

2nd S. in Lent 2/21/16
Philippians 3:17-4:1 C

OUR CITIZENSHIP IS IN HEAVEN AND FROM IT WE AWAIT A SAVIOR, THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

When you walk into my study and see the magnetic “GB” sign, you just know that it means ... Great Britain. This is memento is from my travels abroad, which included renting a car in England and crossing the Channel to drive it in France. There are differences between cars and driving in the two countries; a few small things like which side of the road you drive on, which side the driver sits in the vehicle, and just a few other things like that. So, before French customs will let you into their country with an English car, you have to have a few things on your car, one of which is a “GB” sign letting all the French people know you are a stranger driving a strange car in their land.

You don’t have to drive a rental car from England in France to know what its like to be a stranger in a strange land. In our Epistle, Paul writes, “Our citizenship is in heaven”. As we have sing, we are strangers here, heaven is our home.

We are in the world, but not of the world. Our baptism has made us a citizen of the new Jerusalem of heaven. Yet, for today, we are bound to the things of this earthly life. We need food and shelter, clothing and medicine, good weather, and good neighbors. We must pay our taxes. On this side of heaven, we have earthly obligations to which we are obligated. Yet, we are not to love the things of this world more than we love God, the giver of all gifts.

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus laments over those citizens of Jerusalem who are in the world and believe their citizenship is here, in the earthly

Jerusalem.

Our Gospel lesson took place about three months before Jesus died on Good Friday. As He journeyed to Jerusalem, some Pharisees came with those supposed words of caution, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." As well-intentioned as those words sound, the Pharisees were the sworn enemies of Jesus. They were the allies of Herod. Whatever it took, they wanted to be rid of Jesus. If that meant having Him leave for whatever reason, so be it, as long as they were just plain rid of Him. These Pharisees represent the city of Jerusalem.

Paul writes in our Epistle, "many...walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things." The citizens of Jerusalem, by their thoughts, words, and deeds, showed they were enemies of the cross. Their lives showed the unbelief which filled their hearts.

The "how often" of Jesus' lament summarizes the history of Israel. The "how often" of Christ's lament reaches back to the choosing of Abraham, the deliverance through Moses, and the entrance into the promised land under Joshua. The story of God's people is their continual rejection of God and His ways. Again and again, God called them to repentance through the prophets, and again and again, they rejected God's messengers.

Our Old Testament lesson is a good example of this. God sent the Prophet Jeremiah to proclaim His mercy, and the people responded with rejection, bitter rejection and hatred. We read in our lesson, "when Jeremiah had finished speaking all that the Lord had commanded him to speak to all the people, then the priests and the prophets and all the people laid hold of him, saying, 'You shall die!'" They did not want to hear any of

God's message, so they sought to kill the messenger to silence him.

The Savior word's "how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen brood under her wings," expressed the untold opportunity that was Jerusalem's. Though God wanted her, she did not want God. Though the Savior came to her, she rejected Him.

Yet, in spite of this, we hear from our Lord words of divine pity. The Lord weeps over Jerusalem. His heart yearns with compassion for the city that He loved. Regardless of their stubborn rejection, He still has a desire for their return. Again and again, He preached to them. Again and again, He warned them. Again and again, He prayed for them. And finally, He would die for them that they might escape the wrath to come.

Like Jeremiah, the other prophets and Christ told the people everything the LORD had commanded them to say. Because they did not preach what the itching ears of the people wanted to hear, they were rejected. As they murdered the prophets to silence their preaching, so even the Son of God was murdered to silence His preaching.

Because of her rejection, our just God could do nothing but proclaim doom upon Jerusalem. God's judgment upon their hard hearts came in the form of the Roman legions who marched into the city in the year 70 AD, and unleashed complete destruction upon the city.

"Many...walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things." It was true of the citizens of Jerusalem and it is true of us. We have been called to deny ourselves and follow Christ. Yet, we have often lived as enemies of the cross? Our god is the desires of our flesh. We glory, not in the cross of Christ, but in our shame.

We are so quick to condemn the citizens of Jerusalem, that we forget

that we, too, reject Christ by our sin. We do not fear, love, and trust in God above all things. We are quick to believe a ready lie of the devil as the Word of God. We do not gladly hear and learn God's Word. We do not love and cherish those in authority over us. We are angry with our neighbors and wish harm upon them. We use our tongues to destroy the name of our neighbor. We covet what God has entrusted to our neighbor.

But, Paul speaks the Good News of the Gospel this Sunday: "Our citizenship is in heaven". Our citizenship is in the new Jerusalem of heaven, not because of the works we have done, but only by the grace of God, who sent His only-begotten Son to pay the price of our citizenship. That price was not paid "with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed...but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect" (1 Pe 1:18,19). "Our citizenship is in heaven" because, Jesus, the Lamb of God, by His bleeding and by His dying, saved us from all the threatening perils of our sins.

In the Bible, God calls His children "Israelites." "Israelite" means "pilgrim, stranger". In the Old Testament, God had a very visible way of reminding His children that this earth was not their home. Every year, God commanded the Israelites to observe the Festival of Tabernacles, the Festival of Booths, it was also known as. The Israelites literally had to go out, cut down tree branches, make shelters -- tabernacles, booths -- from them, and then live in those shelters for seven days. God was teaching His children that they were strangers here.

Dear Saints of God, we too are pilgrims, strangers, here. By virtue of our baptism into the death and resurrection of Christ, our true home is in the Golden Jerusalem of heaven.

The living of the Christian life on this earth is the living as the citizens

of heaven God has made us in our baptisms. Our mind is to be set on heaven, eagerly awaiting Christ. But, as we live as citizens of heaven, the devil, this world, and our own flesh constantly tempt us to believe that our citizenship, our home, is here. We are daily tempted to live for the here and now, to live to satisfy the desires of our flesh. Constantly, we are tempted to have our mind on earthly things.

As we journey by faith through the valley of the shadow of death, God comes to us through the Word and with His Body and Blood to keep us in the faith He began at our Baptism. Though we may be called upon to carry the cross this day, God gives us grace and points our hearts to the new Jerusalem where true joys are to be found. As we wait for Christ's appearing, we are gathered under the Savior's protecting wings, strengthened daily in the sure knowledge that heaven is our home and that, because our Lord Jesus rose from the dead, we too shall arise to enter the heavenly Jerusalem, where "God will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes" (Rev 7:17).

"Therefore, stand firm thus in the Lord." Amen.