



## LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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### Citizens of Heaven Philippians 3:17-21

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In our Epistle St. Paul writes: “Our citizenship is in heaven”. Paul wrote these words to the Church in the city of Philippi and he’s warning them about certain people who were “enemies of the cross of Christ. “Their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things,” he says. But we—the people of Jesus—are called to be different. He’s spent a good bit of this epistle explaining specifically how they’re to be different. Back in Chapter 2 he tells them to be humble and to give themselves for the sake of others because that’s what Jesus did for us: though he was God he didn’t grasp at the prerogatives that gave him, he didn’t seek to exploit his divinity. No, instead—for the sake of us, his enemies—he humbled himself, he became one of us, taking our flesh on himself, and then died the degrading and humiliating death of the cross. Jesus gave himself for us and now we are to give ourselves for the sake of the world too. Not in quite the same way. By his sacrifice Jesus redeemed the world and the human race from sin and death and in his resurrection God declared him to be Lord and King of all. We can’t accomplish what Jesus did. He’s already done it anyway. But we *do* give witness to his death and resurrection by what we preach and proclaim and by how we live. By our lives we proclaim the good news that Jesus is Lord and in that we call the world to repent and to follow him, to find the forgiveness we have, to be released from bondage to sin as we have, and to live in faith in the joyful hope of one day being raised to the life of God as Jesus has.

This is what Paul’s getting at when he says to live our lives in the knowledge that our citizenship is in heaven. Jesus came as King—that’s in large part what

the Hebrew word “Messiah” means. Jesus came as King and he came to inaugurate his kingdom—to set in motion the events and forces that will undo the damage our sinful rebellion has done to his Creation and finally set it to rights. The world rejected him and crucified him. At the cross the world rejected Jesus’ kingship. But when he raised him from the grave, God vindicated Jesus and declared that he really and truly is the King. His kingdom is breaking in. And that means we have a choice. Either we choose to follow this new king or we choose to follow the false rulers of the world. In Paul’s day the pagans worshipped Caesar or Aphrodite or Pluto. Our world is no different. People still worship power and sex and money and a host of other things. This is why Jesus didn’t come the way the Jews expected the Messiah to come. They expected him to come vanquish his enemies and establish his kingdom all at once. But that’s not how God works. He loves us. He doesn’t want us left dead in our sins. He doesn’t delight in destroying sinners. No, he seeks to redeem them. That’s why he sent Jesus, not to condemn, but to redeem. That’s why Jesus established his Church and equipped us with the Holy Spirit, that we might build his kingdom here as we call sinners to turn away from the world’s false gods and instead to come to Jesus, the true King. Yes, as we affirm in the Creed, Jesus will come back as King when this work is finished. He will judge us all on that day and those who have continued to reject him will be destroyed. But in the meantime we are to proclaim the Good News that he is the King. We are to proclaim the goodness of his rule and of his kingdom. We are to call men and women to repentance and to turn to Jesus so that when judgement finally does come, they can have a part in Jesus’ kingdom rather than be destroyed. And our lives need to match our proclamation. We need to live as people who are citizens of heaven.

But what does it mean to be citizens of heaven? This came up in our confirmation class this week and I was reminded again just how pervasive pop-theology of heaven is. Over the last two months the kids and I have been embarking on a crash course through the

Bible with the goal of getting the “Big Picture” that runs from Genesis to Revelation. A lot of you have been asking about the diagram on the whiteboard in the parish hall that’s been expanding over the last few weeks. This “Big Picture” is what it’s about. (I’ve been kicking around the idea of sharing it with you all next Sunday—assuming I can figure out how to distil it into a single sermon!). The point of standing back and looking at the big picture is so that we can properly understand where Jesus fits into the story, where we fit into the story, and to see where the story began and where it’s headed. When you do that it demolishes one of the biggest errors we see in popular theology: this idea that the Christian hope is about going to heaven when we die.

When we look at the big picture we see that God created the world good. He populated it with men and women who were to serve him by having “dominion”—that means to be his regents or his stewards and spread his good rule. This vocation is what it means for us to bear God’s image. But we rebelled against God’s rule and in doing so we not only cut ourselves off from his presence and from the life he gave to us, but we dragged his Creation down with us. The rest of the Big Story, then, is God working to set both us and his Creation to rights—to redeem us from sin’s bondage, to restore his life to us, all so that we can once again fulfil the vocation he originally gave us. This is what we see at the end of the story in Revelation—not redeemed men and women going to live in heaven in some kind of disembodied spiritual state, but God *resurrecting* the faithful who then join King Jesus as he returns to establish his kingdom, bringing heaven with him.

