

Philippians 3:17 - 4:1**Citizens of heaven**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

As I'm sure you're well aware, we have a state election coming up in six days' time. Every adult is expected to do their civic duty and show up to vote. This is an important part of living in a democratic society. But our epistle today reminds us that we also have a civic duty in another realm. St Paul declares, "We are citizens of heaven, where the Lord Jesus Christ lives. And we are eagerly waiting for him to return as our Saviour."

St Paul rarely uses the word 'saviour', more often talking about 'living in Christ', or 'belonging to Christ'. And the word 'saviour' was a very loaded one at the time, as the Roman Emperor would claim it as one of his many titles. The emperor was seen as the saviour both militarily and economically. He would protect his citizens from their enemies and ensure their bellies were full. We have to have this in the background as we read St Paul's letter to the Philippians where he talks about citizenship and having a saviour.

Just as the heavenly citizenship serves as a counter to their Roman citizenship, so Christians also look for salvation from a different source. Now Roman citizenship wasn't available to just anyone who lived within the empire. It was rare and prized, and it was an achievement to be proud of. In the Roman world, having citizenship defined both your true allegiance and your ethical behaviour. Being a Roman citizen was much more about how you lived than where you lived. Many people lived within the bounds of the empire, but could never become citizens. This is what Paul is reflecting upon as he reminds the Philippians Christians of their heavenly citizenship. As a citizen of heaven, your allegiance is to Christ and your ethical behaviour is to be Christlike. The concern is that Christians were not living up to the standards expected of their heavenly citizenship.

It's easy to read the warnings about those headed for destruction and immediately look outside the church, to all those terrible heathens out there. But Paul is clearly talking about the members of the church whose pattern of living betrays them, and it brings Paul to tears as he thinks about them. The description of the way of life of this group has three distinct characteristics. It's about self-preservation, self-satisfaction, and self-obsession.

Self-preservation, because it seems that they follow the patterns of this world so that they can have all the things this world has to offer and not be excluded from them. Self-satisfaction, because they feed their appetite without regard, seeking what is immediately satisfying in the here and now. Self-obsession, because they seek glory and honour for themselves, and yet are mortal humans like the rest of us. Those who follow this pattern of selfish life are called enemies of the cross, but this doesn't necessarily mean they are your enemies too. And even if they are your enemies, then the way of Christ is "love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 4:23). And really, it's not about them, but about you. This passage is a wake-up call to those who are taking their heavenly citizenship for granted and risk becoming enemies of the cross of Christ.

Whoever these believers are in the Philippian church, we must assume that as Christians they did not set out to become enemies of the cross. Instead, because of their conduct, the way they live and think, they have ended up on this path to destruction. Through seemingly benign decisions and actions they now find themselves in a position where they no longer recognise God or God's will. This is something that can happen with ease. You don't even notice how far you have strayed from the path. If we think of this group as people who woke up one morning and simply decided to become enemies of the cross, then we don't need to pay attention to St Paul's admonition, because we can't imagine it would ever apply to us.

But this is our reality this side of eternity. Our pattern of life can slowly drift as we follow our own selfish desires from time to time. And so, Paul encourages us to pattern our lives after his, and learn from those who follow the example of these leaders in the early church. In First Corinthians, he makes this much clearer and simpler, "Imitate me, just as I imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). As citizens of heaven, we belong to Christ and we live in Christ and Christ in us, and so our behaviour should be Christlike. And it's only by regularly checking ourselves against what God's word says can we maintain this.

That's what this season of Lent is all about. This penitential season, with its focus on prayer and repentance and our need for a saviour, exists to help us conform to the pattern of Christ. It's a time to discern the differences between dependable guides to a Christlike life and intentional or even unintentional agents of destruction. It's a time to look to Christ as a source of transformation, of power, to become who we are called to be. And it's a time to recognise that without Christ's transforming power we cannot achieve it.

That's why we are encouraged with the promise that Christ will "take our weak mortal bodies and change them into glorious bodies like his own". This is both a promise of the future resurrection to eternity, but also a reminder that here and now we are limited by our human nature, which is frail and mortal and corrupted by sin. But don't get lost in that and use it as an excuse. Our true citizenship is in heaven. Our true future is with Christ. Yes, we won't always live up to that. We forget, we get distracted, we think we know better, or we just stop caring. But Christ still calls us his own. Christ still gives us his Spirit to lead us on the right path.

The warning about the enemies of the cross of Christ is because Christ in his love doesn't want any of us to end up in that position. Paul was quite open and honest when he delivered that warning, and sometimes we need to be open and honest with one another when we see the same unhelpful patterns of life. But that is something that must be done with much gentleness and care. Often the decisions that lead someone down this path make good sense at the time. It's hard for us to see the full picture, and it's hard for us to hear that we are wrong.

A huge part of being citizens of heaven and patterning our behaviour on Christ is being patient and loving and kind. And when faced with opposition or hard hearts, to be even more patient and loving and kind. Ultimately only Christ is the saviour. We cannot restore someone who has strayed, but we can bring them Christ as we live towards them in a Christlike manner. That's all that's in our power to do, and even that requires the help of the Holy Spirit to do so every single day.

And so, as citizens of heaven, may we continually look to Christ as the pattern to follow and as the saviour who is to come. May we recognise that our heavenly citizenship is eternal and that we are promised transformed bodies in the resurrection. And I pray that the Spirit leads you to more closely follow the pattern of Christ every day of your life, that you may boldly live as a citizen of heaven, and a member of the body of Christ, to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

May God's peace, which passes all human understanding keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.