

Members of Synod - my dear brothers and sisters in Christ - on Monday I returned from Turkey where I had been on pilgrimage to the seven churches of Asia Minor that feature in Revelation. I went with a good number of the curates of this Diocese, for whom I am very grateful because the Lord has called men and women to serve who care deeply for the Gospel and the future of the Church. We were very blessed by our time worshiping with the faithful at the church of St John the Apostle Izmir - the city known in the New Testament as Smyrna - where some members had fled from real persecution. It was a privilege to pray and enjoy fellowship with them.

One of the Churches we visited was Philadelphia. There is little archaeology visible in the town now known as Alaşehir but there are the remains of a Byzantine church dedicated to St John. Although the Byzantine church had once undoubtedly been impressive, we were not there long. We read the letter from John to the Philadelphians, we prayed and reflected, petted the stray dogs, and discovered with some child-like delight a tortoise in the grass. In the coach on the way back to our hotel our knowledgeable guide, Yeman, passed around some bread that he had bought for us from his favourite bakery in that small town, where indeed his grandparents had settled when they relocated from Thessalonika in the population exchange between Greece and Turkey under Ataturk in 1923. The symbolism was not lost on us - a secular Muslim sharing bread with Christian pilgrims in the city of brotherly love.

This small gesture, graciously offered and received with thanksgiving on the part of the pilgrims, has lodged in my mind. Before I left for Turkey with the curates, some clergy of this Diocese wrote to me not only to reaffirm

their withdrawal from praying with Deanery colleagues but also to say that they would now no longer even eat with them. I cannot condone this, nor can my fellow Bishops. I hope that minds will change as all remain loved and cherished in these difficult times.

It is my firm resolve to uphold the spectrum of theological conviction in the Diocese with grace and goodwill; but I do question those actions which impinge on our common life as fellow members of the Body of Christ. In a recent Presidential Address I charged this Synod and our various Deaneries not only to pray with one another, but to honour each other. Some I know are currently citing 1 Corinthians 5 as a relevant text, but I find myself asking why the denunciatory categories listed there apply in any way at all to Christian fellowship within the Diocesan family. Let us please remember, moreover, that our Lord had table fellowship with his disciples but to their astonishment also chose to eat with those whose lifestyles and occupations attracted censure: ‘John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, “He has a demon”; the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, “Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax-collectors and sinners!” Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds’ (Matthew 11. 18-19).

Pilgrimage is a central metaphor of our faith. Abram was called from Ur of the Chaldees to an unknown land. He was old and filled with years when his pilgrimage began, and he went in faith not knowing where he was called, or how God would fulfil his promise. God in his wide and generous mercy gave Abram more than he left behind, for Abram left his home but he received a homeland. We too are called to leave things behind to follow Christ. For some their commitment to Christ means leaving fields and family, mother and father (cf. Matthew 19.29). For some, it even means leaving their life behind. But for every Christian it will mean taking leave of things that are

convenient and taking on spiritual and practical disciplines which deepen our relationship with God and broaden our love for others. What that cannot mean is that we separate ourselves from our fellow pilgrims. Rather, there is a proper kind of self-forgetfulness in our Christian pilgrimage that allows us to receive from God because we have stopped snatching at things, our hands open, palms upward, rather than closed in a grip. 'Our citizenship is in heaven', as St Paul says to the Church at Philippi (Philippians 3.20), and it is there we are heading as we walk 'by faith, not by sight' (2 Corinthians 5.7).

In last Sunday's Gospel, Jesus was preparing for his journey to Jerusalem where he shall accomplish his Passion, and win our salvation by his death and Resurrection. 'Today, tomorrow, and the next day,' he says, 'I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem' (Luke 13.33).

We know from the Scriptures that Christ's journey did not begin at Bethlehem, nor did it end at Jerusalem. For God intended before the foundation of the world that his Christ should come into the world and, by joining the divine life of the Logos to the human life of Jesus of Nazareth, open the way to the completion of our nature. If you want to know what we are intended for, what our purpose is, look at the Transfiguration and see how perfect union with God fulfils human life. We enter into a cloud of frightening darkness just as the disciples did on Mount Tabor, but how bright the result, how thrilling the outcome.

However, as the hymn puts it —

'Tis good, Lord, to be here.

yet we may not remain;
but since thou bidst us leave the mount,
come with us to the plain.

This is where we are on our Lenten journey, as we follow Christ down the mountain and towards Jerusalem. We are people on the move - pilgrim people today, tomorrow and the next day. We are not to snatch at spiritual insights, as St Peter did on the Mount of Transfiguration, and make tabernacles where we should not. We are to keep moving, faithfully, quietly, travelling gently towards Jerusalem so that we can take our part in Christ's Passion in order to have our share in his Resurrection.

But what wisdom can we bring with us on the journey? How shall we remain pilgrims together through Lent, in Eastertide, and in our daily lives throughout the years to come? We have our Lenten disciplines: prayer, fasting, alms, and study. There are good habits that will refresh us along the way if we keep them up. But for the length of our journey, for perseverance, I am put in mind of one of the sayings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers.

Somebody put a question to Abba Anthony, saying, 'What must I observe in order to please God?' In answer, the elder said, 'Keep what I command you. Wherever you go, always have God before your eyes, and whatever you do, have in mind the testimony of the sacred scriptures. And in whatever place you find yourself, do not move quickly. Keep these three things, and you will be saved'.

Always have God before your eyes. Whatever you do, remember the testimony of the sacred scriptures. And wherever you are, do not move quickly. It is the last point that relates to pilgrims. For we are on the

longest journey, that is the journey from earth to heaven. It takes a lifetime to get there. So we do not need to move quickly, because we are unlikely to get there any faster. But we should move purposefully, prayerfully - no snatching, no grasping, but with open hands - one pilgrim step after another, with joy and the lightness that comes from thanksgiving.

My brothers and sisters, our home is heaven. 'Here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come' (Hebrews 13.14) and yet there is much to encourage us on our journey and we 'continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God' (Hebrews 13.15). Abram left his home to gain a homeland. We, too, shall gain immeasurably more than we give up if we make our pilgrim journey in faith, encouraging and rejoicing with our fellow pilgrims on the way. On our journey with Christ to Jerusalem we shall need to leave some convenient and comfortable things to learn a right self-forgetfulness, including the anxiety which we find so comfortable, too. For Jerusalem is the place of Christ's death, yes, but it is the place of his Resurrection and Ascension, too. Let us go together filled with pilgrim songs so that today, tomorrow, and every day, we shall be on our way. Amen.