

St George's Anglican Church, Epsom

31st October 2010



Preacher: Rev George Stonehouse (Priest in Charge – St George's)

THEME: LOVE THE LORD YOUR GOD – In Community

READINGS: 2 King 2:1-6/ Acts 2:42-47/ John 17:20-23

VERSE FOR THE DAY:

"Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles." Acts 2:43

SERMON

"Today we continue in our series "Love the Lord your God" looking at how we love, worship and glorify God in different areas of our lives. Last week Jeremy focused on our relationships, and today we look at how this works out in the way we live in our community. It is not just a matter of what we say or the good works we do, but who we are that draws people to Jesus.

One of the features of the world we live in is that everything is being reduced to snapshots, video clips, sound bites and text messages. The danger we face is that we can be tempted to do the same with our relationship with God. Snapshots can sometimes be an amazingly accurate in what they capture, but they can also be horribly unflattering.

I doubt for instance, if many of you are so pleased with the snapshot photo on your passport or driver's licence that you have had them enlarged and framed and hung on the wall for all your visitors to see? My passport photo looks more like one of those photos seen on Crime-watch or Police 10/7 or whatever. The worrying thing is that border control officers seem to have no hesitation, after glancing at it, to recognize that it is a realistic picture of me a citizen of New Zealand with a legitimate passport, and not some criminal on the run.

Now imagine if someone was able to take a snapshot of your spiritual life at this present moment, what would it look like? Would it be a snapshot that you would be happy to have enlarged and put up on the screen for us all to see, or might it be more like the passport snapshot, neither posed nor air-brushed - one you are perhaps reluctant to admit is really what you are like. As a spiritual snapshot, would it show a picture of someone, to use Paul's expression from Ephesians, who is **"in Christ"**? Would it show that you are a citizen of the Kingdom of God?

I suspect that if we were to face up to such a spiritual snapshot some of us may find that is has a greater likeness to a citizen of this world than a likeness of a citizen of the kingdom of God. Now using the analogy of a passport for a moment, keeping in mind analogies can be fraught with problems, does your spiritual snapshot of this present moment fit better with a passport issued by the kingdom of this world, or with a passport issued by the kingdom of God? Too many people seem to live in the false hope that a visa issued on the basis of our good works in this world, somehow gains us entry into God's kingdom. The reality however is that only passport holders, those who have been born again into the kingdom of God, will have that privilege.

Paul, in his Letter to the Galatians declared, **"I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."** Galatians 2:20. Paul is quite certain that his identity is in Christ, and in Him alone. Do we share that same certainty? Is it what the community around us sees?

Now if we go back to our analogy and push it further, our spiritual passports should be issued for us as citizens of the kingdom of heaven, and we will have visas to live in this world. Peter declares in his first letter we are --**"aliens and strangers in the world"**-- **1 Peter 2:11** . If Peter is right, and we live accordingly, it explains why the world tries to constrain us and restrict our witness, we are seen as aliens, and treated as aliens, and in many places around the world persecuted as aliens.

Let's go another step and press the analogy of a passport even further, if we have been crucified with Christ, and He lives in us, then our hypothetical spiritual passport issued by the kingdom of heaven should have His photo on it. It is He that lives in us.

You see, we are either citizens of the kingdom of God or not, either followers of Jesus or not, either committed to serving Jesus, or not. There can be no sitting on the fence, or as one writer puts it "no living in the borderlands between the kingdom of this world and the kingdom of heaven". There are no grey areas. It's black or white. There can be no blurring of the edges. Single-minded commitment to following Jesus should be evidenced in our lives whenever and where ever that spiritual snapshot is taken. The snapshot will indicate just how much *we are loving, worshiping and glorifying* at the moment of taking, whether we are at home or at work or on the sports field or wherever.

In the reading from the 2Kings, we saw the commitment of Elisha to follow Elijah. We read, **When the LORD was about to take Elijah up to heaven in a whirlwind, Elijah and Elisha were on their way from Gilgal. Elijah said to Elisha, "Stay here; the LORD has sent me to Bethel. " But Elisha said, "As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will not leave you." So they went down to Bethel. 2 Kings 2:1-2.**

Now this happened three times. Firstly it was to Bethel, then it was to Jericho, then to the Jordan." Each time Elisha said, **"As surely as the LORD lives and as you live, I will**

not leave you." I like the way Eugene Peterson paraphrases this in the Message, Elisha said, **"Not on your life! I'm not letting you out of my sight!"**

Wouldn't it be great if the snapshot of our spiritual life captured us saying to Jesus, "I'm not letting you out of my sight!"

A quick look at Elisha's calling, shows why he was so committed to following Elijah. **1 Kings 19:19 So Elijah found Elisha ploughing with twelve yoke of oxen, and he himself was driving the twelfth pair. Elijah went up to him and threw his cloak around him. Elisha then left his oxen and ran after Elijah. "Let me kiss my father and mother good-bye," he said, "and then I will come with you." "Go back," Elijah replied. "What have I done to you?" So Elisha left him and went back. He took his yoke of oxen and slaughtered them. He burned the ploughing equipment to cook the meat and gave it to the people, and they ate. Then he set out to follow Elijah and became his attendant. 1 Kings 19:19-21**

Elisha's decisiveness is clear, he counted the cost of following Elijah, he cut his ties, burnt his plow, slaughtered his oxen and pressed on. There could be no turning back.