There are a host of things that contributed to Christians getting the story wrong over the years. In part it was the influence of Greek philosophy which saw the body and the material world as bad and the spirit as good. Many Greeks looked to death as a good that freed the spirit from the dead weight of the body and the world. In part it was the doctrine of purgatory that put so much attention on getting through purgatory to heaven that people forget that the real hope of Christians is for

resurrection. The good theology has always been there. It's in the Creeds we recite every Sunday. It's in many of the best hymns. But the bad theology is there too in just as many hymns. It's in the popular books. The last few years has produced a plethora of books and movies on what some more curmudgeonly types have dubbed "heaven tourism".

And so even after getting the Big Picture right in our class, even after seeing that the hope that fuels our joy is to one day be resurrected as Jesus was and to live in his restored Creation, I still got the question: "But when do we go to heaven?" We read Paul's statement that we are citizens of heaven and we ask: "When do we get there? How do we get there?" And, Brother and Sisters, that would have left both Paul and the Philippian Christians scratching their heads and looking at us sideways. Let's look again at what Paul writes in our Epistle. This is Philippians 3:17-21.

**Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.**

As you hear me often say, we have to read Scripture in context. Whatever sense we give to it had to first make sense to the people who originally heard it. The modern pop-theology of the "Heaven is for Real" books wouldn't have made any sense to Paul or the Philippians. Well, that's not entirely true. It would have made sense, but they would have seen these books as teaching something similar to what the pagan Platonist philosophers taught, not what the Old Testament taught or what the Jews believed or what Jesus taught.

Here's the context we have to keep in mind when we read Philippians: Philippi was a Roman colony and as Paul writes his letter to the Christians there he draws on this. Julius Caesar had been killed about a century before Paul wrote these words. When Caesar died it plunged the Roman Empire into a civil war. That war was fought mostly in the Eastern part of the empire and when it was over and Octavian had defeated Antony, he ended up with a large army in Greece. The soldiers were done fighting. They couldn't go to Italy or to Rome. The Romans feared having large armies on their home soil. In fact, armies weren't allowed in Rome at all. And when you just disband an army and give the soldiers nothing productive to do, they tend to make trouble. So Octavian's solution was to settle the soldiers around the Greek city of Philippi, giving them land so that they could farm in peace, and he made the city a Roman colony.

Philippi had close ties to Rome. It was on the road that led across Greece to the narrowest part of the Adriatic Sea, where it was easy to sail back to Italy and to Rome. The Philippians were proud to be Roman colonists and they did their best to live as Romans despite being surrounded by Greek culture and language. The newest bit of Roman culture was the imperial cult. Caesar was to be worshipped as divine, as the saviour and lord of the world. And the Philippians were happy to do just that to show their loyalty to Rome.

Think about Victoria. It's much closer than Philippi, but when it was built much the same thing went on. The Colonial Office wanted Victoria to be a bastion of British culture and government on the Pacific. They pressured the Hudson's Bay Company to welcome British settlers and to discourage Americans. A lot of people today think the strong British flavour of the city is just to modern gimmick to attract tourists, but it's not. It was deliberate and it goes all the way back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century when the city was a colony on the far edge of the British Empire.

This is what Paul's getting at in Philippians when we writes that we are citizens of heaven. A lot of people read this and think, "Yes, and so living as citizens of heaven is what we do while we wait for Jesus to come back take us to heaven where we belong." But that's not it at all. Again, we've got to think like the Philippians to whom Paul was writing. Being a Roman citizen didn't mean that someday Caesar would come and take you home to Rome with him. Not at all. In fact, that's just the *opposite* of what it meant to be a colonist. Rome didn't need any more people. It was already overcrowded and had high unemployment. That was why Octavian had settled these colonists in Philippi to begin with. No, to be a Roman citizen in a colony like Philippi was to bring the light of Roman civilisation and culture to far reaches of the world. It was to speak Latin when everyone around spoke Greek. It was to be a practical down-to-earth Roman in the midst of decadent Greeks. It was to show the Greeks that Caesar was their lord and that his rule and his empire would bring them peace and prosperity.

And what if the colony was threatened? Philippi wasn't very far from the raiding bands of barbarians in the north. What if they attacked? Or what if the Greeks raised a rebellion? What if the Roman colonists couldn't deal with it themselves? Then they looked forward to Caesar coming to their rescue. He was their "saviour", after all. He would come from Rome with his army, squash the barbarians or put down the rebellion, and after it was all over the colony would be as firmly established as Rome itself. Caesar was the ruler of the known world. He had the power and he had the authority to make it happen.

