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Citizens and Pilgrims:
Christian faith in the European context

'There are many in this city who are my people'. (Ac 18.10) The verse I have been given as my starting point refers, of course, to the city of Corinth, which the Apostle Paul was visiting when the Lord spoke these words to him in a night vision. Corinth was one of the first European cities to receive the message of the Gospel, and we can learn much about this early example of a European church, not only from Acts but also from the Corinthian letters. Who were these people in Corinth? Who are the Christian people in our cities today? What is similar in the profile of Christians in London today and in Corinth two thousand years ago, and what is different? I will leave you to draw the comparisons or contrasts with Oldenburg.

Participation and identification

I see much in common between London and Corinth if we look at those who are Christians in the sense that they participate in the active life of the Christian community. Both London and Corinth, as port cities, were very diverse in terms of culture, language and religion. Indeed, London always has been diverse: recently, a human burial was found in Lant Street, not far from our Cathedral, dating back to the Roman Empire. Archaeological analysis showed that the remains were those of a teenage girl of East European ancestry who had grown up in North Africa before moving to London. No doubt similar biographies could be found for the inhabitants of Corinth, and that diversity would have been reflected in the life of the Christian community too – we know that there were Christians from both Jewish and Gentile backgrounds. The Lord's people were and are from many races and cultures. In our churches in London today there is an extraordinary variety of language, music and food.

It is also clear that the Lord's people in Corinth were divided among themselves, ready to quarrel about many things; and, I have to tell you, Christians in London can also be fractious. We do not always agree about everything, and sometimes disagreement leads to division – not only within one church, but of course we have over the centuries generated a huge number of different churches: both those which have grown up historically in Europe, and also those which have been established here recently as a result of migration, particularly from Africa. A recent survey found that there were more than 240 new black majority churches just in the Borough of Southwark, one of the 32 boroughs which make up London. Our city is not only multi-cultural and multi-faith, but also multi-Christian.

Yet both in Corinth and in London there is one obvious magnet which holds together the Lord's diverse and divided people: namely, a common commitment to following Jesus. And what was true in Corinth remains true: that the sacraments are central to that following. Acts 18 talks of many Corinthians being baptised; in 1 Corinthians 11 we have the earliest reference to the celebration of the eucharist in the church's life. For Christians today as then, the sacraments are at times a cause of division, but that is in itself a witness to the significance they hold in showing us the presence and work of the risen Jesus.

So there are similarities across the millennia between Christians then and now. But there is also a major factor of difference to consider. Nowadays, 'Christian' can mean not only those who participate in the community of Christ's people, but also those who identify with Christianity in a more passive way, perhaps with not very much participation, or none at all.

This was not a phenomenon known in Corinth. In England, it used to be very common: the general assumption was that somebody's religion was 'Church of England', unless they were clear that it was something else. As a result of secularisation across the generations, this pattern of identification is less common now, but 'Christian' is always available to people as a marker of identity, sometimes in a negative sense, as in 'not Muslim'. More positively, many people still want to identify in a positive sense with the Christian inheritance and shaping of our country, even if they themselves have no active faith or follow another faith: for example, many Muslim parents like their children to study in church schools.

So there are two ways in which we could describe the Christians of Europe today: as those who participate, and as those who identify – in Corinth, there was only the one way. The two senses overlap, yet are different; and the relationship between them is different according to time and place. Yet across Europe, we have to recognise this double pattern of participation and of identification. In light of that, how can we understand what is asked of us as Christians today? How are we to relate to the European societies of our time? I want to retrieve a pair of words from the New Testament context which I think can help with this.

Cives* and *peregrini

Broadly speaking, the male inhabitants of the Roman Empire of St Paul's time could be classified into three levels according to their legal status. The lowest was the slave, who essentially was human property, with no rights. At the top of the scale was the Roman citizen, *civis*, with a clearly defined set of privileges, particularly in relation to the way in which he was treated by the legal system. In between was the *peregrinus*, an imperial subject who was not a Roman citizens because his nationality officially belonged elsewhere – the word literally means 'one who goes through the fields', i.e. a stranger to the Roman city state. In the history of the Empire, the boundaries between these different groups changed constantly, and it was possible for individuals to move between categories; but the basic tripartite structure remained intact as the foundation of society. It rested ultimately on the fundamental concept of the city as a basic unit conferring rights and responsibilities on its members. As the Empire developed, and the proportion of *cives* became less, the rights came to be more emphasised: a Roman citizen had the right to a fair trial, could not

be arbitrarily arrested, was not subject to torture, and so on. The *peregrinus*, by contrast, because his allegiance formally resided elsewhere, was technically a resident alien who could count on none of these legal privileges. Slavery, while it still occurs as a major social evil today, has no recognition as a legal status in Europe or almost any other country. However, something like the *civis-peregrinus* distinction is still a major theme in the contemporary world, and doubtless will always be so as long as mass migration occurs.

