

A Shared Citizenship

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[0 : 00] As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling.

She followed Paul and us, crying out, These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation. And this she kept doing for many days.

Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, I command you, in the name of Jesus Christ, to come out of her.

And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of gain had gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers.

And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us, as Romans, to accept or practice.

[1 : 04] The crowd joined in, attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely.

Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

But when it was day, the magistrates sent the police, saying, Let those men go.

And the jailer reported these words to Paul, saying, The magistrates are sent to let you go.

Therefore, come out now and go in peace. But Paul said to them, They have beaten us publicly, uncondemned.

Men who are Roman citizens, and thrown us into prison. And they do not throw us out secretly. No. Let them come themselves and take us out.

The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens. So they came and apologised to them.

[2 : 20] And they took them out, and asked them to leave the city. So they went out of the prison, and visited Lydia. And when they had seen the brothers, they encouraged them, and departed.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you, or am absent, I may hear of you, that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents.

This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you, that for the sake of Christ, you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

Well, the question at the heart of this short passage we're looking at this morning, Philippians chapter 1, verses 27 to 30, is this. What does it look like to be a church where our overriding ambition is to make Jesus, the Lord Jesus Christ, look very, very large?

Now, in a sense, of course, that was the wonderful thing, wasn't it, about the Queen's funeral on Monday. I guess many of us will have watched it. The Lord Jesus had sent a stage. His words had sent a stage.

[3 : 56] I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. His work had sent a stage. Death is swallowed up in victory.

O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

For those with ears to hear, the Lord Jesus was indeed made very, very large, as his words and works were proclaimed to an estimated 4 billion people, half the world's population.

And of course, the reason that was so wonderful is because it's so different, isn't it, from normal life. We live in a society which, far from making the Lord Jesus look very, very large, actually he looks very, very small.

The Lord Jesus so often no more than a square word. Jesus, who might get a nod at Christmas. Jesus, where so often his word is not preached in churches. Jesus, who so rarely hits the headlines unless to discredit him.

[5 : 12] Brings us back to our question. In a world in which Jesus is so often made to look very, very small, how can we make him look very, very large?

I wonder if you remember, if you were here last week, that's the ambition of the Apostle Paul. Just flip back to chapter 1, verse 12. His ambition to advance the Gospel.

Or chapter 1, verse 18. You could put it another way. His ambition that Christ is proclaimed. Or chapter 1, verse 20. You could put it yet another way. His ambition that Christ will be honoured. Literally, that Christ will be made very, very large. And yet I guess some of us will have left last week asking the question, yes, but what does all this look like in practice to have that kind of ambition?

It's all very well hearing about the ambitions of the Apostle Paul, but how can we make that a reality? How can we kind of bed that in, so to speak, as Grace Church Dulwich?

[6 : 19] Well, I've tried to capture the answer in the headings on the outline. It is that, as citizens of heaven, we contend together for the message of Jesus, not frightened by opposition.

And we're going to look this morning at each of those three phrases in turn. Firstly, as citizens of heaven, verse 27, only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Now, the big idea to get our heads around here is citizenship. Just have a look at the footnote there in the Church Bible, where you'll see that phrase, let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel, literally reads, only behave as citizens worthy of the gospel.

It's an idea which dominates the central section of the letter. In chapter 3, verse 20, the Apostle Paul again reminds them, the Christians in Philippi, that they are citizens of heaven.

Our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. In chapter 4, verse 1, he's writing to them that they stand firm in the Lord, just as in chapter 1, verse 27, he longs to hear that they are standing firm in one spirit.

[7 : 45] In other words, Paul's aim in this central section of the letter, from 1.27 all the way through to 4.1, is to develop and strengthen us in effective gospel partnership together, standing together in a like-minded manner.

But in order to do that, we need to understand that if we belong to Jesus here this morning, we are first and foremost citizens of heaven.

In other words, that however we think of ourselves, whatever we think in terms of our identity and that kind of thing, it is trumped by the fact that first and foremost, we are citizens of heaven.

We saw two weeks ago that although the city of Philippi was in Greece, it had been granted the status, the privilege of being a Roman colony. It meant that every citizen of Philippi was a citizen of Rome.

The benefit of being a citizen of Rome, of being a Roman colony in the Roman Empire, was enormous. Roman citizenship was a passport to progress, prestige, privilege, status.

[9 : 00] As Roman citizens in Philippi, they knew where their loyalties lay. In other words, the whole concept of citizenship that Paul is talking about here was understood in Philippi.

But now Paul is saying, you need to remember that you are first and foremost citizens of heaven, not citizens of Rome.