*This* is the idea and the mindset that Paul's drawing on here when he talks about being citizens of heaven. The Church is a colony of heaven, established by Jesus, settled by his people and our purpose is just what we pray in the Lord's Prayer. We pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, *on earth as it is in heaven.*" Our duty as citizens of heaven is to bring the life of

God and the rule of Jesus to bear on the people and on the world around us.

As we all know, this isn't always easy to do. It's easy to forget who we are when we're surrounded by people who worship Caesar and Aphrodite and Pluto. It's not always easy to stand up to the pressures around us. It's not always easy to proclaim that Jesus is Lord when doing so is unpopular and might get us into trouble. But remember, Brothers and Sisters, that we live in hope. The Roman colonists hoped that if they got into trouble Caesar would come to their rescue—and they could only hope that he would win the fight. But Jesus has not only given us his promise, he's told us the end of the story already. He will return—no ifs, ands, or buts. What he began when he rose from the grave, what he started when he equipped his Church with the Spirit and sent us out to do as heavenly colonists, he will one day complete. John gives us a vision of the heavenly city descending to the earth, earth and heaven joined together, and a loud voice crying out: "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more". We look forward to the day promised by the prophets when God's creation has been set to rights and the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Paul writes in verse 21 that Jesus will, on that day, transform our bodies to be like his glorious body. Think about that. After his resurrection Jesus' body was as at home in heaven as it was on earth. On the one hand his friends could touch and feel him. Jesus sat and ate with them. And yet he could also ascend on the clouds to take his throne in heaven. Jesus will raise us in the same way, making us too as at home in heaven as we are on earth—filling us with the very life of God himself so that we can live in the world as God created it—heaven and earth not separate and apart, but joined together and overlapping—God dwelling with men and women. John's last vision is of Creation restored, this

time not a garden, but a great city, but at the centre of it we see the same thing: the tree of life and a river flowing from the throne of God to give life to the world. Jesus died and rose again in order to lead us back to the place we started, to restore us to the life and vocation for which God created us. We are citizens of that kingdom and our duty and vocation today is to live in hope as the people of that kingdom and to proclaim it's coming and to proclaim its King.

In the next verse in Philippians Paul writes:

**Therefore, my brothers...stand firm thus in the Lord** (Philippians 4:1)

Paul was calling them and urging them to stand firm in their allegiance to the Lord Jesus. Everyone around them paid allegiance to Caesar, but regardless of how strong the pressure was, they were to proclaim that Jesus is Lord and they were to live in faith, showing by their choices and their values and their allegiance that Jesus is the one, true Lord of Creation. Paul tells them to imitate him in this. His situation was a little different. He writes earlier in the letter about the ways in which he had given up—even thrown aside—his Jewish privilege in order to give his allegiance to Jesus. That had got him into trouble more times than he liked to count—beaten, stoned, imprisoned. Not being Jewish, the specifics of the Philippians' situation were different, but Paul is urging them to do the same thing. This is what it meant when he told them in Chapter 2 to work out their salvation with fear and trembling. They needed to keep Jesus before them, thinking on his death and resurrection and on his Kingship and then they needed to work out for themselves what it was going to take to follow him and to proclaim him—what things needed to change in their lives, where they needed to change their priorities. And so for us, Brothers and Sisters. We need to live with Jesus at the forefront of our minds. Jesus died and rose for our sake. He is the world's true King. Jesus changes everything, but how does this truth work itself out in our each of our lives and in

each of our situations? How does it impact the things we say and do? How does it impact our priorities and values? How do we use our money or engage in politics in light of Jesus and his kingdom? How do we respond to our own troubles or to the trials of others with Jesus in mind?

Abraham Kuyper once wrote, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, Mine!" It's worth noting that Kuyper wasn't just a theologian. He was also a statesman and the prime minister of Holland. He understood the importance of bringing the kingdom of Jesus to bear not just on his own life and personal piety, but on the world around him. How can we do the same? You don't have to be a great theologian or a great political leader. We've each been called and equipped to live the life of Jesus where we are, to live life faithfully and in accordance with our hope that Jesus is setting everything in this world right, knowing that one day the Lord's glory will fill the earth. What can you do with your unique gifts and personality and resources and situation to give the world around you a glimpse of Jesus' kingdom?

Let us pray: Gracious Father, you sent your Son into the world, not to condemn, but to redeem. Through his death and resurrection you've forgiven our sins and brought us into the life of your kingdom. Teach each of us now, how we can bring your redeeming grace to bear on the people and situations around us. Teach us to live as colonists of your kingdom, speaking your language, showing your character, and living according to your values in the midst of the world so that others will be drawn into your kingdom and know Jesus as we do. We ask this in his name. Amen.