

**“CITIZENS OF HEAVEN”**

***Philippians 3:12 – 4:1***

I don't know how many of you get the *Lichfield Mercury* delivered to your door each week, but those of you who do may have noticed something rather unusual about it a couple of weeks ago. It's a rarely seen phenomenon and one which gladdened my heart considerably. The letters page was almost entirely full of **positive** letters. You will be aware, if you do get the *Mercury* – or, indeed, the *Express & Star* or *The Post* or *The Chronicle* – that the good citizens of Lichfield are probably among the most consistent complainers in the known universe. I can never quite understand it. This must be one of the nicest places to live in the world, with all kinds of wonderful facilities and benefits, and I reckon living here is a great privilege, but wherever you go in this city you find people with something to complain about. I think it's a great shame, and I often wonder why they don't just sell their houses and move off to one of those mythical places where the car parking's plentiful and free, the streets are paved with self-cleaning stone, the architecture is uniformly ancient, there are no young people (or no old people, depending on who is speaking), no plans for any new homes, and there are buses that run every five minutes from outside their spotless council-tax-free homes to all points of the compass? At least then those few of us who actually like this place could enjoy it without constantly being forced to listen to their gloomy monologues. If you're a citizen of Lichfield, or one of the surrounding villages, for goodness sake make the most of it.

We've just read a few verses from Paul's letter to the Christians in Philippi, and in it he points out that those who follow Jesus the Christ are citizens of heaven (v20). That's also an amazing privilege, but, once again, it seems not all the citizens realise how blessed they are. Charles Swindoll, the preacher and writer, once said this: *“I have never been able to figure out why heaven-bound citizens of glory have become so glum.”* And I think I'd have to ask the same question sometimes – why don't our lives demonstrate more obviously what we have to look forward to? I came across a DVD lying around the house this week – I've no idea whose it is – but it's a film called *Twilight* and the strapline says *“When you can live for ever, what do you live for?”* A very good question for all of us. We know – the Bible tells us, the Holy Spirit witnesses within us, we believe as part of our faith – that we will live for ever, we will spend eternity with Jesus the Christ; we share his citizenship of heaven. So what do we live for? How does that affect our lives here and now? Well, let's have a look at what Paul has to say to the Philippians.

As with so many of the things we read in the Bible, we just need to take a moment to set what we read in context. You'll be pleased to learn that it doesn't involve Greek words or complicated historical meanderings, but it helps to realise that Philippi was a Roman colony, so when Paul wrote these words, his readers would have had some quite distinctive ideas in their heads. Philippi was in Macedonia, part of what is now Greece, but it was set up in such a way that the citizens of Philippi were also officially

citizens of Rome. They prided themselves on being Romans, not Greeks; they dressed in the Roman style; they followed the Roman system of law; and they spoke Latin, the language of Rome not of Greece. They stood out as being special, different from your average Greek. In a sense, they tried to get the best of both worlds – the benefits of their location, but all the privileges of being part of the Empire. It was a bit like the town where John & Val Blakeman live in Spain. When we went to visit them last year, we were staying in a Spanish town, with all the sun and food and colour of the Spanish way of life, but most of the bars were run by English people, there's an English language newspaper and radio station, the TV screens in all the cafes were showing cricket, and most of the people were wearing M&S clothes, drawing their pensions via Britain and deriving their rights from being citizens of England.

So when Paul says that the Philippian Christians are citizens of heaven, his readers would have realised that, although they were living in a prosperous city and able to enjoy all those benefits, the privileges which they had as citizens of heaven were even greater. We here, as people who live in a wonderful city and who enjoy all the benefits of Western European prosperity, are also citizens of an even greater, more wonderful place – heaven, the dwelling place of God himself. We are a colony of heaven, a group of expatriates, if you like, with our roots elsewhere as we enjoy what we have here. Ralph Martin, another great New Testament scholar, uses the term “*resident aliens*”, we live “*in the cities of this world, but our colony has special rules*”. Now then, says Paul, in *v16*, as a colony of redeemed people, people who have attained this remarkable privilege of citizenship of heaven, **live like it!** But what does that entail? Paul goes on to tell us.

Again, remember what kind of situation Paul was living in, what kind of culture these Philippians were immersed in. In many ways it was not unlike ours today in terms of morality and behaviour – and, indeed, like every era down through history. What Paul writes in *v19* sums it all up really, and some people have seen in these words an echo of a famous speech from a play called *Cyclops* by the Greek playwright Euripides: “*Wealth is god for men of sense ... My god's my belly ... As for those who have complicated life by making laws, they can go to hell*”. Paul writes of the “*enemies of Christ*”, of those who do not share the citizenship of heaven, but who are the people within whose culture the citizens of heaven have their colony. There are some people who argue that Paul is actually taking here about those who call themselves Christians, but are clearly not “*living up to what they have attained*”.

