

Preaching Jesus as a “Peregrinus”

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In conventional messages for Advent, we tend to preach Jesus as King of Kings, the Lord of the universe, the Son of God, and the like. We want to celebrate Jesus who came and will come again as the eternal Ruler, Restorer, and Sustainer of the whole natural and human worlds. Though certainly there is nothing wrong or inappropriate in this type of redemptive message, it lacks any mention of the human nature of Jesus and the close connection of human Jesus with down-to-earth human beings. The “super divinity” of Jesus has so occupied the Advent message that the humble humanity of Jesus is lost in Advent spirituality as well as more broadly in our dogma. Advent is, however, also about how Jesus came down to earth in the humble, human form in order to live together with humanity, weep together with them, protest together, drink and eat together, and eventually walk together on their faith journey as pilgrims on earth, now in the Spirit (Augustine). We Christians are and will be perpetual pilgrims on earth until the *final Advent* when we shall see Jesus. The season of Advent should be when we learn and practice this pilgrim spirituality as is well exemplified in the earthly life of Jesus himself.

Thus, this article explores and promotes the pilgrim spirituality of Advent and encourages a message of spiritual pilgrimage during the season. To achieve this purpose, the article first considers the biblical portrait of Jesus as an archetype of the Christian pilgrim and then looks at Epistles that describe the Christian life as pilgrimage. The article in turn introduces the Latin term *peregrinus* (the root word for pilgrim in English) as a potential designation of Jesus during the season of Advent. *Peregrinus* is indeed a term used in the Vulgate Bible for the Hebrew term *ger* (sojourner or stranger) and the Greek *parepidemos* (resident alien or exile).¹ To conclude, the article provides homiletic insights on Year A Advent texts in light of this understanding of Jesus as a *peregrinus*.

In the New Testament, Jesus, the very model of Christian life, appears as a concrete example of spiritual pilgrimage. According to the Gospel of John, Jesus comes down to earth, lives as a stranger (ignored even by his own people), and then goes back to his heavenly homeland where he is seated at the right hand of God, glorified and praised.² Here our focus falls on Jesus’ human life, *his spiritual journey on earth*. In John, the eyes of Jesus are not always fixed on heavenly matters alone. That is, Jesus does not understand his spiritual concerns as always other-worldly or Platonic. Rather, because his concerns are focused on the earth (he came voluntarily to earth in the first place, says John), his spiritual mind is oriented toward the heavenly realm. Jesus, in the Gospel of John, knows that what is going on here in the world, especially given the problems of individual human sins and the variety of human suffering and social injustice, does not have the “final word.” Instead, Jesus proclaims and demonstrates that God has the final word on every aspect of human life and that this final word will be fully accomplished on the Last Day. Until then, we humans strive every day for the partial achievement of God’s Last Day, as purposeful pilgrims who will carry on what Jesus proclaimed and started as a fellow pilgrim. Certainly, John’s Jesus has

pastoral compassion on his fellow Christian pilgrims and adds an ethical or prophetic dimension to the pilgrim concept.

Paul in several New Testament writings reflects a pilgrim ethos similar to that of Jesus. He says,

As for me, I am already being poured out as a libation, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give to me on that day, and not only to me but also to all who have longed for his appearing. (2 Timothy 4:6–8)

Yes, we do have confidence, and we would rather be away [*peregrinari*] from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8).

Paul uses the terms “departure,” “finish the race,” “will . . . on that day,” and “longed for,” “*peregrinari*,” all of which imply an earthly life of spiritual pilgrimage toward the eventual culmination of all human spiritual and earthly yearnings. Once again, just like Jesus, Paul recognizes that this salvation-seeking world cannot claim the final word. Only God, standing at the finish line, has the final word that will bestow on him the “crown of righteousness.” Until then, he intends to continue to walk in faith, fighting the good fight, as a pilgrim who follows the path paved by Jesus, the best exemplar of pilgrimage.

Peter, a prominent disciple of Jesus, briefly reflects a pilgrim ethos similar to that of Jesus. Hear what he preaches:

Dearly beloved, I beseech you as *strangers* and *pilgrims* [*parepidemous*] abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in *the day of visitation*. (1 Peter 2:11–12, KJV, emphases added)

Peter acknowledges as one of the fundamentals of faith that Christians are commissioned to live as strangers and pilgrims in this world, showing good deeds by their Christian lives. By the pilgrim life style and the good deeds of Christians, the world will know that Christians have a different moral and ethical vision, the full achievement of which is yet to come, but surely will.

The Book of Revelation, the last piece of Christian Scripture, summarizes the pilgrim motif and describes the eventual end of spiritual pilgrimage in the most vivid and imaginative way. Thus the visionary author of Revelation writes:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. (Revelation 21: 1–2)

According to John the Seer, we humans, or more specifically we faithful Christians, are temporary residents or pilgrims who dwell in “the first heaven and the

first earth,” which will pass away sooner or later.³ When that final time comes, John envisions that all human sin and suffering will also melt away. That is exactly what he hears from the heavenly voice:

See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away. (Revelation 21: 3b-4)

John is instructed by this “voice” that God has already prepared an eternal and ultimate home for God’s people, “the weary, foot-sore pilgrims, scarred by the trials and temptations of a world in which they could no longer feel at home.”⁴ All they have to do is endure the earthly life that is filled with inevitable pain, tears, and death, and, as pilgrims, wait for their return to their true home above. Again, we are not to think that John has a strictly dualistic or Platonic worldview, as if he regarded the earthly life as unworthy to live in compared with the heavenly one, the favored reality. Definitely a major portion of all his spiritual concerns is about how to live *here and now on the earth* as the people of God. Living earthly lives as the faithful is as important as participating in that other-worldly, blissful life.