In Luke 9: **62 we read these words of Jesus: "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."** Luke 9:57-62 I have no doubt that Jesus had the story of Elisha in mind here.

Elisha didn't think, "If I keep my plow and oxen and put them in storage, and if following Elijah doesn't work out, or gets too tough, I can always go back to plowing. He simply ensured that there was nothing to go back to. I am not sure that there are many Elishas with that sort of attitude in this age we live in.

I wonder how many times have you and I sung the song **"I have decided to follow Jesus"** --, and what about the refrain, **"no turning back, no turning back?"** Did we really mean it? It reminds me of Elisha's words when he said, **"I'm not letting you out of my sight!"** I'm not turning back! Wouldn't it be great if others could say of us, "he or she doesn't let Jesus get out of their sight, for them there's no turning back"

Jesus' call to discipleship is a call to single-minded devotion that perseveres to the end. In chpt 16 of Matthew's Gospel we read that while Jesus and the disciples were at Caesarea Philippi, He said, **"If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Matt 16:24-26**

Such commitment is an act of worship, and a sign of our spiritual citizenship.

When speaking with Nicodemus, Jesus said, **John 3:3 "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."** Then in responding to Nicodemus's

puzzlement Jesus added **5 "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 7You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' John 3:3-7**

Being born again, being born of the Spirit is the key to being granted citizenship in the kingdom of God. To be born again we need to hand our lives to the Lordship of Jesus and to be baptized in the Holy Spirit. In fact Paul makes this clear in Ephesians 1:13 **And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, 14who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession—to the praise of his glory.**

The Spirit's presence in our lives is the sign of what Gordon Fee calls the powerful personal presence of the Living God. It is this presence that enables us to *be loving, worshipping and glorifying God* in the presence of those around us in the community we live in. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul describes the behaviours, attitudes, and characteristics of citizens of the kingdom of God who live by the Spirit. He calls them the fruit of the Spirit. He does not describe them as the fruits of the Spirit. There can be no picking and choosing here. You cannot say I'll have this one but not that one. They are the visible signs to the world around us of the Spirit dwelling within us. You know them well.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Gal 5:22-25

Does this mean we will live perfect sin-free lives? The short answer is no. We will still face temptation, but we need the empowering of the Holy Spirit to resist temptations. We have the spiritual gifts of wisdom and discernment to help us not to put ourselves in places where we can be tempted. The fruit of the spirit is a powerful testimony in a community seeking meaning and purpose in their lives.

Now let's go back to the idea of a spiritual snapshot of your life at this present moment. What would it tell about which kingdom you are a citizen of? If it is not the kingdom of heaven, then it is in your hands to do something about it. No amount of the equivalent of spiritual air-brushing or Photoshop editing will cover over the reality that others will be quick to see. We need to let those around us in the community to see more of Jesus and less of us.

We have been looking at how as individuals our citizenship in the kingdom of heaven determines how *love, worship and glorify God in the way we live in this world*, but how do we do this as the body of Christ, and what would the church look like? The passage we had read to us from Acts 2 is an amazingly succinct record of the very early New Testament church. It is Luke's snapshot of how those followers of Jesus, freshly

empowered by the Spirit, *loved, worshipped and glorified God in their community*. They were the first kingdom people working out their citizenship in the kingdom of God, and they were soon to realize that they would increasingly be seen as strangers and aliens by the world around them, but they pressed on and because of their commitment to being in the kingdom of God we are here today.

Luke writes: Acts 2:**42** They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching *they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine* and fellowship and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

43 Everyone was filled with awe, *fear came upon every soul – a holy reverential awe*, and many wonders and miraculous signs, were done by the apostles.

44 All the believers were together and had everything in common.

45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,

47 praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. **And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.**

My dream is to see a snapshot of this church be like this, and the Lord adding daily to our numbers those who are being saved – not just adding to our numbers, but adding to those who are saved. Kingdom churches, churches that live out the kingdom in everyday things, churches that are so firmly grounded in their commitment to Jesus, and empowered by the Spirit that they do not compromise the gospel but that everything they do in the community will bear testimony to God being loved, worshipped, and glorified.

I remember hearing Dr Patrick Sookhdeo, head of the Barnabas Fund saying that if you want to convert a Muslim, show him true worship of the living God. True worship gives openings for God to reveal himself.

I trust that a snapshot of this church shows that we are a kingdom church where worship is not a matter of ritual but a dynamic way of living that points to Jesus, that gives openings for God to reveal Himself to those who do not yet know Him.

Listen to what Bp. Tom Wright says about the church in Acts 2. When Jesus' followers behave like this, they sometimes find, to their surprise, that they have a new spring in their step. There is an attractiveness, an energy about life in which we stop clinging on to everything we can get and start sharing it, giving it away, celebrating God's

generosity by being generous ourselves. And that attractiveness is one of the things that draws other people in. They were praising God, says Luke, and stood in favour with the people; and day by day the Lord was adding to their number those being rescued. Of course they were, and of course He did. That's how it works! The gospel hasn't changed. God's power hasn't diminished. People still need rescuing. He asks, "What are we doing about it?"

If we get this right, then those around us in the community, at work, on the sports field – where ever - see a way of life that points to Jesus, and which is an expression of our love for God. Whenever that spiritual snapshot is taken Jesus will be at its heart. We will not let Him out of our sight even in difficult times, but we will share in His joy as he adds to our number those being saved.