

Talk 2: Citizens of Heaven

Aliens and Strangers
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Sarah Bachelard

Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. (Philippians 3:17 – 4:1)

Over these few days, we're exploring our contemporary experience as Christians and as church by way of the metaphor 'aliens and strangers'. We're seeking to deepen our understanding of where we find ourselves, and so of how we are to live and minister faithfully in this cultural context. In yesterday's talk, I discussed some of the different ways this imagery is used in our scriptural tradition, noticing that the experience of being alienated or being estranged can signify different things and call for different responses. I invited you to spend some time discerning your own experience in this regard.

Today, I want to focus particularly on the third of the motifs I discussed yesterday, 'alienation and belonging'. That is, on the understanding, pervasive in the New Testament letters, that belonging to God necessarily implies that our belonging in 'this world' is changed. We become citizens of another country, citizens of 'heaven', called to be its ambassadors here on earth. Rhetorically, of course, this all sounds rather exciting. But spelling out what it *actually* means is a more difficult task.

To begin, we need to beware of taking this metaphor too literally, thinking of 'heaven', this 'far country', as an 'elsewhere'. In the life of discipleship, the life of faith, we're being drawn into a different kind of belonging, a different source for our identity, yes – but this is realised here, in this world, starting where we are. Jesus said: 'The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you' (Luke 17: 20-21). The shift in our citizenship is not between 'here' and 'there', physical earth and spiritual heaven – as if we're 'beamed up' and have no further care for what happens here 'below'. It's much more like a distinction between two forms of life, two ways of being. So how might we characterise this distinction?

In one, call it 'earthly' belonging, we receive our identity from one another. We are defined by criteria or categories that are important in our social world. These may start as purely descriptive. Someone is born of a certain gender, family, tribe and so on. In practice, however, these descriptive categorisations almost inevitably come to involve dualistic judgements of better and worse, insider and outsider, pure and impure. In St Paul's context, the most significant of these valuations distinguished between Jew and Gentile, citizen and non-citizen, slave and free, male and female. In our context – well – you fill in the blanks: male and female (still), straight and gay, white and black, rich and poor, leaners and lifters, citizens and queue jumpers. And for us, as much as for Paul, the identity we're given determines how we're allowed to belong and participate in our communities, the extent of our freedom to be.

When we receive our identity from God, on the other hand, all these 'worldly' categorisations are rendered void or at least seriously relativised. They're no longer what determine our belonging and value, for, as Paul expressed it, 'there is no such thing as Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). 'Belonging to God's people', Rowan Williams has said:

is being neither a Jew nor a Gentile; it's a third reality beyond the rival identities of different sorts of insider – the insideness of the Jew confident in God's choice of Israel, the insideness of the Roman citizen. There is something [he says] potentially larger than both these kinds of belonging, a new belonging simply as a human being invited by God into intimacy with the eternal.¹

Williams goes on to say that when Paul writes to the Philippians (in the passage we've just read) that 'our citizenship [*politeuma*] is in heaven', he's saying that: 'Our citizenship, our civic belonging, is not defined by the society we belong to here, but in heaven. We are citizens together of a reality which is not just any bit of this earth, its business and its politics. This citizenship, created by God, is open for all'.²

So, there's a picture – and what a picture it is! It speaks of freedom and the possibility of a *universal* community, a belonging from which *no one* need be excluded, generated at *no one's* expense. But how does this new belonging show up in our way of being here on earth? How do we realise it? And how do we help open it as a live possibility for others?

Being Citizens of Heaven

Let's take a moment to reflect on this ... what's your experience? What does it actually mean for you to have your identity sourced in God, given by God? How do you experience yourself and your possibilities differently? How are you changing? Are you changing? Is it making any difference? ...

These are searching questions. As I think about it in terms of my own story, three things stand out. The first is that – slowly and with many backslidings, I am learning to live more and more as a 'listener', responsive to the call of what theologian James Alison has called 'another Other' and less determined by what I or others prescribe as the identity I should live out. Years ago, I approached life

¹ Rowan Williams, *Meeting God in Paul* (London: SPCK, 2015), p.32.