In sum, during the biblical era, Jesus’ first appearance on the earth was itself a catalyst for the concept of pilgrimage among Christians, and the same concept became a pervasive theological motif or ground in the production of the New Testament.⁵ Especially, it is interesting that both Paul and Peter draw on the same concept of pilgrimage (*peregrinari* and *parepidemous*) as a fundamental Christian identity. Later in the Vulgate Bible, this spiritual-existential concept of pilgrimage is easily adopted as *peregrinus* in Latin for the same Jesus-oriented Christian identity.

Peregrinus (*per* meaning “through” and *ager* meaning “field, country, and land”) is a root word for the English term “pilgrim.” The Latin term describes a traveler journeying to a certain place or someone making a short or long trip to a foreign land. We saw earlier that *peregrinus* is also a term used in the Vulgate Bible for the Hebrew term *ger* (sojourner or stranger) and the Greek term *parepidemos* (resident alien or exile).⁶ All these terms rightly describe the early church’s understanding of the Christian life as a heaven-bound pilgrimage—that is, Christians as temporary residents in the world. Yet the Latin term conveys a more comprehensive meaning that includes related concepts of the Christian life such as *stranger*, *traveler*, *sojourner*, *resident alien*, along with *pilgrim*. The term, thus, has good potential to describe the biblical understanding of Jesus’ earthly life and that of fellow Christians as strangers or residential pilgrims in the world.

In Year A of the lectionary, the Gospel’s apparent “theo-geographical” movement is of Jesus coming from heaven to earth—from the first Sunday in Advent (Matthew 24:36-44; expectation of Jesus coming) to the last Sunday in Advent (Matthew 1:28-25; Immanuel, “God with us” on earth). Of course, the first reading is, on the surface, mainly about the Second Coming, and the second reading is about the First Coming. Yet, in our conventional Advent theology, the distinction between the First and Second Coming is only nominal and indeed interchangeable. The First Coming anticipates the Second Coming, and the Second Coming is anticipated to achieve only what the First

Coming envisions. Yet theological or Christological distinction seems to be obvious at least in a literary sense. In Matthew 24:36-44, Jesus *comes from heaven* while in the latter Jesus is *with us* (Immanuel). Thus the last week of Advent heightens the joy and wonder of Jesus being with us on the earth as our fellow *peregrinus*.

We can easily approach and read texts for the First Sunday of Advent, particularly Isaiah 2:1-5 and Psalm 122, from a pilgrim's perspective. Isaiah envisions the people of YHWH shouting at the top of their lungs in anticipation of God's Kingdom being established, "Come let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths (Isaiah 2:3a)." Here Isaiah describes the people of God *on the way* to something or somewhere really wonderful and thus desirable. The place where they are currently located is not where they should remain! They should be pilgrims "walk[ing] in God's paths" to an utterly different and distinct reality. That is why the Psalmist responds with another welcoming invitation declaring "Let us [walk] to the house of God." The Psalmist knows we should be on the journey to the place to which God calls us.

Yet being a pilgrim people is never an excuse to become apathetic toward the existing world (of injustice) just because our ultimate hope lies in another reality somewhere else. As Jesus' example and that of Epistles and Revelation show, the opposite is the case. The eschatological pilgrim's hope and vision calls for and indeed demands the transformation of the fallen reality we face every day. De facto, it would be correct to say that we are on the pilgrim journey for the purpose of utter transformation of our existing reality. Surely we Christians journey on in *this* world, not in a different dream world. Thus readings from the Second and the Third Sunday make great sense when they convey the hope and vision of justice, equality, righteousness, reconciliation, and peace. Hear what they beseech:

Give the king your justice, O God,
and your righteousness to a king's son.
May he judge your people with righteousness,
and your poor with justice. (Psalm 72:1-2)

The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.
His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. (Isaiah 11:2-4)

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; (Luke
1:46b-48)

He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:51-53)

The whole discussion above shows the biblical foundation and theological rationale behind the concept of Jesus as *peregrinus*, its prominent applicability to Christian life, and— important for this essay—to most lectionary readings in Advent. I need to make sure at this point that the traditional Jesus concept for Advent as the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords is still desirable and to a great extent necessary not only for Advent, but for all Christian seasons. That is why, then and now, we need a text like Matthew 24:36-44 as it appears in the current lectionary. *Peregrinus* as a Jesus concept is not a negation of the traditional Advent understanding of Jesus and Christian identity. Instead, the pilgrim concept is the recovery of the lost or hidden Advent theme of Jesus as a pilgrim who calls for and relies on his fellow pilgrims (us!) for his ongoing transformative mission on the earth. This recovery is indeed the truthful completion of Jesus' holistic identity as both Divine and Human, as both King and Servant, and as both Eternal Host and Perpetual Pilgrim. For Jesus' Grand Journey has not ended, and so neither has ours. Let us journey on, therefore, with Jesus our fellow Pilgrim, in this season of Advent and beyond.

Notes

1 For instance, Genesis 23:4 (*peregrinus*) and Hebrews 11:13 (*peregrini*).

2 Dee Dyas, *Pilgrimage in Medieval English Literature, 700-1500* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK; Rochester, NY: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 21; Wayne A. Meeks, "Man from Heaven in Johannine Sectarianism," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 91, no. 1 (1972): 44-72.

3 Dyas, *Pilgrimage*, 25-26.

4 Ibid., 25.

5 Craig G Bartholomew and Hughes eds., *Explorations in Christian Theology of Pilgrimage* (Aldershot; Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), chapters 2-4.

6 For instance, Genesis 23:4 (*peregrinus*) and Hebrews 11:13 (*peregrini*).