



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"It Takes an Alien."**
Comment: *Pride of national origin must be balanced with the realization that we are all from someplace else and are never really "home."*
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Readings for this Sunday:

Old Testament Exodus 22:21-27
Epistle 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8
Gospel Matthew 22:34-46

It's that time of year again for me: the renewal of my Philippine visa. This is a ritual familiar to all foreigners living abroad- the way that the local government keeps track of its honored guests and gets even more money out of them. It also reminds them that no matter how many years they may have lived in this country, they are still *aliens*. 'Aliens' in this case does not mean "little green men," of course. In fact, in our case, it is more likely "big *white* men (and women)" that carry that title. Here it means someone from another country living far from home for a variety of reasons. "Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt." That verse from Exodus, chapter 22, spoke loudly to me this week as I thought about the sermon for today. When I come before our congregations Sunday morning with faces and names from various nationalities, races and languages, I am always in wonder at the delightful variety of people in our little microcosm of the world. But I am also aware of how volatile the mixture can be, and how important it is to remember the warning from Exodus.

The idea of the voyage, the pilgrimage, recurs in Scripture like the refrain of an old, familiar tune. The travels of Abraham, of Lot, of Joseph and his family, of the Hebrew

People through the wilderness, into Babylonian exile and back again...these things formed and refined the nature of God's People and gave them an identity. But it also gave them the need to remember their roots- or rather, their "transplanted roots"- their identity as a people who came from elsewhere and were destined for further pilgrimage yet again: thus the importance of the verse from Exodus to protect the interests of the more recently arrived. And that command still applies today. The Christian Scriptures, too, builds upon the image of being a stranger in a strange land: the Apostle Peter addresses his readers: "Beloved, I urge you as *aliens and exiles* to abstain from the desires of the flesh that wage war against the soul. Conduct yourselves honorably among the [nations] so that, though they malign you as evildoers, they may see your honorable deeds are glorify God when his comes to judge."

Pride of nationality can be a wonderful thing: it shows a sense of community accomplishment, of family lineage and of shared goals. But it can backfire, tragically, when pride turns into chauvinism and a kind of patriotism that is bigoted and cruel. We encounter this dichotomy over and over again in Scripture where the children of Israel are proud of their heritage and identity, but also contemptuous of the foreigner and the stranger. That's where the importance of the Exodus verse exerts itself over and over again. Significantly, the Jews themselves have become symbolic of a people dispossessed: wandering the world in search of a homeland, hated and persecuted partly because they embody the concept of being alien. The alien is strange, threatening, ultimately "other" than we are. No wonder the state of Israel is so important to the Jews, and why it is so tragic that it has become the source of so much contradiction.

In my own native country, the issue of immigration is a hot topic. 9/11 and the xenophobia that came from it cast a dark shadow on the promise of the New World that brought the ancestors of virtually all Americans from their lands of origin. Cities like my native Chicago were alive with newcomers at the time of my grandparents' births: speaking dozens of languages and organizing themselves into clubs and churches and neighborhoods that reflected the whole, wide, colorful world while still becoming proudly more and more American.

It pains me to hear of the descendents of those immigrants becoming bitter about America and insisting that our borders be increasingly restricted to eliminate those who might be unworthy of the riches of the Land of Promise. It outrages me to hear complaints about the use of Spanish in official publications when an objective view of history reveals that similar efforts were made in German, Polish, Swedish and any number of other immigrant languages for the grandparents of these complainers to ease their integration into American life.

Being a member of a minority while living abroad has taught me a lot, and I cannot return home to the U.S. now without reflecting on my new identity as a national and racial minority- as an *alien*. It's not a bad identity, I should point out: it has a lot to teach about compassion, justice and understanding.

Sometimes it takes an alien to see both the good and the bad of a country. Certainly foreign visitors to America give the most interesting insight into our own identity and the façade we sometimes construct to hide from the truth about ourselves. Aliens have nothing vested in playing those games and can tell us how true we are to the promise to "lift the lamp" of welcome "beside the golden door."

I must also suggest that it takes an alien in the Philippines to recognize the problems of this country, especially when it concerns the "invisible" racial minority groups here. Ask a typical lowlander their opinion of the Igorots to get some truly unfair stereotypes about our Episcopalian brothers and sisters from the mountains. We must accept the truth of the terrible racism of American soldiers during the Philippine-American War, but can see also how negatively the indigenous Aeta are viewed by otherwise educated Filipinos even today. Perhaps it takes an alien to see the subtleties. Perhaps it's a lesson to be learned by us all.

For you see, there are no "natives" in any country other than those where humankind first evolved, and we have all been on the move for most of human history. Native Americans crossed from Asia to become the first aliens in the New World. The Bornean datus came in their barangays as aliens to these shores. Chinese races have moved and mingled as domestic aliens throughout the 5,000 years of

culture in the Middle Kingdom. We all came from somewhere else, we all had to be accepted when we got there, and we all need to remember that fact as we deal with fellow travelers. "Do not mistreat an alien of oppress him, for you were aliens, too."

Yes, perhaps it takes an alien to understand all of this. And perhaps the role of the alien is to witness to the fact that we are, in fact, all aliens. We came from elsewhere and we are journeying all of our life in search of a promised homeland where we can finally discover who we are mean to be. So let us listen to the wisdom of our forebears in the Faith: "Do not oppress the alien..." because he is *you!*