

## **Sermons at the Anglican Church of Luxembourg**

**Theme: Stand firm in the Lord**

**Text: Philippians 3:17-4:1**

I find it very interesting to hear the language people use for their Christmas travel plans

Some say: “We are going to spend it with our family in NNN ”

Others say: “We are going home for Christmas...”

I think it says a lot about how we think about how we see our current context

Some here are ex-pats: here for a season, then moving back to their home country

Others are migrants, here for a season before moving on with work

And some others are immigrants: we have left home countries, and have come to another country to take up permanent residence

If you'd asked the Roman Christians in Philippi where they were going to spend Christmas, I wonder what they might have said?

You see, Philippi was a Roman colony. Not out in the wilds, on the edge of the Empire.

But a well-established trading centre, largely populated by ex-soldiers who, after 21 years of service had been given full Roman citizenship

If you'd have walked the streets of Philippi you would have seen people dressed the same as in Rome, speaking the same language, the same law was administered in its courts

But they didn't hanker to go home to Rome: because Rome was here, in their daily lived experience

It was like a bit of Rome had landed in current day Macedonia in Greece

So when Paul urges the church to remember that “Our citizenship is in heaven” its not that he is encouraging them to look forward to what will one day be theirs

Nor even to long that things could be different in the here and now, to remember home in a sentimental or traditionalist way

No: he is encouraging them to live here and now the ways of heaven

*“Thy Kingdom come, they will be done on earth as it is in heaven..”*

During Lent we are looking together at what it means to be a disciple of Jesus

For Paul, the Christian faith is no philosophy or concept

No, it's something rooted and lived out in the things of daily life

He starts by making the daring assertion: not do as I say, but do as I do

READ 3:17

One commentator thinks this could be also translated as “join me in imitating Christ”

Either way this isn't about just ideas: it's about the way we live life

And our passage likewise ends: “stand firm in the Lord in this way...” (4:1)

And in the verses in-between we encounter some ways that people in the Church of Philippi were turning the Christian faith into not just an idea that had nothing to do with daily life, but actually as a way of thinking that gave rise to a way of living life in a Jesus denying way

The background is probably a philosophy that we call Gnosticism – this was rooted in an understanding of the basic difference between the spiritual and the material. For the gnostic they are fundamentally opposed and can never mix as a whole

It's like classic Sunday only Christianity – spiritual over here, then get on with the material over there.

How different from the central claim of the Christian faith – the incarnation: that God becomes human, and from that the spiritual and the material are part of a whole, all under the rule of God

*Your Kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven*

Gnosticism gave rise to a disconnect between the spiritual and the material, a privatisation of faith and a denial of its impact on our public lives

At best it disempowered disciples from living the Jesus Way in God's power and left them struggling to try in only their own

At worst it gave rise to a schizophrenic faith where lifestyle could be whatever you wanted it so long as you said sorry on a Sunday

READ v18-20

The cross holds heaven and earth together

So just as daily you remember your legal citizenship is of Rome and you live that out in your 24/7 lives in Philippi, so also remember that your true citizenship is in heaven

Live that out in your 24/7 lives

One of the big problems we face today in our understanding of being a disciple of Jesus is that we take as the paradigm the calling of the first disciples: standing on the lakeside Jesus says to fishermen, Come follow me and I will make you fishers of men – they leave everything and follow Him

Likewise with Matthew the tax collector, the paradigm is of leaving all literally to follow and so the Gospel account goes on

And everyone sitting here today, unless you have left everything to become a vicar or a missionary is living the tension of a disconnect

Jesus says: leave everything and follow Him. Geoff was going to be a lawyer. He left that to become a Vicar. That what real Christians do, first-class Christians do. I haven't left everything. So where does that leave me?

The paradigm is not the leaving but faithfulness to what Jesus says to me, faithfulness and obedience to His unique vocation for my life and your life

Those accounts are of the calling of the apostles, the twelve – those whose vocation involved a leaving because at the heart of that vocation is going – that's what the word apostle means: one who is sent

The vast majority of the disciples we hear called in the Gospels didn't go but stayed and lived the vocation to be a disciple as a home-maker, a small business owner, a politician, a senior figure in the community

The paradigm of leaving can unwittingly do the same damage to whole-life discipleship as Gnosticism

I haven't done that, I can't do that, so I split up my life into the private and the public, the inner and the outer, the spiritual and the material, the Sunday and the rest of the week

No: READ v17 – those who live

READ 4:1

“This way” – it is for this way of living, faithfully living your 24/7 vocation in your 24/7 daily life that Jesus promises to empower us, what Paul calls “standing firm in the Lord...”

Our will power, our faithfulness, our wisdom, our good intentions will only take us so far – but then the complexity, busyness, demands of daily life threaten to overwhelm us and those good intentions

Just as citizenship was a reminder to these ex-soldiers, so is the image of “standing firm ...”

This is an image from battle – the inspiration and empowerment from a great commander and of standing shoulder to shoulder with your mates, your fellow soldiers in the front line

In daily life, Paul says, allow Jesus to help you to stand firm – this is part of the generous Lordship we looked at last week

How?

By expecting to find Him there alongside you, even ahead of you – after all, He did say “I am with you always...” and “Come, follow me...”

Let's challenge what one writer has called the practical atheism that sadly pervades churches – a theology of the absence rather than the presence of God in the world, including His absence in the offices you sit in, the school corridors you walk down

Why don't we start praying for His help to start recognising His presence, his enabling us to “stand firm.. in this way...”

If you don't expect to see someone or something, you probably won't be disappointed

Maybe we need to ask Jesus to start to renew our minds, our expectations as citizens of heaven to expect to see heaven breaking in, God's kingdom coming, His will being done on earth as it is in heaven

Each week we are inviting people to our home to start working together on this over a simple meal,

... learning and trying out simple and ancient practices, developed by fellow believers down the ages who were longing to recognise the presence of Jesus in their 24/7, rather than expect and then lament his absence

We eat a meal together, talk how we have got on and encourage each other to keep on expecting and looking in the week to come

And you, too, are welcome!

“So, brothers and sisters, join with me in imitating Christ, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us...”

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love, stand firm in the Lord in this way...”