² Williams, *Meeting God in Paul*, p.47.

very differently. I had always wanted to make a ‘contribution’, to live ‘well’, but a few things hadn’t gone my way and there was a lot about myself and my situation I was dissatisfied with. I seemed to be stuck, failing to do the good I wanted to do, failing to be who I thought I should be. So – at one point – armed with a fair whack of positive thinking and strategic planning, I decided to make something of myself ... Yeah, well, *that* went well ...! After two solid years of trying hard, nothing really had changed. Finally, at the end of my own resources, exhausted and despairing, I gave up. And then, one morning, I woke up with the words of Mary in my head: ‘Let it be unto me according to your word’.

And suddenly I saw what I’d been doing – rushing around, telling my life – telling God – what and how things *should* be. But I hadn’t been listening at all. In that moment, I realised I didn’t have a clue what my life was about and even less of a clue how to make it happen. And, actually that was a turning point – the moment I committed to a disciplined practice of stillness and silence, a practice of meditation, so that at last I might be open to hear. This was the moment when finally I dared entrust myself, wholly; really to rest in God. There was a sense of letting myself go, letting God take my weight. I gave up trying to make a success of my life, trying to make myself good.

A second change flowed from this. Gradually, I found myself living less defensively and less attached to how things look. As I seek to listen and follow where I’m led, entrusting my life to God, I’m less threatened by the fear of judgement and failure. A consequence I’ve noticed is that I’m more able to acknowledge and own up to the bits of myself I wish were otherwise, my ‘shadow’, as well as all the ways I try to justify my existence. Don’t get me wrong – my tendencies to self-justification and being ‘right’ are still well and truly in place. I like it when people like me; I’m anxious about getting things wrong. But I see these patterns more clearly and they do determine me less. There’s a lessening of the pressure to ‘make it’ in the eyes of others or even in my own eyes – obedience has become the more important thing. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul said: ‘it is

required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself' (1 Cor. 4: 2-3). As I read him, this isn't about evading proper accountability or self-reflection. It's just that to become a citizen of heaven is more and more to entrust even our meaning to God: 'Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed' (1 John 3:2).

And finally, in all this, I'm noticing the growth in myself of what feels like authentic hope. In fact, it's as though I now know what is meant by Christian hope. Not that I'll be rescued from all suffering, all injustice, all dying. It's more that in the very midst of experiences of uncertainty, fear, betrayal and loss, I'm aware of the direction where life is and this sustains me. The best way I can describe it is the sense of being drawn deeper and deeper into the stubborn faith that, if I just remain open and as true as I can, I will be met; that even when I can't see the whole, my attempts to live truthfully and responsively matter, and are part of something real coming to be in me – and in the world.

You might resonate with some of this. Or your experience may be different. Growing into citizenship of heaven is not a cookie cutter process. Depending on how you've been hurt and what needs healing and reconciling in you, depending on where you're stuck and the gifts you've received, there'll be a different emphasis in your journey of salvation and sanctification. The lives of the saints, after all, are utterly individual. But there are underlying dynamics that are common. There is growing wholeness, peace and contentment born of wounds and personal dividedness integrated and accepted. There is patience and non-anxiousness, lightness and deepening capacity for joy. 'For freedom Christ has set us free', and we recognise it when we experience this freedom in ourselves and see it growing in others.

It's a freedom, writes Williams, from 'the passionate self-concern that seeks its own security, the fear that others are doing better or are more deeply loved than we are It is a freedom for new kinds of relationship in which we are at last

able to contribute to each other's life and well-being instead of threatening and feeling threatened by each other'. In other words, he goes on: 'Christian freedom is the liberty to let God do God-like things in you – to give life, to promise forgiveness and reconciliation, to communicate hope in word and action'.³

Of course, none of this means we're immune to the ordinary struggles of human existence. We still doubt and get anxious and are hurt, we yield ourselves only slowly and sometimes very painfully. At times, for all our listening it feels like we can't find our way and the future seems full of threat. But we keep going. And more and more we find ourselves resonating with the words of Peter when Jesus asked him if he wanted to go back to his old existence: 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life' (John 6:68).