These are people who live with a self-destructive bent – whose “*destiny is destruction*”. They have begun to slide down the slippery slope that will lead to their own demise. You can see that happening in some of the high-profile figures who populate the pages of the press – Pete Docherty, Amy Winehouse, Ozzy Osbourne. I was watching the film *All That Jazz* a couple of weeks ago, the semi-autobiographical story of the Hollywood director and choreographer Bob Fosse, fighting against his impending death from

drug and alcohol abuse, but with clearly with no intention of giving up, despite the consequences and the clear advice of his doctors. And there are those people around us who have been warned of the dangers of their lifestyle but who continue to indulge themselves despite what they can see themselves turning into. We may huff and puff self-righteously about such people and such behaviour – as, no doubt, the Philippian Christians did – but Paul goes on to bring it a bit closer to home.

*“Their god is their stomach”*, he writes. These *“enemies of Christ”* are slaves to their appetites. That was certainly something that the Romans were known for. Some of the grander homes that have been excavated (and some of what we read in the literature of the period bears it out) had what was called a *“vomitorium”* in them. You can probably guess what it was for. When they were gorging themselves on fine food, they would go off to the vomitorium to make a bit of room for the next course. But I suspect Paul has in mind here not just a desire to satisfy the appetites of the stomach, but all appetites.

And how close that is to our modern western culture! Get what you want, when you want it and in the quantities you want it. It’s a kind of religion of self-indulgence. Food, drink, sex, consumerism – we are bombarded with images and slogans everywhere we go: through our television sets, on our computer screens, in our magazines and newspapers, on advertisement hoardings and the sides of buses. And we buy into it – citizens of heaven trying to get all we can from this earthly place, but gradually allowing the here and now to eclipse the promise of a home for the eternal future. In the end, God is edged out by the gods of our shallow consumerism.

And when that happens, everything is turned upside down. What was once considered shameful is now a source of pride – *“their glory is in their shame”*, a reversal of moral standards. Suddenly it’s cool to deviate from the accepted morality of the past, from the guidance of the Creator God who knows how we should function best. It is the darker side of human nature that becomes the norm. Sex (again), drugs, alcohol, violence, greed – these are the things that will guarantee headlines and notoriety. Alan Duncan, shadow leader of the House of Commons, recently appeared on *Have I Got News For You*, before the MPs’ expenses furore blew up, and Ian Hislop challenged him about the expenses he was claiming on his supposedly second home (nearly £150,000, I believe). Duncan admitted everything and with a huge grin said, *“It’s great, isn’t it?”* There was laughter and applause. Now I don’t say that to jump on the bandwagon of those deploring the MPs’ expenses revelations, but to give an example of someone glorying in what would once have been shame. Another example is the youths who congregate in the car park behind Morrisons and compete to see who can drink themselves unconscious quickest. But we’ve all done it, to a greater or lesser extent, haven’t we? We laugh about our sins and either brag about them or seek to dismiss them as just our little peccadilloes, *“my little weakness”*.

What it boils down to, says Paul, is that “*their mind is on earthly things*”. The focus is on short-term satisfaction. And when you live in a culture where short-termism is the underlying principle – whether it’s returns on your shares or wanting your pleasure without having to work or wait for it – then that will gradually affect all you do. Once again, the focus is on what’s around you and not on what you have to look forward to, it’s on this earthly city and not the eternal heavenly future.

It’s actually, I believe, a form of nihilism. There is no point waiting, looking forward: there’s nothing there so just get on and indulge yourself now. And once waiting and anticipation have gone, there is no place for hope. You don’t need hope, because you can get all you want now. You end up with a hopeless philosophy, with no perspective beyond the here and now. Get it quick and once it’s gone, it’s gone. One of the places where this is most starkly obvious in my experience is a humanist funeral, where there is absolutely no hope of anything beyond this life. The couple that I have attended and the ones I’ve overheard waiting for my turn at the Crematorium have been utterly devoid of any eternal dimension, and thus utterly devoid of hope and utterly devoid of comfort.

That’s all pretty negative and gloomy, isn’t it? And if you get sucked into that kind of worldview where what you can see and touch here and now is all you’ve got, then you are, indeed, hope-less. But Paul is never hope-less. He is full of hope and joy – never more obviously so than in this particular letter to the Philippians. So after that little diatribe there is one of his enormous “*But*”s. You are not like that, he says. Your mind is not to be on earthly things. And it doesn’t need to be, because although you are stuck in the middle of this self-seeking, short-term, self-indulgent, morally upside-down culture, you are actually “*citizens of heaven*” – there is something beyond this: you have a glorious future to look forward to. So get on and live like it. You have a hope and a purpose because of what Jesus has done and what God through his Holy Spirit is still doing.

We are “*eagerly awaiting a Saviour*” who will come from heaven. Jesus Christ is going to return. He’s coming back and it will be worth waiting for. The Roman citizens in Philippi were used to referring to Caesar, their Emperor as Saviour and they looked forward to the occasions when he would visit the citizens in their colonies. Jesus is coming back again someday – the details have been left deliberately hazy – but when he comes it will not be a fleeting visit, a quick parade and a celebratory lunch. He is coming to put things right.

