

Mooroolbark Uniting Church

28th January 2018 Epiphany 4

**CITIZENSHIP** Hebrew 11:8 – 16

Lay Preacher, Lyn Greenall from Black Rock

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

As you all know, today is part of a long week-end because we recognised Australia Day with a public holiday last Friday. (controversial)

The marking of 26<sup>th</sup> January is an important date in Australia's history, and has changed over time: starting as a celebration for emancipated convicts, and evolving into what is now a celebration of Australia that reflects the nation's diverse people.

I don't know if people in this congregation are citizens of Australia or another country, but today I want you to consider the question: are you also a citizen of heaven?

Historically, it's believed that Aboriginal peoples lived for more than 60,000 years on this continent. "Mooroolbik" was the name given by local WURUNDJERI people to this area, "moorool" meaning "great water", and "bik" a place. The name "Mooroolbark" was made popular with eventual European settlement in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Other sources have thought the name represents "red earth or red bark."

From the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Europeans became interested in this land to the south, and explorers sailed from different countries.

In 1770, Captain James Cook landed at Botany Bay and claimed the eastern half of the continent as NSW for Great Britain.

Traditionally, we remember 26<sup>th</sup> January 1788, when Captain Arthur Phillip, commander of the first fleet of eleven convict ships from Great Britain, and the first Governor of NSW, arrived at Sydney Cove and raised the Union Jack to signal the beginning of the colony.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century this day was called "First Landing Day" or "Foundation Day", and by the time of Federation in 1901, the commemoration extended beyond NSW.

Most of us will remember that although we sang “God save our Gracious Queen (or King) in our youth, the National Anthem changed in 1984 to “Advance Australia Fair” as we ceased to be British subjects.

Soon afterwards, our First people and others called 26<sup>th</sup> January “Invasion Day”, recalling years of harsh treatment and wiping out of whole tribes who were the original custodians of the land.

Reconciliation is still in progress, and hopefully today we can celebrate the recognition and celebration of everyone in this nation, whatever their, race, religion or background.

Last Friday many awards were granted to people nominated for a wide range of significant contributions to the community – Seniors, Juniors, Locals, and Australia Day Honours such as Order of Australia, etc . eg?

Another important event on Australia Day is the holding of Citizenship ceremonies.

Let’s consider this morning what the word “citizenship” means.

Despite the laws for Australian Members of Parliament, and all that debacle / confusion, we can in fact be citizens of more than one place.

Q. How many people here were born in another country? Dual citizenship or more.

As we read in Hebrews earlier, the people of faith admitted that they were strangers and refugees on earth – they were citizens of heaven, not just the land where they were born or lived.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> January thousands of people in this country chose to become Australian citizens. Their pledges symbolised our unity as a nation and represented commitment to Australia and its people, the values we share and our common future. Their pledges symbolised the sense of belonging, with personal and legal dimensions.

So too, we can also be citizens of heaven, with commitment to God’s values as seen in the life of Jesus Christ.

(Show) Here I have my passport, which is a powerful document.

It certifies that I'm an Australian citizen, and carries authority for me to travel to foreign countries, with our Government giving a certain amount of protection if required in other places; then it guarantees a safe re-entrance.

When travelling, very important not to lose your passport!

Countries all over the world provide passports, except for people like the unfortunate persecuted Rohingya people who are an ethnic Muslim minority in the Buddhist-majority Myanmar. Tragically, they have been denied citizenship, and are therefore stateless with no protection.

But most of *us* can obtain a passport without too much trouble.

An interesting feature of a passport is that it implies allegiance to that country.

So my grandson Anthony, who was born in Japan to a Japanese father and Australian mother, and now lives in Australia, has two passports.

I sometimes wonder if he feels more affinity to Japan or Australia. In addition to being a citizen of Japan and Australia, he has been baptized and is also a citizen of heaven, he knows where he's going.

If we are citizens of heaven, we have allegiance to God, to the Kingdom of Heaven. where we can begin living now, while looking ahead to the eternal Kingdom.

Wherever we live today, whatever side of the ocean, on whatever continent, it's a house or building, not our eternal home. Because Jesus died on the cross for us, Christians know where we are headed, and because of the cross, we are guaranteed citizenship. We can have full confidence and deep comfort that, because of JC, God has prepared a place for us.

