

Trinity 8

Ephesians 2.11 – 22

¹¹ Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called ‘uncircumcised’ by those who call themselves ‘the circumcision’ (which is done in the body by human hands) – ¹² remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.

¹⁴ For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, ¹⁵ by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commands and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace, ¹⁶ and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. ¹⁷ He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Citizens of God’s Kingdom

Introduction

“The Bible was not given to inform us, it was given to change us.” So said the great 19th Century Baptist preacher, Charles Haddon Spurgeon. Do take a moment to stop and think about this. Of course, the Bible does inform us, and that is hugely important, but if that is all it does, then what’s the point? Reading the Bible does indeed involve our intellect, but it is given that we might encounter the Living God, be reconciled to him through the Lord Jesus, discover not just who we are, but Whose we are, and discover a fullness of life we never knew was possible. “The Bible was not given to inform us, it was given to change us.....”



It is very much about the new identity we are gifted by God, when we open our hearts to His Son. It’s as if previously, we were living in a far country, a long way from God our Father, knowing nothing of his promises and the covenant of grace into which he had invited his people Israel, and now invites us all. God had always said that one day this blessing would spread out for all the peoples of the earth (e.g. Genesis 12v3b), and for the church in Ephesus a light is being shone on the fulfilment of that promise.

Where do you call home?



Paul here is writing to a gathering of Christians, who were probably mostly Gentile believers, and he uses the language of citizenship. Many of us today perhaps take the idea of citizenship rather for granted, certainly that has been so for me. I’ve been made to think about it a bit more just recently, when hospital visits have required me to fill in a form to indicate that I am a British citizen and

therefore entitled to receive free treatment from the NHS. It has nudged me into thinking a bit more about the idea of citizenship. As a teenager, I remember being aware that there were still numbers of stateless people around Europe, as a result of the second world war. More recently, it is a sad reality that there are many thousands of refugees fleeing war or hunger around the world, looking to become citizens of a safer country. So many are longing to belong somewhere they can call home, and where they and their families can live fulfilled lives of dignity and value and hope. At its best, citizenship is about belonging, and about home.

The world in which this letter was written

The Gentile church in Ephesus is reminded that being given a new start is what has happened for them. They've become part of Jesus' new and international community. Citizenship was a live issue and a big deal in the Roman world. Bear in mind that some of these Christians may have been Roman citizens, but probably not all, and indeed some of them may have been slaves. Roman citizenship was a privilege, and it was not enough just to have been born in Rome or within the empire. A limited number of people were born citizens (if their parents were citizens), and even then women could only be citizens in a limited sense. Citizenship could be bought, and in addition there were various rules by which you might be granted citizenship, such as service in the Roman legions (which I understand had to be for 25 years, if you survived that long!). It was regarded as a privilege, often hard won, and no doubt the readers of this letter would have pricked up their ears at this citizenship analogy.



Although the topic of citizenship would probably have stirred their interest, notice that Paul speaks specifically about the citizenship of Israel. God's ancient people had been brought into a privileged relationship with God, by invitation. The qualifications for this citizenship were faith (like Abraham in Genesis 15v6) and living in obedience to God's ways. Individuals from other countries could choose to join with Israel if they wished (like Ruth, in the lovely book named after her in the Old Testament, chapter 1 v16). The establishing of the nation of Israel was meant to serve a kind of missionary purpose, but mostly, citizenship of Israel had come to be regarded as being separated from the rest of the world, the Gentile world, and the Gentile world was regarded as being separated from God.

Game changer



With the coming of Jesus, however, notions of citizenship are blown wide open! So yes, the Bible's clear that we're still expected to be responsible people as part of whatever country we belong to. However, accident of birth and status, circumstances and opportunity, wealth, privilege, hard work, none of these apply when it comes to belonging to God's household. Equally, being part of the ancient nation of Israel was no longer to be seen as being part of an exclusive chosen race. These dividing walls of hostility

are broken down, and the only "qualification" for this new kind of citizenship is the opening of the heart to God's Son. It has been said that cross of Christ stands at the cross roads of history.

