

1 Peter – Citizenship in the Kingdom of God

Passports are strange things – such a small book with so few pages in it and yet such a valuable thing. It's amazing the rigmarole you have to go through to get one of these if you lose it. I once lost mine before Rhona and I were to go on holiday to France and had to spend the best part of two whole days getting forms completed and having people sign a set of awful photographs taken first thing in the morning.

A British passport, or any kind of European passport for that matter, is such a valuable thing that people put their life and their health at risk to get one. For the right to live in this country or in the Republic of Ireland they smuggle themselves onto trains, hide out in airless containers, fly heavily pregnant into Dublin, place themselves at the mercy of violent and ruthless gangs and all manner of other degrading and humiliating situations for something that we, as Europeans citizens, take for granted.

But that does not mean that for us our passports are not endowed with any emotional value. People have literally killed each other in this country over whether these booklets should have five letters or two on them, whether they say Irish or UK. For the right to say that they live in the Republic of Ireland or the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland grown up men and women who you would think should know better have shot each other, blown each other up, hung each other from gallows in prisons and performed all sorts of unspeakable acts in the torture chambers of terrorists or the interrogation suites of governments.

We invest a great deal of emotion and fervour into our nationality as you can see simply by walking down any street in Northern Ireland over this month of July. Like so many dogs urinating against lampposts each part of our country is marked in red, white and blue or green, white and gold.

1 Peter presents all of us who claim the name of Christian, of whatever nationality we are, with a powerfully new perspective on this whole idea of nationality and national identity. Peter writes to those he calls “God’s elect, strangers in the world.” The Greek word translated stranger in our NIV is the word *παρεπιδήμοις*, literally refugee, resident alien as the Americans term it, a foreigner, an asylum seeker, if you will.

Now this must have struck those who first read those words as really quite odd. If you were an educated person living in one of these Roman cities then the chances were that you were not a foreigner or refugee but rather you would be a citizen of the place in which you lived or if you were a person of modest enough wealth then you might even be a citizen of the Roman Empire itself just as Saint Paul was.

In our day citizenship is something that, for the most part, people are born into, but in those days the whole idea of citizenship was much more fluid and you could simply pay the right price and become a citizen of the town or kingdom in which you lived or even of the empire itself. Some people, such as Paul derived their Roman citizenship by being born into a rich enough family, others worked long and hard to build up the money that would give them the freedom and privileges that went with being a citizen.

So to write to these people, most likely Jews and gentiles of the merchant classes many of whom would have been citizens and describe them as refugees must have sounded odd to say the least, if not even a bit insulting to some of the more posh ones. Why does Peter use this language right at the start? Well he uses these words because later on in his letter he tells his readers were their true citizenship lies.

These people are not ultimately citizens of Rome or any other city for that matter. The people he writes to are citizens of the Kingdom of heaven. They are citizens in exile, living among foreigners, even if they are living in the land were they were born and brought up. This citizenship of heaven is one that is bought at a price just like the citizenship of the Roman Empire.

Peter mixes his metaphors here talking both in terms of being born a second time into God's family and also of being bought out of slavery and adopted into a new family. Possibly he is writing to people of different social levels. The early church, unlike many of our own these days had people of every strata of society. There would be everyone from the local city's equivalent of royalty down to a common slave whose master didn't even regard him to be human.

Writing to this range of people Peter uses a range of metaphors for entering the Kingdom of God. To those familiar with the idea of being born into citizenship he says in verse 23 "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God." Thus even those who regarded themselves as being of "high birth" or coming from good families have to be born a second time to have citizenship in this Kingdom of God.

Their citizenship does not come from the perishable seed of their earthly father or mother no matter how good or powerful or rich or wise or influential they may be, rather it comes from having been born again from their heavenly father who as Peter says, “judges each man’s work impartially,” so that their former status in the Roman Empire means nothing in the Kingdom of God.

This is something that the church has always been very slow to pick up on. Down through the centuries and even in the present day in what appears to be a more egalitarian society we value more highly those people who have high status or lots of money than those who have no social status and no money. I’m sure this applies whatever the denomination, look at the social make-up of your kirk session, select vestry, leadership teams, deacons’ court or whatever and see what you find.

To those lower down the social strata who were more used to the idea of having to buy their way into citizenship Peter writes to them using the imagery of redemption. There is an interesting illustration of how this worked in Acts 22:23-29. The Apostle Paul is in front of an angry mob in Jerusalem and verse 23 starts –

As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, 24 the commander ordered Paul to be taken into the barracks. He directed that he be flogged and questioned in order to find out why the people were shouting at him like this. 25 As they stretched him out to flog him, Paul said to the centurion standing there, "Is it legal for you to flog a Roman citizen who hasn't even been found guilty?"

26 When the centurion heard this, he went to the commander and reported it. "What are you going to do?" he asked. "This man is a Roman citizen." 27 The commander went to Paul and asked, "Tell me, are you a Roman citizen?" "Yes, I am," he answered. 28 Then the commander said, "I had to pay a big price for my citizenship." "But I was born a citizen," Paul replied. 29 Those who were about to question him withdrew immediately. The commander himself was alarmed when he realised that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains.

You see how the army commander tells Paul that in order to become a Roman Citizen he had to pay a large sum of money? The price to become a citizen of Rome for someone who was of lower social standing was high but with it came the legal rights and protection that Paul has just invoked. Peter tells his readers that their citizenship in the Kingdom of God has come at a great price too. Not the gold or silver with which they might have bought Roman Citizenship but the lifeblood of Jesus Christ spent for them on their behalf by God their adopted father.

So whatever social level people were from in the Roman Empire their entry into the Kingdom of God came at a price that they could never pay. They could neither enter the kingdom of God through high birth or through donations and bribes. The only valid method of entry into the Kingdom of Heaven, into the Kingdom of God was, and still is, through the free gift of citizenship that comes from being born again into God's family and the price of that being born a second time comes from the blood of Christ.

Having been born again into the Kingdom of Heaven then we leave behind in that other world all of the social status, rank and privilege that went with it and enter into a new world order in which the first are last and the last are first. This is a kingdom where everyone who is a member of the King's family (whether or not in this kingdom of Great Britain & Northern Ireland they have any wealth at all) has an equal inheritance from their heavenly father, paid for by their brother Jesus.

So at this time of year when our country goes mad over Irishness and Britishness never forget that our true citizenship lies not in Ireland or Britain, Ulster or Eire, or in any other kingdom or country for that matter. We are subjects of the Kingdom of Heaven.

But of course in the mean time we live as foreigners here in Northern Ireland and so next Sunday Evening we are going to look at how we can fulfil Peter's command in chapter 2 to "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us."

So before we look at that next Sunday have a think about how your new status as a Citizen of Heaven affects your behaviour as a foreigner and stranger living on this island among the British and the Irish.

Let us pray...