

The second reading today is from the First Letter of Peter. It is addressed to various early Christian communities in Asia Minor that were suffering persecution.

The bulk of scholarly opinion is that Peter the Apostle did not write this letter; Catholic tradition has always held that the letter was written by Peter himself, probably while he was in Rome. However, its writer appears to have had a formal education in rhetoric and philosophy and an advanced knowledge of the Greek language, which would be highly improbable for a Galilean fisherman. It is possible that St Mark – who was with Peter in Rome and wrote his gospel from much of what Peter told him – acted as Peter's scribe, but the dating of the letter – somewhere towards the end of the first century – makes this unlikely. It is probably a pseudonymous work, written in the name of Peter to give greater weight to the spiritual comfort it is trying to give to persecuted Christians.

The letter encourages Jewish Christians undergoing persecution in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia and Bithynia: he calls them 'foreigners' living in alien lands, because that's what they were to the local populations. They held beliefs

that those populations considered outlandish, outrageous, moralising and anti-social. They were frequently questioned, rudely, about these beliefs. They were obliged to swim against the tide.

*Plûs ça change, plus c'est la même chose.* This is exactly the situation that we, as Christians, find ourselves in today in our little western corner of the world. We are foreigners in an alien land in more than one sense. We, too, find ourselves swimming against the tide. Protest against the 200,000 abortions every year in the UK is considered to be an infringement of women's rights; any ethical or moral stand we might take against the unstoppable rise of gender politics is called discriminatory, bigoted, hypocritical; all our efforts to uphold the importance of faith in our society, our schools and our government structures are labelled Neolithic, superstitious, primitive and backward. Any and every attempt to introduce the concept of something that goes beyond a purely materialistic understand of existence is met with savage ridicule. How could we *possibly* believe such nonsense?

The traditional Marian hymn, the *Salve Regina*, contains the line: '(...) poor, banished children of Eve, mourning and weeping in this veil of tears.' We are foreigners in an alien land.

This is all in the external, outward, concrete way of things. Yet we are foreigners inwardly, too. That's why the concept of 'home' is so important to anyone who has the slightest inkling that 'home' is not really 'here'. The ancient Gnostics were well aware of this and used to recite a prayer that included the lines: 'I am a child of earth and starry heaven, but my race is of heaven alone.' Steven Spielberg knows how to pluck these universal heartstrings in his films: *Jaws* – the monster from the deep dark within; *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* – the numinous coming down from above; and *ET* – exile, a foreigner in an alien land. ET spends the whole film wanting and trying to go home.

St Paul, who was once thought to have written the first letter of Peter, said: 'Here we have no lasting city' – that is, this isn't our permanent home.

The Sufi mystic and poet Jal'al Rumi, said: 'I saw that we are God's shadow and that the world is our shadow.'

The longing for home is a deep, archetypal longing that has been within the person from the first time there were people around. Every outward, concrete home we make is a reflection of that longing. It is enmeshed in every human heart.

The daily dynamism of our lives in this world is absolutely necessary. We are here to live as consciously, wisely and lovingly as we can – and we can't learn these lessons anywhere else. For every day we must give thanks – not for this or that, but for the *fact* of our existence, including all its “this's and ‘that's”. A spirit of thankfulness is the surest path to inward peace. However: this is not our true home. Our true home is not a place but a state of existence, a plenitude of Being in which existences – even a blade of grass – participate.

There are doorways through which we can occasionally catch a glimpse of it:

- in the faces of our children or grandchildren...
- in the shape and colour of a flower...
- in a poem...
- a painting...

- music that lifts us out and above ourselves...
- in the touch of someone we love...

When these things engage us, move us, cause us joy, then we become aware, however briefly, that they are held, forever, never to be lost, in a single moment of time that has no beginning and no end. They are held in our true home, where no one and nothing is foreign or alien – not even our darkest and most shameful desires.