It means that the way home is now open to the people of Israel and to Gentiles alike. In the early church, divisions between these two groups were causing quite a bit of tension. Jewish Christians were tending to insist that Gentiles who came to Jesus, also had to be circumcised and follow various other Jewish rules in order to be part of the church. The Apostles, especially Paul, took time to carefully explain that Jesus has fulfilled all of the Old Testament requirements about coming into the presence of God. By putting our hand

into the hand of Jesus, trusting all he has done for us on the cross, we are brought home, and by his Spirit we can begin to live in the ways of God's people.

A new community

All of this means that, in Christ, those old divisions are broken down. This new kind of citizenship is not dependent on any of the old ceremonial qualifications, only on trust in Jesus. All who have said Yes to him, are reconciled to one another. In the church there are to be no more divisions based on ethnicity, social class, status, effort, or human privilege. Amongst Jesus people, there is no concept of "foreigners and aliens, but fellow-citizens with God's people and members of God's household" (chapter 2 v 19).



Paul then tweaks the analogy slightly at the end of the chapter, by speaking of Jesus' people as a building, with Jesus as the cornerstone. Those who have welcomed Jesus as Lord and Saviour are "being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit". Church as a community is meant to be where God can be found.

The invitation stands open to all, whatever our background. To live out this reality in the life of the church is part of our high and holy calling. This is not just an interesting bit of theory, it is a reality that is meant to be at the heart of church, in which we are changed to our core in a shared lifestyle which still, today, is truly revolutionary. Indeed, as in the Apostle John's vision, right at the end of the Bible, God on his throne says, "I am making everything new." (Revelation 21:5)

Amen.

Sermon prepared by Margaret Harper

Prayers – led by Ken Rotter

Our Loving God and Father,

Thank you for the transformation you can make in us as we trust in you that we read about in Ephesians 2.8: it is by your grace that we are saved from sin and death as we trust in you. Thank you too for the peace you can bring in our hearts as we trust in you, as Paul reminds us in verse 14.

Lord I know I was once an alien, like someone from an ethnic minority who did not fit in, an outsider who longed to belong, conscious of the hostility of the crowd around me. Without hope and without God. But you have gifted us to be citizens of your kingdom, along with all those who have put their trust in you. So we have the passports to get us into your kingdom, and to belong in your community. Thank you for the wonder of belonging in your church and help us show that our shared lifestyle is different, as we meet people day by day.

We pray for those in our community suffering in hunger, conflict, worry or pain, that You will meet them in their need, and bring peace to their hearts.

As we continue to live with the Covid-19 virus, we pray for the Christian food bank to which we contribute, and the hope and plans to start a new weekly social supermarket in our Church Hall this autumn. We ask for you guidance and wisdom for all those involved in these projects at this time. We pray for the reopening of our Church Hall for use too.

We pray for the refugees fleeing from hatred and war, facing the loss of all they have known. Help us not to fear them but welcome them so they too may enjoy your kingdom of peace. Please guide our government and local authorities to fair and just treatment of asylum seekers, and for those trying to assess who should come and who should stay. And we continue to pray for Peter and Martina Morriss, sent out by us, working in Germany among mostly Afghan refugees who have lost everything, seeking to show them they too, can become fellow citizens in your kingdom.

We pray for the ship Logos Hope and the crew of fifty different nationalities on board, living in a harmony that so often speaks to the communities they visit. Thank you for all the recent help and hope they have been able to bring to the people of St. Vincent, so disrupted by their volcano which erupted massively, covering a large chunk of the island with ash. Thank you that they are once again able to open to visitors on board the ship. Thank you, Father, that the development of these young people for Your service has continued throughout this whole pandemic.

Lord, we thank you that our citizenship is in heaven, and we look forward to the day when You will welcome us home.

Thank you, in Jesus precious Name.

Amen.