In the Apostle Paul's letter to the Church at Philippi, he reminded them that they were citizens of heaven, eagerly awaiting their Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, to come from heaven. Paul himself was also a Roman citizen, which gave him legal rights to be tried in Rome.

In his letter to the Colossians, Paul said " God rescued us from the power of darkness and brought us safe into the Kingdom of his dear Son, by whom we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven."

And as we heard in the letter to the Hebrews, the faithful acknowledged that they were foreigners and refugees on earth. Other translations have called them strangers, or exiles, or aliens.

This image is portrayed vividly in one of the most famous religious allegories in the English language, which has been translated into many other languages.

I'm referring to "Pilgrim's Progress", full name being "The Pilgrim's progress from this world to that which is to come."

Written by Puritan Minister John Bunyan in 1678, the story is about a man called Christian, who started with a bundle of sins on his back, travelling to the celestial city over the Hill of Difficulty, through Vanity Fair, and other places with various challenges.

When I was Chaplain at Blackburn High School, I used to read a children's version to year 7 students as a serial story, and I quote a couple of extracts.

The first is when Pilgrim reached the cross, and his bundle of sins fell off his back.

It reads:"The angels took off his ragged clothes and put a new robe on him, and they made a mark on his forehead and gave him a book with a seal on it. "Show this book when you come to the Celestial City" they said. "It is your passport."

And later, after he crossed the deep river, it says "And so at last Christian and Hopeful entered the Golden Gates and as they passed through, a great change came over them. Their old worn garments became robes which shone like gold.

As they set foot on the shining streets and all the bells of the Heavenly City rang again for joy, they heard a voice say "ENTER THOU INTO THE JOY OF THE LORD."

You may recognise these images in many of our old hymns.

Today, if you were a citizen of the UK (United Kingdom = England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), your Head of State would be Queen Elizabeth the 2<sup>nd</sup>.

If you were a citizen of the Kingdom of Tonga, in the South Pacific, your Head of State would be King Taufu'ahau 6<sup>th</sup>. I mention this because it is a place we have visited often, most impressed at homage paid by Tongans in the past to Queen Salote 111, and now to her grandson, the current reigning king.

If we belong to the Kingdom of Heaven, our Head of State is God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

When we are born again by faith in Jesus Christ, we are born into the Kingdom of Heaven.

In John's Gospel we read of the Pharisee Nicodemus who went to Jesus one night and was told that unless he was born again of water and the Spirit, he could not enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Water symbolises cleansing, and the Spirit symbolises power. To be born again is to undergo such a radical change that it is like a new birth; something happening to the soul, but coming from the grace and power of God, not a human achievement. It is through faith in JC that we are reborn; it is when he enters into possession of our hearts and lives, that the change comes.

This rebirth or re-creation is mentioned many times in the New Testament. The change comes when we love Jesus and allow him into our hearts – as we considered with the famous painting “The light of the World. (SHOW.) Then we become children of God, and citizens of the Kingdom.

Some theologians interpret The Kingdom of Heaven, or the Kingdom of God as your Christian lifestyle, / or world evangelism, / or the world to come. But I think if we consider the Gospels, we see that it's not only a future promise, God's Kingdom is also a present reality.

Mark and Luke refer to The Kingdom of *God*, and Matthew, writing for the Jews, talks of the same thing as Kingdom of *Heaven*. Over and over again, he gives us parables of Jesus that begin by saying: “The Kingdom of Heaven is like...”and gives us another short story or illustration, showing us how to live our daily lives.

As he looked around at those early listeners in Palestine, Jesus told them of the Sower and his seed, of weeds, of a mustard seed, of yeast, of treasure in a field, the pearl of great price, all parables with a meaning about living in his Kingdom in the present.

Though trials and worries come our way, we need to keep our eyes on the goal. Through faith we enter the Kingdom of Heaven, and through faithfulness we stay in the Kingdom, bearing fruit, anticipating life after death, eventually enjoying the Kingdom which will be established on earth at Christ's return. Christians are already considered as citizens in the Kingdom of Heaven.

Let me close by reminding you of words we say every time we repeat the Lord's

Prayer. "Your Kingdom come,

Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

Let's pray this together....."Our Father who art in Heaven,

Hallowed be your name.

Your Kingdom come,

Your will be done on earth as it is in Heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread,

Forgive us our sins

As we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us in the time of trial

And deliver us from evil;

For the Kingdom, the power and the glory are yours

Now and forever.

Amen