

Where is my true home?

10:30am, Sunday 21st February 2016

A sermon preached by the Canon Pastor, the Revd Dr Ruth Redpath.

Readings: Psalm 27, Philippians 3:17-4:1, Luke 13:1-9

Citizenship is a word frequently on peoples' lips. People from many different countries belong in this congregation. Many were born here, their families having been here for generations; others were born here but to recently migrated parents, others have come as adults, as migrants, or as refugees or asylum seekers, and have obtained or are seeking Australian citizenship.

Discussion about the qualifying criteria for citizenship surfaces regularly - what level of language skills are needed and how much examinable knowledge should applicants have about our history and culture, and the degree of adherence to an ill-defined code of Australian values so-called.

I was born in Australia, but went to England for postgraduate study as so many of us did. My schooling here had been saturated with reference to English culture and history, so, on arrival there, much was familiar. I fitted into the environment readily with only the odd cultural gaffe, and felt I belonged, delighted to be able to vote as a rate-payer and tax-payer. I stayed 15 years - to all intents and purposes an English citizen, though on an Australian passport.

However, a few months after my arrival, the Australian cricket team arrived for an Ashes series against England. My allegiance was tested, and I realized that when something so important was at stake, I was still an Australian!

You will have noticed the word "citizenship" in our reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians,

The recipients of that letter were members of the Christian community in Philippi a northern Greek City, on a well-worn route between Rome and its various territories. Colonized by Rome about a hundred years before, a significant proportion of the population maintained loyalty to the Roman Empire. Roman patterns of administration and civic life had been imposed and the Latin language was used freely.

For local residents of Greek origins, this would have been cause for resentment.

Even more serious was the flourishing at this time of emperor worship.

For the church community, whether or not Roman citizens, circumstances could arise in which the Christians had to decide where their loyalties lay - were they primarily citizens of Greece or Rome, or were they "citizens of heaven" as Paul called them?

What did he mean by this?

This phrase has commonly been given an unintended and distorted meaning - that we Christians have to sweat it out here on earth for the duration, all the while longing for heaven where everything will be perfect. In its extreme form such a perspective leads to a denial of the beauty and enjoyment of life in the created world and a pessimistic and diminished contribution to society.

No - this is not what Paul means. Rather he is talking about where our primary allegiance as followers of Jesus Christ lies.

He speaks of 2 groups of people - them and us - as if they are at war, describing those "others" darkly - as enemies of Christ's cross. That is shown in the way they live - giving priority to the life of the senses, to the material world, to a world-view which takes little account of its transience, and of the reality of the spiritual realm and the evil power residing in potentates such as Nero. This way is destructive.

But you Christians, he says, have different values from that, different lifestyles. You are citizens of an entirely different realm, an eternal one, a realm which through the death and resurrection of the incarnate Lord Jesus has broken out on this earth giving life to his body, the church.

And it is up to you, individually and together as the people of God, living in that transforming power, to continue the sacrificial work of transforming the creation and its people, bringing heaven to earth, even as you await the Saviour's return to bring it to completion.

Meanwhile, it will call for constant effort and honesty to maintain the focus. You need to encourage one another and to remember the example I have set. You need to keep resetting your affections on values of God's kingdom, not those prevailing in the surrounding culture.

When the toughest test comes, and you have to choose between Caesar and Jesus Christ will you, he asks them, "stand firm in the Lord"?

In today's gospel reading, we read of the brutal murder of Galileans worshipping in the temple and the collapse of the Siloam tower, killing innocent bystanders.

In our day, the occurrence of such disasters -whether deliberately perpetrated, the result of negligence or purely accidental and random, - is likely to call forth a protest about a God who did not prevent them.

Having said that, it is not uncommon even among Christians, to blame the victims for bringing trouble on themselves; this is God's punishment for sin, they say.

Certainly in Jewish thought this was not unusual and from the response of Jesus - "unless you all repent, you shall all likewise perish as they did" - it would be easy for us to take this as his position.