You serve not the emperor first and foremost, but the Lord Jesus Christ, the one whose name is above every name, the one who has been declared Lord of all, the one who will return.

And yes, while you may well have benefits and privileges and status as citizens of Rome, you have far greater benefits and privilege and status as citizens of heaven.

Now, unfortunately, John has already used my illustration at this point. I actually have my passport. There it is. It's a bit older than John's.

[10 : 07] I don't know what you call this colour. It's kind of, I don't know, what is it? Ruby? Is it Ruby? I don't know. Anyway, there it is. I could open it up and I could, my name, Simon Mark Christopher Dowdy, my place of birth in North London and my date of birth.

To have a British passport is a guarantee. It's a guarantee that I belong. It's a guarantee that I have absolute right to all the benefits and privileges of being a British citizen.

But of course, citizenship is more than that, isn't it? It's not just a kind of piece of paper. It's more than that. It's powerful.

It shapes our drive, our ambitions, our behaviour. Who we are. Some of us in this room have dual nationality or dual heritage.

And that, of course, makes things more complicated, doesn't it? You know, where do I really belong? Which culture am I really from? Who am I most loyal to?

[11 : 14] When push comes to shove, which one holds the trump card? Now, say, if you're looking in on the Christian faith, I'd love you to grasp that this is what lies at the heart of being a Christian.

Not in some way being part of a religious institution or simply holding to a particular belief system or some kind of vague belief in God. No, but being made a citizen of heaven.

Jesus Christ died on the cross for the forgiveness of sins. He rose three days later, never to die again. He offers new life to those who trust him and follow him.

And the moment we begin to do so, we become citizens of heaven. It's so far removed, isn't it, from the kind of popular preconceptions of what it means to be a Christian.

Well, for those of us who do belong to Jesus, this is the question I think we need to ask. which citizenship is the trump card in your life in terms of your ambitions, in terms of the decisions that you make, the priorities you have?

[12 : 28] As I said, many of us in this room have dual nationality or dual heritage. It's that kind of question, isn't it, I guess, which we face all the time. There are people at Grace Church from France, I've listed them here so I don't miss anyone else.

France, Belgium, Ukraine, New Zealand, Australia, Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, not sure whether to make that one country or two, so it's tricky, thin ice.

Malaysia, Pakistan, Colombia, the US, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. When it comes to the decisions of life, which heritage holds the trump card?

The fact that you're living in the UK or the fact that you're from another country where dual loyalties lie. Well, it's a question which not only those with dual citizenship in this room face, it is a question that everyone in this room who follows the Lord Jesus faces.

If we belong to him, it's our heavenly ambition, our heavenly citizenship, which is to trump every other loyalty. we are to share the ambitions, the values, the priorities, and concerns of Jesus' kingdom first and foremost, longing to see Jesus made very, very large.

[13 : 48] That is to come before any other values or any mindsets we may have, regardless of the country or nation we're from or the social class or social group that we consider ourselves to be from, more important than our family, more important than our place of work, more important than wherever we go to school.

Again, it's so far removed, isn't it, from what so often passes as Christian discipleship. You know, which may be that I'm kind of, you know, on the one hand I'm kind of glad to be a Christian, I'm glad to follow Jesus, but it's really other things that actually, in terms of the decisions of life, actually affect my life.

No, this is so different. It means, of course, that for some of us in this room, there needs to be a very significant mindset shift, such that it is indeed our heavenly citizenship which becomes our primary identity, the lens through which we see life and make decisions, our heavenly citizenship trumping anything else.

that's our first point this morning, as citizens of heaven. Secondly, as citizens of heaven, we strive together for the message of Jesus.

Have a look at verse 27 again. Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.

[15 : 38] Now, when Paul speaks here, as he does, about the gospel, he's not talking about something which is kind of vague and subjective. objective, but rather he is speaking about the objective truth that Jesus Christ has been appointed by God as the universal ruler of our world, king.

Just look on to chapter 2 verses 9 to 11. We'll see this more in a couple of weeks' time, but we see he's been exalted. He has been given the name that is above every name, so that at his name, at

the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

And it is for that public truth that Paul wants the Philippians to contend together, as he puts it in verse 27, standing firm in one spirit with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel. Let's just unpack that a little bit. Striving, it's a word that comes from the athletics track. Here is an energetic pursuit of a single goal with one spirit, the sense of sharing one purpose together, and with one mind, literally with one soul.

In other words, this is far deeper than a kind of shared set of beliefs, far deeper than simply agreeing on things and agreeing on what we believe. Rather, it speaks of their affections, their heart, their mind, their will.

