

Acts 22:21-29
Feilding Baptist
30.8.26

Call to Worship

Welcome to worship with Feilding Baptist Church!

It's good to be here, good to have you here. We begin with four verses from Titus chapter three. They say so much about our God. See what stands out for you?

Titus 3:4-7 (NLT)

4 But—

When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love, 5 he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He washed away our sins, giving us a new birth and new life through the Holy Spirit.[a] 6 He generously poured out the Spirit upon us through Jesus Christ our Savior. 7 Because of his grace he made us right in his sight and gave us confidence that we will inherit eternal life.

Let's take a moment to pause and reflect on these words.

Almighty God, we come here this morning, not because of us, but because of You. And these verses give reason for our thankfulness, and our worship; Your kindness and love, Your saving grace, Your mercy, the freshness of new life that You offer us through the Holy Spirit. And we have the Spirit because of Jesus, Jesus who lived, who died, who lives again, King over all. Thank you for Your power and might, for Your plan through to eternity. Thank you for involving us in this. Please bless this time this morning, please bless us as we worship, and as we consider and think. Holy Spirit, please guide our hearts and minds. Amen.

Message - The Grace of Citizenship

The grace of citizenship is offered to all.

Mount Pleasant Baptist Church, known as Mounties, is a large Baptist Church, in Perth. (It is part of the Western Australia Baptist Union). It has a wonderful new curved auditorium that I reckon would seat 600 people. The rows were tiered down to the stage, a stage that was at least as big as our entire auditorium! The worship team consisted of ten people. There were men, women, people of different ages, different ethnic backgrounds, and while you would never know, from how they dressed, it appeared that they also were from different income levels.

Whether intentional or not, this gives a picture of, what?

To my eye, this did suggest that this was a community where all could belong, all could fit in, and take part. Is that in line with the Bible? Is this level of openness and inclusion what the Bible, what Jesus would support?

Well, Genesis 9:1, God speaks to Noah and his sons, saying to them to be fruitful and increase in number, and fill the earth. And for a while they did, until two chapters later we read that they stopped from filling the earth, and gathered, and built a tower and a city (Genesis 11:4). The tower of Babel.

The very next chapter God is much more specific, saying to Abraham and his descendants, that they were to be a blessing to the whole earth (Genesis 12:3). This trend of being a blessing continues, for example, and much more pointed when we get to Jonah, where the prophet Jonah is sent to the people of Assyria, and their capital Nineveh. These people were Gentiles - they were not of Jewish descent, or part of Israel.

Jesus showed, as we get to the New Testament, that this Israel Gentile barrier was to be torn down. For example, Jesus listened and ministered to a Canaanite woman (Matthew 15:21-28), a woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon, and restored her daughter. Jesus went across the water to people who farmed pigs, and restored people there (Matthew 8:28-34).

After Jesus, Peter is challenged in a dream and invited to include in his ministry the people outside of Israel (Acts 10:9-16). And Paul went on three missionary journeys to Gentile areas, before being taken to Rome. And we're glad of all this, because most of us are Gentiles. I'm not sure if anyone here identifies as Jewish? But the point is, we humans must continually challenge ourselves about keeping an open mind, and open door to those who, in our world, are Gentiles. We have to appreciate difference, especially cultural difference. Not everyone is supposed to be like us.

Which brings us to Acts 22. It is at the end of Paul's third journey, as he returns home to Jerusalem. And if you remember, well, if you remember you are remarkable, because we've been working our way through Acts... would you believe it was the 8th of June last year when we paused this series?!

Paul has not been forgotten by the Jewish leaders, who in scenes very like the crucifixion of Jesus, rouse the crowd, resulting in Paul being arrested by the Romans. He takes the commander by surprise by speaking to him in Greek (21:37), before clarifying who he isn't. He is not that Egyptian that they all knew about, and hope he is, but a Jew from Tarsus (21:39), a citizen he says, of no ordinary city.

Paul is surprisingly granted permission to speak to the crowd, which he does, in not Greek, but their language of Aramaic (21:40). And then he gives his testimony. Jesus in blinding light came to him at a time when he was inflicting huge suffering on the followers of Jesus. Despite this, God's remarkable grace was poured out on Paul, with Jesus saying to him, as Paul recounts, in 22:21, 'Go, I will send you away to the Gentiles.' Paul retells this to the crowd, and this is what happens next. Let's read;

Acts 22:21-29 (NIV - UK)

21 'Then the Lord said to me, "Go; I will send you far away to the Gentiles."'

Paul the Roman citizen

22 The crowd listened to Paul until he said this. Then they raised their voices and shouted, 'Rid the earth of him! He's not fit to live!' [or as The Message puts it, they shout "Kill him! He's an insect! Stomp on him!")]