But we know that is not so from elsewhere in the gospels. You recall the story of the man born blind who was brought to Jesus, provoking the disciples' question "Who sinned - this man or his parents?" Said Jesus, "Neither this man or his parents sinned."

When Jesus calls the crowds to repentance he has begun the journey which we are going to follow in these Lenten weeks, a deliberate journey from Galilee to Jerusalem.

He warns the crowds following him of impending disaster for themselves and for their nation if they too reject him as the One who brings the new kingdom. He knows what suffering awaits him in Jerusalem and that the time to turn to him is limited. Repeatedly, he urges them to wake up to the signs of the times before it is too late.

When the crowd tells him of the massacre of the Galilean pilgrims in the Jerusalem temple, they do not get the stock answer about the victims' guilt. They might at least have expected him to pronounce judgment on the perpetrators - those acting with the authority of the Governor of the hated occupying power. If so, they must have been disappointed - if not angry - as he challenged them to examine themselves.

"Unless you all repent, you shall all likewise perish".

So what was Jesus saying? As he approaches Jerusalem, he gives increasingly unmistakable clues that there is a connection between what will happen to him there - and the coming destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans. (an event with which the readers of this gospel 50 years or so later would be familiar.) In that coming catastrophe, Galileans would suffer at the hands of Roman soldiers in just the same ways as those who were killed in the temple. The fall of the Siloam tower on innocent bystanders provides an echo of the prediction elsewhere that in the destruction of Jerusalem one stone would not be left standing on another. So Jesus says, stop, listen to my summons to change direction before it is too late. If you continue to insist on taking up arms against your oppressors, the consequences are inevitable.

But then he speaks more gently in the parable of the fig-tree. In this story we can think of Jesus as the land-owner who over the 3 years or so of his ministry has been seeking to find evidence of repentance among the people of Israel – fruit on the tree - without success. In fact we read elsewhere that there wasn't repentance even in the cities where most of his mighty acts had been done.

Alternatively, we can think of Jesus as the gardener who has been doing his best to tend and cultivate and bring fruitfulness to the plant before the land-owner - God himself - declares that enough is enough and judgment falls. The gardener has not given up hope and will continue to work tirelessly until that happens. There is still a chance to repent.

Whichever way we look at this story the message is the same - just as he himself would die, so Jerusalem would be destroyed if they refused to follow the way of peace, to live as citizens of the Kingdom which Jesus embodied.

The choice was theirs.

Our readings today – not easy ones - are chosen to assist us in our Lenten journey, as we purpose to walk with Jesus on his way to the cross. As we do so, we are challenged to recognize - within ourselves - the ways in which we can so readily, often unquestioningly, almost unconsciously, absorb and adopt the attitudes and priorities of the surrounding culture and thus fail to reflect those which our Lord taught and exemplified.

As we take time to rise to this challenge, we have the opportunity to turn again - to repent - to turn our affections and our allegiance more surely towards the things of the kingdom, knowing that our citizenship - our true home - is in heaven, in God's kingdom.

At a national level, a nation which does not stand for justice and truth, and for compassion and care of the weak is sowing the seeds of its own destruction.

So the Church as a whole also needs regularly to critique, and turn from acquiescence in, the distorted values of our society. It then may find itself taking unpopular stands on issues crucial for the well-being and cohesion of individuals and society, as has been done in regard to the refugees being returned to Nauru.

Likewise as individuals, we may be called to take costly stands in the workplace and community over unjust or improper practices.

At an even more serious level, it is not far-fetched to name the possible necessity for a life-threatening choice between Caesar, or his equivalent, and Jesus Christ today - that has been, or is, only too real for some in our congregation and could well become so for more of us in the future. We need to share these experiences with each other, and pray for each other so that we will stand firm.



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SERMON

Later in our service we - in this multicultural congregation - will be invited to speak the words of the Lord's Prayer in whatever language comes most naturally to us, whatever the country of our citizenship. But we do that as citizens of heaven, together expressing our desire that God's kingdom may come and his will be done on earth as in heaven. May God help us to be single-minded in doing our part to bring that about.