[17:15] It speaks of our moral energy. Now, the perfect illustration of this, I guess, was the Queen's funeral, wasn't it?

The military, all marching in step with each other. The band, playing the same music. The police, all working to secure the event. The clergy, all with one mind.

They all knew what they're meant to be doing. Imagine if one of the trumpeters thought, hey, let's play something different. How about some Coldplay?

Or if one of the sailors who was pulling the coffin thought, I think I'll just nip out for a quick coffee and then come back. No one's going to miss me. Or one of the clergy looks at their diary and thought, oh yeah, I think I'll just slip out and go and see a friend.

Note, they were striving together with one purpose in view. And that is a wonderful visual aid of what it looks like for a local church to be ambitious.

[18:20] Ambitious to make the Lord Jesus look very, very large. Now, can I ask, if you regard yourself this morning as a citizen of heaven, is that how you see yourself?

In other words, not a bunch of individuals or a bunch of individual families, but working together with others for the sake of the gospel.

Now, I'm conscious that that may well be a vision that some of us have lost during COVID. It's been mothballed, if you like. In which case, if you are still in COVID mode, now is the time to get back to this clear vision of a church being in partnership together for the gospel.

Or, of course, it may be that actually that's never been your vision at all. In which case, would you grasp the significance of what God wants us to be as a church this morning?

In other words, what is the apostle Paul's expectation for the business person in Philippi as they wake up on a Monday morning? Or for the parents at home, or the school teacher, or the teenager at school, or the social worker, or the older person in retirement, as they get out of bed in the morning, as they think, Monday morning, what are my priorities going to be today?

[19:55] Well, I am citizen of heaven first and foremost. Today, as I stand firm, my business above all else is to contend side by side with others for the public faith of the gospel that Jesus Christ is Lord.

God, I guess it begs the question, doesn't it? Is that our priority on Monday mornings? I guess it's easy to say yes to that on a Sunday, but do we say yes to that on a Monday?

As I was thinking about this during the week, I thought to myself, just imagine the impact of a local church if not only on Sundays, but through the week, we very much have this sense of we are all in it together, striving together on every front for the message of Jesus.

Can you begin to feel what an enormous impact a local church like that would have? You know, at school, with friends in the workplace, with the dentist, walking the dog, with neighbours in the shops.

Wouldn't that be wonderful? I guess it's something we'll need to consider as well, isn't it, as we continue to pray and think about a second service. They will be decisions which we'll have to make about venue, timings, location.

[21:21] I don't know about you, but I think it'd be very easy to approach those decisions with a kind of what's best for me mentality, what would be easiest for us as a family, what would fit in best with our lifestyle.

Instead, we need to approach it with a what enables us to strive side by side together for the gospel mentality. Would it be an opportunity to explain and proclaim the message of Jesus to a different type of person or in a slightly different area?

Here we are very much in kind of Dulwich Village, West Dulwich, but might there be a different area where we could make Jesus known? So here's, I think, the question to ask with our second point. What ties us together as a church? Is it simply the fact that there are lots of people like us? Or that we have friends we look forward to seeing?

Or the fact that our kids enjoy it? After all, one of the joys of the last six months or so post-COVID has been we've actually been able to meet together as one church, one service.

[22 : 34] And the kids have been with us for the first quarter of an hour or so. And yet, of course, being in gospel partnership together is about so much more than simply enjoying one another's company and being in many ways with like-minded people in the same place each week.

It is striving together for the same thing for the message of Jesus. Third, not frightened by opposition.

So we've had as citizens of heaven, we strive together for the message of Jesus, not frightened thirdly by opposition. Verse 28, not frightened in anything by your opponents.

Because, of course, contending for the gospel is going to bring opposition. That word frightened, it's the word that would have been used of a bunch of horses who are startled and begin to stampede, running all over the place.

And Paul notes that in the face of opposition in Philippi, that is exactly the temptation that some of the Christians face. They will act in a similar way and give up striving together for the gospel.

[23 : 46] And we'll see more of that in the next passage. What do you say? What was the opposition that they faced? We'll have a look at verse 30.

Engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had, and now hear that I still have. It's the conflict the Apostle Paul faced when he first went to Philippi ten years previously, and the conflict that he now still faces.

Now we looked at this a couple of weeks ago, so if you missed that talk then do listen to it online, but it's the reading which we had earlier from Acts chapter 16, when the Apostle Paul first preached the gospel in Philippi.

Opposition was encountered, what were people saying about him as Paul ended up in prison, what the authorities saying about him? It's not Roman to be a Christian.

You're not preaching Roman values. You worship Jesus, not the Emperor. It's so similar, isn't it, to the opposition that we face today.