Standing Firm in the Lord

So this is who we, the church, are called to be – citizens of heaven, alive on the other side of the death of our old identities, 'standing firm in the Lord' and bearing this freedom to those around us. For the first Christian communities, this way of being put them seriously at odds with their culture. Their refusal to observe the civic religion of the Roman empire, their reinterpretation of the Hebrew tradition in the light of Christ, their subversion of established boundaries between Jew and Gentile, slave and free, rendered them joyful, but also vulnerable. Vulnerable to being sacrificed by religious and political systems bent on preserving the status quo. Following Christ they became outsiders to the world they had known. Hence their self-designation as aliens and strangers.

We too can feel ourselves on the 'outer' of contemporary culture – we can be treated with hostility (at least in certain circles) or not taken seriously, even if we're deemed not so often dangerous as annoying and irrelevant. It's a short step from here to construe our experience as being the same as that of the early church, to tend to feel ourselves a little bit persecuted, victims of an

³ Williams, *Meeting God in Paul*, pp.36-37.

unsympathetic ‘world’. It’s a short step – but, for the Anglican Church in Australia, I think it is in most instances a false step, and potentially profoundly misleading.

This is not only because there’s a difference between real persecution and the loss of cultural privilege. It’s also that, in my experience, the dynamics that characterise the worst of what Paul called ‘the world’ are deeply internal to our church. Remember the world’s way? It’s to define people’s belonging and status according to criteria that involve judgements of better and worse, insider and outsider, pure and impure, success and failure. Unless or until we fall on the wrong side of these criteria, we may not notice how pervasive they are in our church communities. But it seems to me that the reason so many people want nothing to do with us is because they have found themselves there and been profoundly hurt or betrayed.

They have been ostracised and even cast out of fellowship, deemed an embarrassment, because of divorce or because they or their children are gay. The social distinctions of country towns are more often maintained than subverted by parish life, and for most people church is not a safe place to admit their real vulnerabilities or failures. Everyone is trying so hard to be good and look saved, that there’s little room to express real doubt, or tell the truth about our deepest struggles or confront abuses of power. And when certain Australian bishops have confronted such abuses in the church, it’s been members of the church, fellow ‘Christians’ – not the so-called world – who have shunned them.

All too often, then, the church operates *just like* the ‘world’, as what James Alison has called another ‘system of goodness’,⁴ its members seeking to be assured of their righteousness by distinguishing themselves from all they deem not quite up to scratch, not quite like ‘us’. For this reason, many people experience the church as alienating them from the truth of themselves and their lives, and from authentic belonging in a larger and more gracious whole.

⁴ James Alison, *Undergoing God: dispatches from the scene of a break-in* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006), p. 201.

I know this is not comfortable. And I know it's not the whole story of our communities. There are many examples of solidarity and healing, kindness, truth-telling, compassion and costly service. Individuals and congregations do seek to offer generous hospitality and welcome, and work often unnoticed in their communities, visiting the elderly, running food banks, growing in holiness and grace. But you know and I know that destructive experiences of church life like the ones I have named are not simply aberrations or exceptions to the rule. They're distressingly common. The church is very often, way too often, a judgemental, fear-driven and visibly untransformed community.

Why don't people want to hear from us? Why don't they take us seriously? I really don't believe that, for the most part, it's because our church has embodied in a radical way the counter-cultural, subversive call of the gospel and is being persecuted for it. I think the more difficult truth is that people don't, on the whole, recognise in us and in our communities the freedom and truth of Christ. They don't experience through us the possibility of *being* citizens of heaven, *their* lives sourced in a gracious, life-giving and liberating energy. So why would they join us?

John Main, the Benedictine teacher of Christian meditation has said, 'The church can only communicate what it *is* ..., what it is in the state of experiencing'. We're not called to be 'travel agents', he said, 'handing out brochures to places we have never visited'.⁵ Which brings us to the critical question. How are we more fully to inhabit this 'far' country to which we seek to testify? How must we be transformed if we really are to be capable of communicating it?