“*All things*” will be under his control. Again, the Philippians had an idea of The Emperor Caesar as “Imperator Mundi”, the Emperor of the World. He seemed to control everything. The Empire spread as far as they could imagine and Caesar ran the lot. Jesus will return as the Emperor of the World, the King above all kings, the Lord of all lords. And all those things that have gone wrong – the reversal of moral

standards, the human drive for self-destruction, the draining of hope from humanity – they will be put right. Once again, people will glory not in their shame but in the righteousness and justice of the Kingdom of God.

And we – weak, vulnerable humanity – will have our “*lowly bodies*” transformed to be like his, like his “*glorious body*”. Notice that he doesn’t say “evil” bodies – God made these bodies that you and I inhabit. He made them good and full of potential. But things have gone wrong and they are susceptible to pain, disease, malfunction – they are frail and vulnerable. But they will become perfect, powerful, healthy, whole as Jesus touches them with his glory. And we shall be able to spend eternity with God, just as he originally intended.

Now, stop and think for a moment. Doesn’t that idea fill you with hope, with joy, with optimism? It’s not necessarily going to happen today, or tomorrow, or even within your earthly lifetime – but God has promised it and so it will definitely happen. There is something to look forward to and it will be far, far better than anything you can experience here and now. Just remind yourself that you are a citizen of heaven. What you see around you here in Lichfield, wonderful though it is, is not all there is. There is more, infinitely more – and it will be worth the wait.

So, in the mean time, don’t get sucked back into that attitude that is fixated on earthly things, that begins to be seduced by the apparent glory of the darker side of human life, that reverses the moral values and timeless laws of God, that means you become enslaved to your appetites. In *4:1* Paul’s exhortation is to “*stand firm*” – not to stand **still** – but to resist the siren calls of a godless culture and a hope-less worldview by constantly reminding yourself that you are a citizen of heaven. By all means, enjoy what there is around you within the boundaries that God has given, but never, ever forget that you are a citizen of heaven. And “*let us live up to what we have already attained*”.

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Paul points out that those who follow Jesus the Christ are citizens of heaven (v20). That's also an amazing privilege, but Charles Swindoll once said: "*I have never been able to figure out why heaven-bound citizens of glory have become so glum.*" Why don't our lives demonstrate more obviously what we have to look forward to? We know – the Bible tells us, the Holy Spirit witnesses within us, we believe as part of our faith – that we will spend eternity with Jesus Christ; we share his citizenship of heaven. So what do we live for? How does that affect our lives here and now?

The citizens of Philippi were also officially citizens of Rome. They prided themselves on being Romans, not Greeks; they dressed in the Roman style; they followed the Roman system of law; and they spoke Latin, the language of Rome not of Greece. They stood out as being special, different from your average Greek. In a sense, they tried to get the best of both worlds – the benefits of their location, but all the privileges of being part of the Empire. So when Paul says that the Philippian Christians are citizens of heaven, his readers would have realised that, although they were living in a prosperous city and able to enjoy all those benefits, the privileges which they had as citizens of heaven were even greater.

Paul writes of the "*enemies of Christ*", of those who do not share the citizenship of heaven, but who are the people within whose culture the citizens of heaven have their colony. These are people who live with a self-destructive bent – whose "*destiny is destruction*". And these "*enemies of Christ*" are slaves to their appetites. What was once considered shameful is now a source of pride – "*their glory is in their shame*"; a reversal of moral standards. What it boils down to, says Paul, is that "*their mind is on earthly things*". The focus is on short-term satisfaction.

There is no point waiting, looking forward: there's nothing there so just get on and indulge yourself now. And once waiting and anticipation have gone, there is no place for hope. But Paul is never hopeless. You are not like that, he says. Your mind is not to be on earthly things. And it doesn't need to be, because although you are stuck in the middle of this self-seeking, short-term, self-indulgent, morally upside-down culture, you are actually "*citizens of heaven*" – there is something beyond this: you have a glorious future to look forward to. So get on and live like it. We are "*eagerly awaiting a Saviour*" who will come from heaven. Jesus Christ is going to return to put things right. "*All things*" will be under his control. And we – weak, vulnerable humanity – will have our "*lowly bodies*" transformed to be like his, like his "*glorious body*". In the mean time, don't get sucked back into that attitude that is fixated on earthly things. In 4:1 Paul's exhortation is to "*stand firm*" – not to stand **still** – but to resist the siren calls of a godless culture and a hope-less worldview by constantly reminding yourself that you are a citizen of heaven.

### **Questions for discussion**

1. Do you ever think of what lies in store for you after this life? How does it make you feel?
2. In what ways are the things which Paul mentions in v19 seen in our culture today? How do we get drawn into them?
3. Is it possible to live without having our minds on earthly things? Why/why not?
4. How can we best "*live up to what we have attained*"?
5. What are the things that will help us to "*stand firm*"?
6. Is there anything that has particularly struck you from this passage or from your discussion?

