

# Sermon for 18 July 2021

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My birth certificate says I was born on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of August 1972 in Cuckfield Hospital in the County of East Sussex to parents who were born in England. It is backed by all the authority and power of Fred Gilbert Brooks, the registrar who signed the certificate. Consequently, I also have a British passport which says on the front page “Her Britannic Majesty’s Secretary of State requests and requires in the name of Her Majesty all those whom it may concern to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance and to afford the bearer such assistance and protection as may be necessary.”

I am a British citizen with all the associated rights, privileges and responsibilities of British citizenship. This is quite something. Britannia may no longer boast to “rule the waves” but we still have one of the strongest currencies in the world and one of the highest standards of living. Other countries look to us as a global power and the name of Her Britannic Majesty is recognised and respected through most of the the world.

In this I share something with Paul, a Roman citizen by birth. The citizenship conferred on him by the circumstances of his birth gave him greater rights and privileges than most people in the world.

I also have a immigration permit which gave me the right to live in South Africa as of 2 July 1974. For most of my childhood, I lived in South Africa as a resident alien. Then, six months after my 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, I automatically became a South African citizen by naturalisation. So I also have a South African passport and the rights, privileges and responsibilities of South African citizenship.

My South African passport has the same wording on the front page as the British one, except it is in the name of the President of the Republic of South Africa. Sadly this name does not command as much international respect as that of Her Britannic Majesty and, if you’ve seen in the news what has been happening in South Africa this week, you might think that the rights and privileges of South African citizenship confer significantly less status than those of British citizenship.

But I still have the responsibility of South African citizenship. At the time I became a South African citizen this would have meant serving 2 years of national service in the South African Defence Force. Although, as it turned out, by the time I left university this responsibility had been removed and I never did have to join the army.

My South African citizenship is also a slightly second class form. Being a citizen by naturalisation I can lose the right to South African residence and citizenship more easily than someone who gained their citizenship by birth or descent. This too is mirrored in Paul’s experience in Acts 22 when he he faced a Roman tribune who was a citizen by naturalisation. It is clear from the text that whilst the tribune stood in a position of authority over Paul, this was undermined by Paul’s greater status as a Roman citizen by birth.

All of this gives us background for today's reading from Ephesians 2. I am going to focus on this reading. Ephesians is an amazing letter. I heartily recommend you sit down and read the whole thing at once – which is, after all, how one normally does read a letter.

Today's reading contrasts those who are Gentiles by birth with those who are citizens of the commonwealth of Israel. The letter is written to people who were Gentiles and it is talking about a change of status, summed up most succinctly in verse 19 "you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God".

This is a core message of Ephesians. Once you were... but now you are... Here are some quotes from the letter:

"You were dead through the trespasses and sins ... All of us once lived ... in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath... But God ... made us alive together with Christ".

"In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed".

"the Gentiles have become fellow-heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus".

"We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine ... we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ".

"you must no longer live as the Gentiles live ... You were taught to put away your former way of life, your old self ... and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to clothe yourselves with the new self".

"once you were darkness, but now in the Lord you are light".

And to sum it all up, Paul says in the opening verses of chapter 1:

"He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ ... In Christ we have obtained an inheritance".

We are citizens of God's new kingdom. Gentiles, who were once strangers to God's kingdom as well as Jews whose former kingdom has been dissolved may now both become citizens of this new united Kingdom of God.

And notice that we become citizens by adoption. Had I been adopted by South African parents I would have become a South African citizen by descent. This has the same status as a citizen by birth. We are not just citizens by naturalisation. We are first class citizens of God's kingdom.

We were born with one status but we are now reborn (to use the language of Jesus in John 3) with a new status. Once we were... but now we are...

We are citizens of a new kingdom, a kingdom of peace and reconciliation. We are now part of the household of God. Together we now form the new temple in which God dwells.

I would like to end now by reflecting on what it means to be a citizen of heaven. First, I think this citizenship has priority over our earthly citizenships. Luckily for me Britain and

South Africa are at peace. But if they went to war I would have to choose a side. That would be scary and a lot worse than when England competes with the Springboks in rugby – although I really do feel it then. When the chips are down, who really am I?

The same question applies to being a citizen of God's kingdom and it is clear to me that I will always choose this citizenship over any other. Most of the time I can hold together citizenship of Great Britain, South Africa and God's kingdom. But if need be I will die for God's kingdom. It will always come first.

And second, I come back to what it says in the front of my passports. God's kingdom is not restricted by the need for passports but similar words apply "The one true God, Father Son and Holy Spirit requests and requires in His Name all those whom it may concern to allow the bearer to pass freely without let or hindrance and to afford the bearer such assistance and protection as may be necessary."

As a heavenly citizen I can go anywhere and do anything that God wants me to. This might be as simple as crossing the road and having a pint at the pub. Or it might be to travel to a land where Christianity is banned as Brother Andrew did in his book "God's Smuggler". In either case I am going to a place where God already is, where he is inviting me in and where he is, ultimately, sovereign. I need not be daunted in either case. I am on the King's business in the king's realm.

So here is my question: do you think this way? Do you see yourself as someone who was born with one status but has been reborn with a new status? To what country do you owe your primary allegiance? Is there anywhere you feel you could not go if God called you there? I will leave you to ponder these questions and, where necessary, to pray about them.

Amen.