Join in Imitating Me

With these questions in mind, I want to return to our passage from the letter to the Philippians. Philippians is one of Paul's 'prison' letters addressed to a community that has, he says, shared in the gospel with him 'from the first day until now' (1:5). This community has been a generous benefactor to Paul and the

⁵ John Main, *Monastery Without Walls: The Spiritual Letters of John Main* (Norwich: The Canterbury Press, 2006), p. 159.

letter is ‘full of language indicating reciprocity in friendship’.⁶ There seem, however, to be intimations of trouble in or around the community, or at least people about whom Paul wishes to warn his friends. In Chapter 1, for example, he urges them to ‘live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ’ and to be ‘in no way intimidated by your opponents’ (1: 27-28). Early in Chapter 3, he warns: ‘Beware of the dogs, beware of evil workers; beware of those who mutilate the flesh’ (3: 2). And shortly afterwards, in our passage, he speaks of the many ‘who live as enemies of the cross of Christ’ whose ‘god is the belly’ and whose ‘minds are set on earthly things’ (3: 18-19).

There seems to be no consensus about who these ‘opponents’ were, or even whether they were actually present in Philippi, threatening the community.⁷ In fact, biblical scholar Gordon Fee suggests that while the Philippians may have suffered at the hands of the Roman citizens of their city,⁸ Paul’s main concern is with signs of internal tension or unrest in the community, which is likely to make them more susceptible to false teaching. This is why he warns them about both the law-focused ‘circumcision party’ (‘those who mutilate the flesh’) and those who interpret Christian freedom from the law as a license for lawlessness (‘their minds are set on earthly things’).⁹ This is why he reminds them so insistently of *Christ’s* way and the necessity of imitating this way of humility and self-emptying, the way of the Cross.

And this is what strikes me as key for us. Only those who are united with Christ in a death like his, Paul says, will be united with him in a resurrection like his (Rom. 6: 5). The cross is the pre-eminent symbol of life utterly given over to God, life on *our* terms given up. It is the end of self-sufficiency and points to the

⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), p.6.

⁷ Charles Cousar notes that the ‘practice of comparing antithetical models was a widely employed exercise recommended in the Greco-Roman schools as a rhetorical device’. Charles B. Cousar, *Philippians and Philemon* <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/acu/detail.action?docID=3416773>. Copyright © 2013. Westminster John Knox Press, p.78.

⁸ Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, p.32.

⁹ Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, p.33.

passage necessary if we are to receive our lives back as gift on the other side of death, our identities sourced in God. Unless we consent to this, we remain fundamentally separate from God – seeking to secure an identity for ourselves. And until we have died, we remain dominated by the fear of death and all the forms ‘death’ takes in social life as humiliation, failure, irrelevance and shame.

This has profound implications for our capacity to proclaim and live the gospel. Unless we have died to the identities we seek from one another, then we’re liable to remain in rivalry with one another, jostling for status and prestige – the Corinthians knew something about that. Under these conditions, it’s difficult to tell the truth when it’s unpopular, to stand with those who are disgraced lest we be contaminated by association, and almost impossible to give up trying to preserve our own skin. Does any of this sound familiar?

So here’s the question for us. For all our professions of faith, could it be that we, as church, are living as ‘enemies of the cross of Christ’? Are we resisting a necessary passage through death, proving ourselves incapable really of entrusting ourselves to the promise of resurrection? Of course, in many respects, the church as we’ve known it *is* dying – but we’re not exactly embracing the prospect or making of this, our death a gift to the world. What might that look like, do you think? And what could it make possible?