The proportions of full 'citizens' to 'resident aliens' differ dramatically from one country to another. An extreme example is Qatar, where of a total 2 million inhabitants only 200,000, i.e. 10%, are Qatari citizens (the 500,000 Christians in Qatar are all 'resident aliens'). In Europe, which is our concern tonight, definitions of citizenship vary from one jurisdiction to another, but surely *civis* broadly corresponds with the category of 'EU citizen', while *peregrinus* includes a range of people, from refugees and asylum seekers, through those with 'leave to remain' to resident aliens. *Peregrini* are much in the news in Europe today.

The categories of *civis* and *peregrinus* resonate in Christian faith and theology too. In the first place, according to the Acts of the Apostles, St Paul himself twice asserts his status as a Roman citizen, to the embarrassment of authorities who have failed to give him access to due legal process. It is interesting to note that the first such occasion, in Acts 17, is when he is in Philippi; and it is in the Letter to the Philippians that he makes the succinct declaration that, 'our citizenship is in heaven'. Within the category of *civis*, then, we see the everyday meaning being transformed and deepened by Paul's eschatological faith.

The process of transformation is still more marked in the case of our other key word. In Christian thinking, the *peregrinus* as 'resident alien', the one with no permanent belonging in the local imperial city, becomes the *peregrinus* as 'pilgrim', the one passing through this earth as a traveller on the way to his heavenly home. The key scriptural text here is the First Letter of Peter, which speaks of Christians as being in diaspora from their homeland, and as *paroikoi*, 'aliens'. It is interesting to note that in English, following here French and late Latin, the basic unit of residential Christian community is called the 'parish', deriving from this word *paroikoi*, 'those away from [*para*] their native home [*oikos*]'; what is for us the model of a settled expression of faith has at its root the idea of unsettlement, transience.

I have talked at some length about these words because I believe that as Christians in Europe today we are called to be both *cives* and *peregrini*, and these two poles of Christian life belong together. Living as citizens is the basis from which we identify with our society, and also sustain our belonging with those who identify as Christians in some sense; knowing ourselves to be pilgrims enables us to participate in Christian community with all who are on the edges of or in transit through our societies, and keeps our horizons enlarged. The thesis that the two belong together in the Christian life is not at all a new idea; it is elegantly yet paradoxically expressed in the second-century *Epistle to Diognetus*:

> Though they [Christians] are residents at home in their own countries, their behaviour is more like that of transients (*oikousin idias all' hōs paroikoi*); they take their full part as citizens (*politai*), but they submit to anything and everything as if they were aliens (*xenoi*). For them, any foreign country is a homeland, and any homeland is a foreign country (*pasa xenē patris pasa patris xenē*).

What does all this mean for our life as Christians today in Europe? How do we hold together these two poles of ‘pilgrim’ and ‘citizen’ in the life of our churches? I want to finish by mentioning five areas which seem to be particularly important to me; but I hope that the *civis-peregrinus* model is helpful in thinking about your own situation. If that is so, then perhaps you can think of other applications too.

Citizens and pilgrims in Europe today

Firstly, our churches are places of welcome and gathering for people who have the experience of travelling in their lives, and whose Christian faith sustains them in their travelling. Such people might be asylum seekers or refugees, but they might also be first-, second- or even third-generation members of migrant communities; they might also be people who have moved internally within their own countries, and are now far from their usual structures of friendship and support. At the same time, our churches are also places embedded in the civic life of our local communities, bearing the stories of a place, and often appreciated by people who practise no visible form of the Christian faith. The danger for the church of the *peregrini* is that it may become a deracinated assembly of the faithful, with only weak links to its community; the danger for the church of the *cives* is that it may become an ossifying shrine, unwilling to welcome new members. Yet by God’s grace our churches can, and sometimes do, bring together both aspects. Last year, in one of our parish churches in South East London I confirmed Blessing, a woman from Zimbabwe who had originally come here as an asylum seeker. A few months ago, when I met her again, she told me that she had recently been through a citizenship ceremony, and was now a UK citizen. ‘That is wonderful, Blessing,’ I said, ‘Do you feel you really belong to the UK after your citizenship ceremony?’ ‘Bishop Michael,’ she replied, ‘I felt I really belonged to the UK after you confirmed me into the Church of England’. For her, a true sense of local citizenship had come through her full participation in the pilgrim gathering of God’s people.