23 As they were shouting and throwing off their cloaks and flinging dust into the air, 24 the commander ordered that Paul be taken into the barracks. He directed that he be flogged and interrogated 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 lot of money for my citizenship.'

'But I was born a citizen,' Paul replied.

29 Those who were about to interrogate him withdrew immediately. The commander himself was alarmed when he realised that he had put Paul, a Roman citizen, in chains.

May God bless these words to our hearts and minds.

Okay, three things. But firstly, what was the issue?! Why the fuss? Why is it such a big deal that the Gentiles hear about Jesus? Does anyone know? It was simply that the Gentiles were becoming followers of Jesus without first becoming Jews. (In the New Testament, Gentiles were anyone who was not of Jewish descent or birth. In Jesus' day, this included Romans, Greeks, Syrians, and all other non-Jewish ethnic groups.) Here's where the citizenship makes sense. The Jewish understanding was, that people had to first become Jewish. The Bible never says that. Jesus never says that. And the Holy Spirit doesn't take that line either. Our citizenship isn't in ethnic division. Our citizenship is in God, in the Kingdom of God. Or citizens of heaven that we read in Philippians 3:20. The problem therefore, is by making salvation directly open to the Gentiles, to us, makes us equal, to Jews (Stott, 348). And for this, they wanted Paul dead.

Now, the opposition had killed Jesus. They had killed Stephen. Now they want to kill Paul. When is this killing going to end? How is it okay to solve problems by killing people? Where is the regard for life, for the sanctity of life? And why is there no effort made to sort it out the problem in other ways? It just seems lazy to seek death.

I wonder what the parallel is today? What problems do we try and solve with a sledgehammer, instead of taking time, and talking things through? Maybe it's the election? Seeking people dead is not okay.

So that's the first thing. If God values lives, so should we. Even if it is inconvenient. It is so sad that the crowd couldn't have listened a bit more, and heard about what God had been doing in the Gentile areas. For Paul's testimony go better and better. It was remarkable!

The second thing is the response of the commander. Look, he doesn't get everything right. He mistakes Paul for an Egyptian terrorist. And he assumes Paul is only Jewish. But, for all that, he welcomes, that's my take on it, welcomes Paul into the barracks. Yes, he was going to flog him, but there is something about the invite into the barracks, where Paul was not welcome in the very place he should be been, the temple. He didn't get everything right, but he was still welcoming. That's the picture I see here. He welcomes a guy he thought was Jewish. Before he knew Paul was a Roman citizen. This is so the opposite attitude of the crowd.

I wonder if the action of the commander are a message to someone who is waiting for all the ducks to line up, before - something? Don't assume. Be bold. Trust God.

What else? Paul spoke to the commander earlier in Greek. Then he spoke to the crowd in Aramaic. It is highly likely that when Paul is stretched out, before he's about to be flogged, when he speaks to the centurion, that he speaks in Latin. What a way to grab the attention of these people!

And it is a good job he did. For the flogging was not just the cane. This was such a brutal method of torture that most died from it, and those who didn't die, were crippled for life.

Paul reveals his Roman citizenship, after revealing his Jewish citizenship. Dual citizenship. But as I just said, he had triple citizenship, being a citizen in the Kingdom of God. These earthly citizenships can be granted by birth, and by finance, ha, let's be clear on this one. People could not officially buy their way into Roman citizenship. Only unofficially with a bribe of a corrupt official could you buy your way in.

Our citizenship in God's Kingdom is by grace, undeserved favour. And this is what I believe God through Luke is getting at here. Consider our citizenship. Consider how we become part of this Kingdom. Consider the expectations of citizenship. Consider the benefits of citizenship.

As I've said in the newsletter, being an Australian citizen has benefits. You can't be a 501. You can vote. You can get a passport. What about being a citizen in the Kingdom of God. What does this privilege us with? Can you think of ten things?

So Paul announces his Roman citizenship, perfectly timed, most likely in Latin, and the result is, as he has outranked the commander by being born Roman, he's untied and heads off for a cuppa with the boys! He's one of them after all! No! That's exactly what we think happens, but look v30, Paul is not freed! Hang on! This isn't how it was meant to work out? What is the point, what is the value of this Roman citizenship?

This is our reality too. We're dual citizens, of the world, and of the Kingdom of God. But just because we are citizens of God's Kingdom, doesn't mean we are free. In a sense we are. But we still have the burdens of sin and death, and sickness, to contend with. But we look forward to a time when our citizenship will give us access to the restored earth, in our resurrected bodies, when we can live totally free of darkness and all its guises.

There are privileges that come with citizenship, but there are also expectations. Allegiance. How we are to live Paul talks about in many of his letters. So, yes, let's revel in the privileges, without neglecting the responsibilities, loving the unlovely, sharing the grace that has been given us, showing mercy, being hospitable... The list goes on.

Let's remember that the grace of citizenship is offered to all.