I don’t presume to have a comprehensive vision of this. But let me draw some connections between what I take to be necessary for our personal journeys of dying and rising, and what might be being asked of us as a church. The beginning is always to give up who we think we are and what we think we know about being in the world. The life of discipleship calls for more and more total self-entrustment to God, the willingness to ‘follow’ without knowing where we’re going or what it will mean.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote powerfully about Jesus calling Levi, in Mark’s gospel. The text says: ‘As he was walking along, he saw Levi son of Alphaeus sitting at the tax booth, and he said to him, “Follow me”. And he got up and

followed him'. (Mk 2:14) Bonhoeffer comments: 'And what does the text inform us about the content of discipleship? Follow me, run along behind me! That is all. To follow in his steps is something which is void of all content. It gives us no intelligible programme for a way of life, no goal or ideal to strive after. It is not a cause which human calculation might deem worthy of our devotion, even the devotion of ourselves. What happens? At the call, Levi leaves all that he has – but not because he thinks that he might be doing something worthwhile, but simply for the sake of the call'.¹⁰ Discipleship in essence is about living responsively, or as Thomas Merton put it – 'living as listeners',¹¹ handing ourselves over without remainder to the call we hear.

What might this mean in practice for a parish community, a theological college, a diocese? First, I believe, it involves being called back to radical, self-surrendering prayer. Not just 'saying our prayers'. I mean as leaders of communities regularly and deeply handing ourselves and our ministries over, and encouraging others in this same practice. And this requires taking seriously our need to be growing and maturing, facing our shadow and unhealed memories. Christian life is not essentially about conformity to a moral ideal. It's a risky process of being transformed by grace – from one degree of glory to another. Only our participation in *this* process gives us anything to say to our contemporaries, many of whom are seeking for life in the Spirit but readily recognize the difference between real wisdom and authority (on the one hand), and mere piety and religious platitudes (on the other). In this context, radical, self-surrendering prayer can involve committing to practices such as spiritual direction, supervision and reflection – processes that *awaken* us to the depths of our own need of healing, repentance and reconciliation, and expand our capacity to be responsible for what is not yet deeply transformed in us.

So, self-surrendering prayer. Second, we start where we are. It's not as if we have to rush off elsewhere – it'll unfold from here. Doing the things we can see

¹⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1995), p.58.

¹¹ Thomas Merton, 'The Quickening of John the Baptist'.

to do, we take the next step in our context and ministry as prayerfully and conscientiously as we can. We offer welcome, speak the truth, we practice generosity, deepen our solidarity, we celebrate and give thanks.

And third, we practice giving up being anxious about the future and where it's all going. We relax. Of course, we notice trends, try new things, exercise our imaginations, explore possibilities. In the next talk, I will say some more about this. But what matters is the spirit in which all this happens. When we take new initiatives desperately hoping this one might save our skin or turn our fortunes, then they are already infected by fear and the whiff of death. There's no freedom, no joy. English philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch said that acceptance of our mortality is the condition of true goodness. Really to be good is to be good 'for nothing' or, as Meister Eckhart so strikingly said, 'to live without a why'. This doesn't mean we pay no attention to consequences. It just means that what we do, freely, not compulsively – because as best we have discerned it, this is what we are called to. The rest is up to God. It's this for-nothingness, this 'gift' quality of our lives and ministry that signals our freedom from the fear of death and threat. It's this that creates space for others to be and for new life to dawn, to breathe.

Conclusion

Rowan Williams has said that 'a true enterprise of evangelisation will always be a re-evangelisation of ourselves as Christians also, a rediscovery of why our faith is different, transfiguring – a recovery of our own new humanity'. Indeed, he says, unless our evangelisation can open the door to being more fully, freely and joyfully alive, then it 'will run the risk of trying to sustain faith on the basis of an untransformed set of human habits – with the all too familiar result that the Church comes to look unhappily like so many purely human institutions, anxious, busy, competitive and controlling'.¹²

But our citizenship, says Paul, is in heaven. And if we know this, if we realise it, we will no longer be run by the fear of failure or marginalisation, no longer

¹² Rowan Williams, 'Address to the Synod of Bishops on The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith', Rome, October 2012, s.15.

terrified at losing the life we've known till now. Our lives are sourced in the life of God – and if we manifest this belonging and joy, then that really will be a counter-cultural witness for an anxious world and free us to proclaim good news for the oppressed.

Who knows, we might end up sufficiently unsettling the powers that be that we find ourselves persecuted for righteousness' sake! That's a sobering thought But if it signified that we were finally living as citizens of heaven, it would be cause for rejoicing, indeed.