Secondly, our sense of being both citizens and pilgrims creates a natural empathy and common understanding with different groups in contemporary Europe. As citizens, we share our civic life with many people of no particular religious belief, most of whom could be described as in some sense ‘post-Christian’. In the properly secular space of our democratic societies, we work with them to build up the common good, and we negotiate with them over the acceptable boundaries of competing rights and responsibilities. Meanwhile, as pilgrims on a journey, whose horizon is wider than any secular goal, we also recognise that we have much in common with people of other faiths; like us, they believe that the purpose of our human lives can only be found beyond our lives; like us, they are guided by that which is given from beyond rather than merely created here; like us, their ultimate allegiance is to divine truth rather than human consensus. In our current situation, fraught with dangers of alienation, mistrust and conflict, we have a responsibility and opportunity to maintain a conversation between our secular partners and our Muslim partners. Three years ago in Woolwich, an off-duty British soldier was publicly and brutally murdered by Islamist fanatics, and a backlash threatened. In the days which followed, I and my colleagues found

ourselves again and again talking with both angry white working class people and fearful Muslims. These are not easy conversations, but we are called and equipped to broker them.

Thirdly, the values on which we base the education of young people in society need to fall between two simplistic extremes. One would be to insist on a particularist ethos, acceptable only to fully committed Christians, and therefore always in danger of acquiring a sectarian character. The other would be to accommodate ourselves entirely to an agreed set of supposedly universal principles of appropriate behaviour.

Recently in British schooling, there has been much concern expressed about the radicalisation of children through their indoctrination with extremist Islamist ideas. To counter this, the authorities have proposed that all schools be required to teach what they have called 'British values', such as respecting individual liberty, tolerance of others, affirming equality of gender and sexual orientation, and so on. It is difficult in general to argue against these – it is also difficult to see in what sense they are specifically British! – but as a Christian I want to say that they are not sufficient on their own to provide guidance for young people. Our foundational values are those of God's Kingdom, which set before us a vision both more challenging and more enriching than that of contemporary Britain.

Fourthly, our role as Christian ministers and leaders needs to share in a similar duality: we are both pastors and guides of a particular group of pilgrim people and also priests appointed to deal with religion on behalf of the wider community. In England, this is most evident in the work of chaplains to various institutions – hospitals, prisons, universities or schools. On one hand, a Christian chaplain will have a specific ministry to Christian patients, prisoners or students; he or she will teach them the faith, pray with and counsel them, administer the sacraments to them. On the other hand, the chaplain also has a wider spiritual responsibility to all in the institution – to be available to them as a listening and caring person, and to arrange access for them to ministers of their own faith if that is different from the chaplain's. It can be difficult sometimes to combine these two, and sometimes the tension between generic spiritual care and sacramental Christian ministry becomes impossible to resolve. But a similar tension, if less acute, can be experienced by every priest and bishop: we are called both to lead and nourish our own faithful people and to be available and accessible for all. For myself, I am convinced that this is not just a question of adding to the central task of leading Christians a secondary virtue of being nice to everybody else; rather, I believe that care for the other is a core duty for anybody who claims to be a religious leader. Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan teaches me that.

Finally, when we pray, we do so both as *peregrini* and as *cives*. In this Advent season, we place ourselves once again with the early Christians, whose prayer was fervently ordered towards the end times. They knew that they had no continuing city here on earth, and so their prayer was one of longing for the heavenly Jerusalem. In this, they were like their spiritual ancestors the Jewish exiles, who yearned for Jerusalem while in exile in Babylon. But, in a key 'citizenship' text from the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophet Jeremiah wrote to the Jews in Babylon, urging them: 'Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find its welfare' (Jer 29.7). As Christians praying in the European community of today, we need to recover the vision of

St Augustine in the Roman Empire of his time. As Bishop of Hippo, he held before God the everyday concerns of the civic society where he was a community leader, seeking its welfare in all things. But beyond and behind the earthly city, he discerned also the *Civitas Dei*, and he prayed that its journey through history would soon be completed when Christ's kingdom of justice and peace was finally established. And his last word, as ours, is as a *peregrinus*:

Ecce quod erit in fine sine fine. Nam quis alius noster est finis nisi pervenire ad regnum, cuius nullus est finis. Behold what will be in the end, without end! For what is our end, but to reach that kingdom which has no end?

Bishop of Woolwich, The Rt. Revd. Dr. Michael Ipgrave