

From the words of Psalm 137:

How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

Psalm 137:4

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Even as he sits at the pinnacle of power in Egypt, Joseph never forgets who he is or where he's come from. He's seen so much; he's come through so much. He's lived the bitter life of a slave; living every moment at the beck and call of his master; completely powerless to defend himself. And he's lived the hard life of a prisoner; held against his will behind hard walls; unable to go as he pleases or do as he wishes.

But even now, as he stands as the second greatest power in the kingdom, a position won through wisdom and prudence and the grace of God, he never forgets his home; or his father Jacob; or his brothers. And many years later, centuries and centuries later, long after his life is over, and his people are being led by God from their own bitter lives as slaves in Egypt to freedom on the Promised Land, at his command the people carry his bones with them; that he might be buried in the Promised Land; that he might rest in peace at home.¹

Imagine, if you can, this kind of scenario. It happens all the time, so maybe it won't require too much imagination. Maybe not to you but this very moment to millions of people around the world. You've just escaped with your life. By the skin of your teeth. Your homeland is being torn apart of violence and civil war. And you and your family were lucky enough to get out just in time, in the face of great terror and risk. By the barest of margins. The dangers were huge. The uncertainty was overwhelming. The hardship and hunger and horror were immense. But you're some of the lucky ones. You got out. When so many others couldn't.

And you can only hope and pray for those who were left behind: as you sit and wait, day after day after day, in a dreary, dirty, depressing refugee camp. In a country that has no wish for you to be there. So, there you sit; and wait; and hope; and pray for the day when things will settle down back home; waiting for the day when you might get to go back home. But the days add up, turning into years. And the years add up, turning into decades. And still it seems no better back home. And, as will inevitably happen as time mounts, you stop thinking about home every day. Maybe you have a few brief snatches of memory; a sound or a scent brings back a stab of memory.

But even that eventually goes. Maybe even to the point where you forget that you have another home; and you come to assume that you're where you are and will always be where you are. And you just get on with life. You get busy with whatever it is that has to be done to survive. And you forget. Maybe your language. Maybe your culture. Or any of the other things that used to define you and shaped everything that you did. Maybe even to the point that you forget who you are.

At the heart of this week's Epistle is the image of exile; the image of those forced by violence and disorder to live away from home; of those driven from home. Pilgrims.

¹ Joshua 24:32:

As for the bones of Joseph, which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt, they buried them at Shechem, in the piece of land that Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of money. It became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph.

Aliens. And refugees. A year ago, we saw that all so clearly once again in those driven from their homes by the war in Ukraine. And now it is the people of Sudan. Another story, in another place; in a sad, endless, series of such stories. Stories of those driven by violence or war or hunger or disaster from their home and their people and their culture.² Stories of those forced to live away from all that is dearest to them, amongst a strange people in a strange land: as [*aliens and exiles*] as *strangers*³ and *pilgrims*, as we hear this week.

That, St. Peter is telling us, if how we ought to think not just of those who sit in refugee camps in some dark and fearful corner of our world but how we ought to think of ourselves, even if we're blessed to be living in the very same house, or the very same community, or the very same country where we've always lived. As strangers and pilgrims; as aliens and exiles. Because, as far as Peter is concerned, we're not really at home, no matter how comfortable we may be feeling right now. As far as Peter is concerned, we're really exiles. Refugees. Aliens. Pilgrims.

And that's what the Resurrection tells us. That's there's something yet better.

And that's what Jesus is talking about in this week's Gospel, when he speaks about his departure; about going away: "a little while and you shall not see me; and again a little while and you shall see me." Because he's getting ready to go home. He's getting ready to go back to the home which he'd once left that he might save us.

And perhaps the greatest danger for us in our exile is not violence, although the world has so much of that; nor hunger, although there's lots of that as well. Perhaps the greatest danger of our exile is memory. Of forgetting who we are. Forgetting where our real home is. Forgetting where we come from; and just adopting the culture and language and practices of the broken place that we now call home.

Which, in truth, is really nothing more than a kind of refugee camp.

And that's why Peter tells us not to get so caught up in the things of our temporary home that we lose sight of where we've come from and where we're going, with Christ as our saviour and guide; not to get so caught up in the brokenness of a broken world, in the disorder and debris of our temporary home, that we lose sight of our real home.

That we stop longing for something better.

That we stop longing to get back home; the home that we now see only in brief glimpses; maybe even snatches of memory; the home that we vainly look for in any number of lesser goods, as we wait until Jesus comes again.

And until then, we're just we're just refugees; pilgrims passing through; doing everything, in the meantime, to make sure that nothing ever gets in the way of going home to be with Christ forever.

² Παρεπίδημος (parepidēmos)

From Παρά and the base of ἐπιδημέω (From a compound of ἐπί and δῆμος [from Δέω (to bind) the *public* (as *bound* together socially): - people]; to *make oneself at home*, that is, (by extension) to *reside* (in a foreign country): - [be] dwelling (which were) there, stranger.);

an *alien alongside*, that is, a *resident foreigner*: - pilgrim, stranger.

³ Πάροικος (paroikos)

From Παρά and oikos (of uncertain affinity; a *dwelling* (more or less extensive, literally or figuratively); by implication a *family* (more or less related, literally or figuratively): - home, house (-hold), temple.

having a *home near*, that is, (as noun) a *by-dweller* (*alien resident*): - foreigner, sojourn, stranger.