

Living as Citizens of Heaven

Philippians 3:17 - 4:1

Being welcomed and belonging are two important aspects of Christian fellowship, just they are in family and of community life. Being welcomed and belonging includes being safe. If we are safe, we relax and can be ourselves. If our church, our marriage, our family, our streets are safe, we contribute more and enjoy the freedoms afforded of life here in Australia, ideally protected by law and by accepted behaviour.

Many asylum seekers, in desperation, risk their lives and the lives of their children to live in our country. They make a perilous and expensive journey, knowing they will have to spend time in detention centres, with no guarantee of being given citizenship.

In our Old Testament reading, we heard of one of the first refugees, Abraham — or Abram as he was then known. He was told by God to “Go from your country, your people and your father’s household to the land I will show you” (Genesis 12:1). In the New Testament Paul says that, like Abram, God has sent us on a journey to a new land. He says that our citizenship is in heaven (Philippians 3:20).



Citizenship is important because it provides security for the future. Even though asylum seekers may live in their new land, they don't have all the benefits and blessings of that new land until citizenship is given them. Every year we see thousands of people become citizens of Australia, and we celebrate the obvious joy that it brings them.

It's interesting that Paul sees our citizenship as already having been achieved. We are not in the process of becoming citizens of Heaven according to Paul. No, our

citizenship is already processed, because Jesus has gone ahead and processed our claims. Jesus says:

“My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” (John 14:2,3).

Our citizenship is in heaven, but our life is lived here. And so our true life in heaven is obscured by the realities of this life that are more dominant: the realities of suffering; the realities of life with its struggles with finances, unemployment, depression, loneliness, grief, divorce – you can add an endless array of struggles. We are citizens of heaven but yet to be freed of our struggles and responsibilities in this world.



Some of our present struggle is with 'enemies of the cross of Christ' (Philippians 3:18b) — those who ridicule our beliefs, who suggest we believe in a fairy tale. They may include our families and friends who may have even once believed, but now reject our faith.

As I look at the destruction and interruption to lives and loss of life in flood effected areas of Queensland and NSW, and of the deliberate destruction caused by Russian troops sent into the Ukraine under the lie of being rescuers and peace keepers — it's enough to bring tears to my eyes. I shake my head and despair at our world's lack of moral progress.

As a pastor desiring the eternal good of people through sharing the gospel, I, like Paul, am brought to tears and real sorrow for people who reject God's grace. I'm made even sadder when those who were taught the faith and walked with us have fallen away with careless disregard, and in some cases have deliberately rejected their citizenship.

Our tears share in the same compassion of Jesus who wept over Jerusalem. God's own people had repeatedly rejected him, and even killed the messengers of his Word (Luke 13:31-35). All Jesus wanted to do was to embrace his people and show them love.

Jesus loved Jerusalem, especially her Temple, the heart of the nation's worship of God, a house of prayer where God placed his name and promised to be present in peace. Jesus wept over a city divided by self-righteous racial prejudice, oppressed by military might, a temple filling its coffers at the expense of the poor, and because her religious leaders did not recognise God's promised Messiah when he came to them. Certainly Jesus weeps over our cities, too, when we do the same.



As those who know Jesus as Lord and as citizens of his kingdom, we want to share the love and joy we have with our family and loved ones about our heavenly home. We want them to be with us in heaven. Sometimes their rejection of Christ, despite our prayers and witness, makes us question God.

Even Abram questioned God — perhaps even doubted how God was going about his work. Abram was childless, nearing 100 years old. He wondered whether God would honour his promise of an heir. God responded with a covenant to reassure him that he hadn't forgotten about his promise. God also responds to us with a covenant. As we celebrate Holy Communion, listen to those words of Jesus again: 'This is my blood of the New Covenant'. A covenant is an unbreakable contract by God to us.

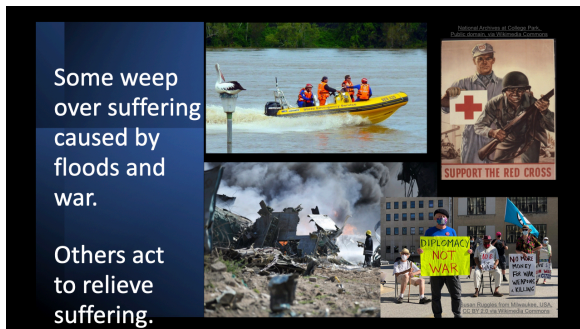
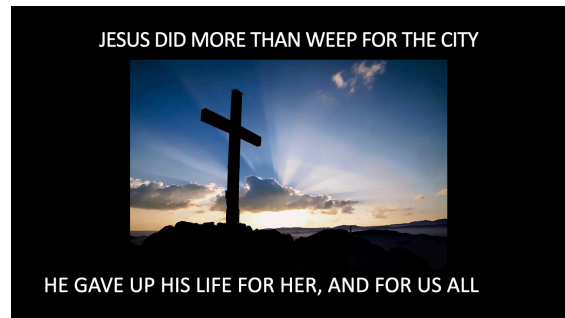
We might not understand everything God is doing. We might not understand what we are going through. But God reassures you that your citizenship in Heaven is assured. And while we journey there, Paul says we wait expectantly for our Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will turn our humiliation into glory (Philippians 3:20-21).

Just as the journey by asylum seekers drawn by the promise of hope and new life in a new land is difficult, our journey to our heavenly home is difficult, too. The difference is that we don't have to wait for our citizenship. Our citizenship is already granted, and even though we endure a present time of waiting, we trust that God hasn't forgotten us.

Called to stand firm as we wait on God, we do not simply stand like statues waiting for his appearing. We are called to actively live out our faith, full of generous compassion and hope. We not only shed tears for the lost, but we work and serve others so that they may come to know

our God — God who wants to embrace them as a mother hen embraces her little chicks.

Jesus' compassion went well beyond weeping, serving even his enemies through the cross and grave. He also sets us on a path to welcome, feed, clothe and respect the stranger. Tears with no other practical response are nothing but shed emotion. God's compassion is always accompanied by action to comfort, heal, and put things right.



Don't just weep over the scenes of flooded and war-torn communities: pray that God brings peace and comfort to those who are suffering, and be part of his spreading his wings. Be his love in the world. Show grace and acceptance, just we have been welcomed and accepted by God into his family, made permanent citizens of his kingdom at great cost to himself.

Now stand firm in faith, fully alive in the spirit, active in service and mission as you await your joy

and crown. And in the face of all dangers and powers that oppose you, let the loving arms of God embrace you until you are safe where you truly belong — as citizens of Heaven. And until that day, may the peace of God, that far surpasses all human capacity and understanding, keep your hearts and minds forever in Christ Jesus. Amen.



Video of the service including the above address: https://youtu.be/ijS_BWHCIDk