or carries out the commands of his good or froward superiors, while showing to each one all the honour due to him, and loving the brethren. A Christian who does not forget his heavenly home gains a freedom from all earthly powers, of which no man of the world can boast; it also gives him an incentive to faithfulness which no other motives can supply. *Freedom and faithfulness*—these two words describe to us the way in which the citizens of the kingdom of Christ walk in the ordinances of this world. Freedom from the world, and from all its spiritual and fleshly powers, becomes ours directly we feel and know that God is our Lord, and that we are His servants. Freedom is ours whenever we acknowledge the will of God, not only in its holiness, greatness, and beauty, but also when we feel in ourselves the longing and strength to do the will of God. Freedom from the world and fearlessness in it are ours, whenever we are sure by the grace of God that our sins are forgiven, and that our whole life will be guided by God's love and wisdom to a blessed end. But this freedom must be jealously guarded as long as we are pilgrims in the world.

The worst enemies of our freedom are not the opposers of our faith, or the injustice of human rulers, or the wants and cares of this life, but "the fleshly lusts which war against the soul." There is no need to provoke these enemies, they are here already, and are on the look-out for strife; and the prize of the conflict is always our freedom as citizens of the kingdom of heaven. This conflict cannot be fought out in a short time. It is a youthful delusion to imagine that in mature life, or in the midst of our life's work, strength to withstand will grow of itself, or that our passions, which make us the servants of sin, will decay. The conflict does not begin all at once along the whole line of our being, so dangers creep in unawares, when we thought we had long been safe. By God's mercy, none of us can see into the hearts of others, and trace out their secret thoughts and desires; but we can and we ought to try our own hearts, and we must not forget that our Christian freedom will become the cloke of our sin as soon as our thoughts are stained with sinful desires.

We must also keep ourselves free with regard to human ordinances and earthly powers which have been placed over us by God. The Apostle calls the State, and all who have authority under the king, a human ordinance or arrangement, when referring to the Roman emperor as head, and the whole army of officials as his instruments. He does not thereby contradict the Apostle Paul, who teaches that all authority is ordained by God. Neither does he disparage authority, for he wishes to impress upon Christians that it is their holy duty to be subject to authority, and to honour the king. He wishes also to remind us that the State and all authorities are not Christian, but things that are common to all men. They do not belong to the kingdom of grace and of redemption, but to the kingdom of creation and the government of the world by God. Therefore Christians ought to rejoice thankfully in all the blessings which they, in common with their fellow-subjects, enjoy, under the protection of the legal ordinances of the State. Thankfulness to God who made all these ordinances for the protection of all that is good, and the restraint of all that is evil, should be shown by the faithfulness with which they support them, as far as in them lies. A Christian who knows that all earthly things are in the hand of God, evinces his faithfulness in a way very different from that of a man of the world, whose highest law is his own personal advantage. A Christian will also remain faithful even though the authorities do not act as he thinks right. For the Lord's sake he can honour the king and be subject to the authorities, even when they are neither good nor gentle, but very froward men. A Christian can act thus without degrading himself by becoming the slave of man, because he is the servant of God, and therefore free from all idolatry of human ordinances. Like worldly men who not only do so, but often require other men to do so too, a Christian cannot confine his thoughts and desires, his love and hope, to the ordinances of an earthly state, for he is the citizen of a kingdom that is not of this world. Higher to him than all

the kingdoms of this world is the kingdom of the King who is in heaven. Higher in his estimation than the nation to which he belongs by birth, speech, and history, is the companionship of those who have been redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ, and have been gathered out of all nations into the one people of God. The negro, who calls on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ with me in faith, is my brother, and stands infinitely nearer to me than the German who blasphemes my Saviour.

I know well, and you do also, that in these days we often hear words of similar import spoken by Roman Christians, though we cannot allow that their wishes and intentions are right. They also say that the kingdom of God is more to them than all the kingdoms of this world; that the Church is holier to them than nationalities; that God must be obeyed rather than man, but we do not see them acting like pilgrims and strangers in this world. The kingdom of God which they exalt above all states and peoples is itself a kingdom of this world, and maintains itself by very worldly means. The will of God which they assure us they obey is a very human compilation; and the service of God, which keeps Christians free from every form of slavery, is nowhere to be found amongst them, but only a human slavery which rouses our pity. They do not show their freedom from the laws of the State as the Apostle requires of Christians; they do not give other men who are not of their faith much cause to praise God for their good and useful works. Are we therefore to be suspicious of the sacred words which they misapply? Are we therefore to give up the grand truth that the Christian's Fatherland and citizenship is in heaven, and not on earth? When we hear and read the answers commonly given now to these Roman pretensions, Evangelical Christians stand convicted too; for truth is not separated from its abuse; and it is truth itself which is inseparable from living Christianity, faith in the one eternal kingdom of God and of Christ, and in the surpassing worth of citizenship in this kingdom, which is rejected. Though this truth is misapplied by one man, and ignored by another, let us only exalt it all the more. If we preserve the freedom which we possess in this world as strangers and pilgrims, we shall be able to show our faithfulness, when the faithfulness of the citizens of this world commonly ceases. We shall still honour the king when his flatterers forsake him; we shall still pray for the king, when those who have lost hope of gaining any more honours or advantages from him, despise him. And it is yet to be seen who loves his Fatherland and his country best, the man of the world who knows no other Fatherland besides his earthly one, and no higher lord than his earthly king; or the Christian who serves God the Lord, and travels on as a pilgrim and stranger through this world and its ordinances, to the heavenly and eternal Fatherland.

Let us jealously guard the freedom to which God has called us, and for which Christ has set us free; and then we shall also show forth the faithfulness which is well pleasing to God and man in all human ordinances.

“Courageous be against the foe,
And faithful to the end;
That, freed from all things here below,
Thy thoughts to heaven ascend.”

Amen.