

Sermon Transcript 2-7-23 (SC)

Title: Engage!

Passage: 1 Peter 2:11-17

Every Christian has dual citizenship. Did you know that? Every Christian is a dual citizen. Perhaps not in a political sense, granted, but in a spiritual sense. We are citizens of the Kingdom of God, *and* we are citizens of the earthly countries and cultures in which we live. So, every Christian is caught up in the tension, the tension between the Kingdom of God where we *belong*, and the earthly contexts we have come to call home. And in our Bible reading today, the Apostle Peter explores what it means for us to live out our citizenship in heaven, here and now, within the cultures we find ourselves. Peter explores what it means to be “strangers and exiles”, living for God within the structures of our secular society. But before we explore this for ourselves, let’s recap:

In his first letter, Peter was writing to several church communities going through a difficult time. They found that the culture around them was changing, it was becoming more hostile toward their faith. In the face of that escalating persecution, Peter wrote to encourage them.

And Peter’s message of encouragement begins with a word about the past, the present, and the future.

- God has done great things for you in the *past* – he has redeemed you through his Son.
- God calls you toward a glorious and hope-filled *future*.
- So, in the challenges you face, God calls you to be holy in the *present*.

Last week we thought about what the call to holiness means for the church. The Apostle Peter called us “living stones.” And unlike every other temple in the ancient world, Peter said we are being built into a spiritual house *without* borders or boundaries. You see, the Church Universal is not built around a place but around a person. The Church Universal is not built over some site, but is founded upon a saviour.

But there’s more good news, “you are not *just* part of the fabric!” says Peter, but you are also called to be a priestly people. As living stones, you *are* the church. As a priestly people we are called to “declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.” (1 Peter 2:9) We are the Church, and we are witnesses.

So, what does that “witness” look like within the secular structures that order our common life? What does it mean to be a witness in the ways we relate to the power structures that

govern civil life? To return to our opening point about dual citizenship, what does it mean to live, here and now, for the Kingdom of God in the earthly contexts and cultures we find ourselves?

And from our reading today, I want to make these three points about being a witness within the secular structures of our society.

Be distinct, but not detached; Engage, in order to encourage; Don't confuse liberty for licence.

Let's turn to the Word. Here I am reading verse 11 – 12:

Dear friends, I urge you, as foreigners and exiles, to abstain from sinful desires, which wage war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us.

I. Be distinct, but not detached.

As citizens of heaven here on earth, there *should be* something distinctive about our behaviour. People should be able to sense a difference through our conduct. But as Paul was sharing with us two few weeks ago, the call to be distinct doesn't mean we all have to go and join a monastic community. After all, we are not called to live in isolation from the world, but rather, in relation to the world. So, in our conduct at home, at school, at work, in our places of leisure, we should be distinctive but not detached. So when Peter talks about the sinful desires that wage war against your soul:

Don't pursue wealth for wealth's sake but look instead to become a generous steward.

Don't pursue power for power's sake but look to take on responsibility, for the good of your neighbour.

Don't pursue a plastic view of relationships, but look to honour God with your faithfulness.

Be distinct from the world, but not detached or disengaged from it. Let's continue reading:

Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human authority: whether to the emperor, as the supreme authority, or to governors, who are sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to commend those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish people.

II. Engage in order to Encourage.

Because of our inherent, and not altogether unwarranted, suspicion of institutions these days, this verse sounds alarming to our contemporary ears. So let me clarify what it *doesn't* mean: This verse doesn't mean, "enslave yourselves unthinkingly and uncritically to corrupt or oppressive regimes." Instead, it means, "wilfully work alongside those structures that

give shape and order to our common life, as much as you can, in all good Christian conscience.” The message from Peter is engage with the social structures in which you live. The message from Peter is that citizens of the Kingdom of God genuinely care about their dual citizenship in the cultures and contexts in which they live. So, invest in the communities in which you live. Write to your MP. Call your local counsellor. Encourage the police. Pick up the litter on your streets. Challenge the friend who has nothing positive to say about the political life of our nation. Engage, in order that you might encourage others to think: “do you know, that Christian genuinely cares about our community. That Christian genuinely cares about people.” Citizens of the Kingdom care deeply about their dual citizenship here on earth. Engage, in order to encourage. And now finally a point from verses 16 – 17.

Live as free people, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as God’s slaves. Show proper respect to everyone, love the family of believers, fear God, honour the emperor.

Here is my final point about being a witness within the secular structures of our society.

III. Don’t confuse liberty for licence

There is something extraordinarily freeing about the Christian life. There is a sense of perspective about it that is liberating. We *don’t* have to weigh ourselves against the same measures of success that our culture imposes. We *don’t* attach the same ultimate value to these things. There is something freeing knowing that our citizenship in the Kingdom of God is not based on our personal performance, but rather is freely given to us through faith in Jesus Christ. There is great liberty in knowing that God’s love is offered to us for free. But that does not mean that God’s love is cheap. And here, we must remember there is a difference between liberty and licence. You have been freed from sin, so serve God, and not yourself. You have been freed from the metrics of success that this world imposes, so use that freedom to serve God, and not your ego.

So then, as we prepare ourselves to go into the coming week, how can I testify to my citizenship in the Kingdom within the secular structures of our society?

- i. **Be distinct but not disengaged**
- ii. **Engage in order to encourage**
- iii. **Don’t confuse liberty with licence**