[24 : 57] Our post-Christian culture, the message of Jesus doesn't fit with British values. yes, the gospel is inclusive, but not in the way that our culture wants it to be inclusive.

To be a Christian is to be an outsider. I was reading recently that the American evangelist, Bridie Graham, once explained that whenever he went into a restaurant, just as an ordinary bloke, just going into a restaurant for a meal, or so often when he went into public places, he could see the mockery in people's eyes, their hostility.

It's very striking, isn't it? You see, he knew. You might think of a Billy Graham, not frightened by anyone. He knew what it was to face the temptation to be frightened, to feel frightened, as the Apostle Paul does here as well.

And yet, they've learned not to be thrown off course by it. So how can we learn that as well? Well, keep reading in verse 28.

This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. In other words, opposition to the gospel shows who is on which side.

[26 : 22] Those who are the source of opposition show by their hostility that they do not stand with Jesus. Indeed, they show that they are against him. It is a sure sign, as the Apostle Paul puts it, of their ultimate destruction.

Perhaps you can think of a friend or colleague or family member who perhaps assumed they were a Christian. Perhaps because they went to church or perhaps they felt because they lived a good life or they had been baptised.

And yet, as they have heard the message that Jesus Christ is Lord, actually they have been offended by it. And they have become more and more hostile.

In other words, their very hostility has demonstrated where they stand, both to themselves and to others. By contrast, the very fact that you are unmoved, striving side by side with others to make Jesus known in the face of that kind of opposition, shows which side you are on.

It's a sign of your salvation. Why? Because, you see, at that point, as we kind of go through the pain barrier, so to speak, it shows that actually what we're saying is the fact that we are citizens of heaven triumphs everything else and trumps everything else.

[27 : 48] It trumps the fear that a friendship is being put on the line. It trumps the fear that perhaps if it's in a work context, that it might damage our prospects at work, or just the fact that we're going through the pain barrier to have the difficult conversation.

The fact that we stand with Jesus and for Jesus is the evidence that we belong to him. And yet there's one more thing, verse 29.

For it's been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake. isn't that surprising? Just look at the verse again if you haven't been surprised. It's been granted to the Christian, literally it's been given to the Christian as a gift, as a privilege, not only to believe in Jesus, but also to suffer for Jesus.

Because to suffer for Jesus is the birthright of every single Christian, every citizen of heaven. verse 30 is just what the Apostle Paul faced and chapter 2 we'll see it's just what the Lord Jesus faced.

[29 : 02] It is one of the marks of an authentic citizen of heaven. So here's the third question, the question I'd love us to be thinking about with this third point.

What might move us apart, in other words, what might move us away from being in it together, seeking to make Jesus known as Great Church Dulwich?

Now I guess at one level the answer is simply opposition, isn't it? But I just want to push it a bit deeper than that, because I think it's more to do with the way in which we respond to opposition. temptation. You see, isn't our great temptation, if we are honest, that we so prize, many of us, we so prize this world's citizenship, that actually we are reluctant to suffer for the Gospel.

That was certainly the danger in Philippi. In other words, that we so value our status, our reputation, our prospects, what we have in this world, we so value what this world offers, that actually it makes us reluctant to contend for the Gospel, and to do so publicly, to strive together for the message of Jesus, to stand firm.

[30 : 26] And as a result, we so often adopt, I guess, a kind of avoidance strategy. We avoid suffering for the Gospel. We even avoid situations or conversations in which we may have to suffer for the Gospel.

How as a church do we make Jesus look very, very large? Well, it's when our citizens of heaven, we strive together for the message of Jesus, and when we are not frightened by opposition.

Now, I think the implications of this are enormous. I've been thinking and praying through some of them for myself this week. I'd love us to chat further and to carry on mulling this over collectively, and in order to help us to do that, I've put some questions for discussion and prayer on the bottom of the outline.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if at the end of the service we just turned to our neighbour and tackled one of those questions or over tea and coffee afterwards? But first, let me pray for us.

Let's pray. only behave as citizens worthy of the gospel of Christ. Heavenly Father, we praise you for this glorious truth that for those who trust in the Lord Jesus, we are citizens not first and foremost of this world, however we define that, but as citizens of heaven.

[32 : 00] And we long in our better moments to be a local church which is striving together side by side for the faith of the gospel, making Jesus known, not frightened by opposition.

And we pray for your mercy on us. We pray that our heavenly citizenship would be the thing that trumps all other ambitions and considerations and desires that we might have.

we long, heavenly Father, to be a church that makes the Lord Jesus appear very, very great in the eyes of those around us.

And we ask it in his name. Amen.