

Where do you belong?

Can you please turn to the people beside you and answer the following question: “where are you from?”

What did people come up with? How many of you initially said you were from Riccarton or Kilmarnock? or somewhere nearby? How about another town or city? How many said Scotland? Whose first reaction was “Europe” or “The World?”

How many of you said something like “Well originally I’m from... but now I live in...”

You see where we’re from isn’t always where we were born. Where we say we’re from is often place where we feel part of a community – its somewhere that we feel that we belong.

This is a true story about a guy that we’ll call Steve. Steve’s mum travelled to the UK from the Caribbean as a baby when it was still legal for a child to travel on their parent’s passport. She grew up here and had three children of whom Steve was the youngest.

When Steve was in his twenties he decided to apply for a passport to go away on holiday with some friends. He filled in the forms, had some photos taken and he attached his birth certificate to the application and sent it off. A few weeks passed before Steve received an unexpected letter in the post. The letter stated that Steve’s application had been declined due to the fact that he wasn’t a British Citizen.

Steve’s situation was extremely complicated and he spent two years trying to argue his case – in the end unsuccessfully. Steve was told that he didn’t belong. He wasn’t a citizen and if he wanted to live here he would have to take a test to prove his Britishness but even that didn’t work out because he needed to show ID from a “home country” that he had never even visited.

For Steve that must have been a confusing time – he wanted to belong, he wanted to be a citizen but there was nothing he could do to make it happen. He was stuck.

Reading: Ephesians 2:11-22 (we used The Message translation)

¹¹⁻¹³ But don’t take any of this for granted. It was only yesterday that you outsiders to God’s ways had no idea of any of this, didn’t know the first thing about the way God works, hadn’t the faintest idea of Christ. You knew nothing of that rich history of God’s covenants and promises in Israel, hadn’t a clue about what God was doing in the world at large. Now because of Christ—dying that death, shedding that blood—you who were once out of it altogether are in on everything.

¹⁴⁻¹⁵ The Messiah has made things up between us so that we’re now together on this, both non-Jewish outsiders and Jewish insiders. He tore down the wall we used to keep each other at a distance. He repealed the law code that had become so clogged with fine print and footnotes that it hindered more than it helped. Then he started over. Instead of continuing with two groups of people separated by centuries of animosity and suspicion, he created a new kind of

human being, a fresh start for everybody.

¹⁶⁻¹⁸ Christ brought us together through his death on the cross. The Cross got us to embrace, and that was the end of the hostility. Christ came and preached peace to you outsiders and peace to us insiders. He treated us as equals, and so made us equals. Through him we both share the same Spirit and have equal access to the Father.

¹⁹⁻²² That's plain enough, isn't it? You're no longer wandering exiles. This kingdom of faith is now your home country. You're no longer strangers or outsiders. You *belong* here, with as much right to the name Christian as anyone. God is building a home. He's using us all—irrespective of how we got here—in what he is building. He used the apostles and prophets for the foundation. Now he's using you, fitting you in brick by brick, stone by stone, with Christ Jesus as the cornerstone that holds all the parts together. We see it taking shape day after day—a holy temple built by God, all of us built into it, a temple in which God is quite at home.

The people that Paul was writing this letter to knew what it meant to be outsiders, not outside a physical country or area, but outside of God's kingdom. They didn't share any history with the early Christians, the promises from God that Christians read in the Old Testament didn't apply to them and there was nothing that they could do to change the situation – like Steve they were stuck. In fact, the same is true of us. At some point all of us were outsiders – not part of God's kingdom, unable to get in, unable to do anything to change that situation on our own.

Just at the point when Steve had all but given up he was introduced to Ian. Ian said he thought that he could help Steve. He worked for the government and knew the law on immigration inside out and so they met up and within just a few days Steve had a piece of paper certifying that he was now, officially, a British citizen – he belonged at last!

There was nothing that Steve could have done himself to fix the situation – he needed outside help from someone who had the knowledge and the authority to make a difference. Paul says that we needed the same. For the Gentile and for us it was only the death and resurrection of Jesus that could turn us from outsiders to insiders, from wanderers to citizens with a new home country and it is the same for us. There is nothing that we can do on our own to make ourselves a part of God's kingdom. We can't earn it or buy it, it is a freely given gift from Jesus, the only one who could make a way for us.

It's hard for me to imagine how life changing that certificate was for Steve or for many of the thousands of people across the world who arrive in a new country looking for somewhere to belong, but it isn't something to be taken for granted and that's what Paul is trying to get across.

We've been given this amazing opportunity to belong, to be a part of something that God is building and it isn't something that we should take lightly – If you haven't already then can I encourage you to grab it with both hands. If you're already belong in God's kingdom then hear what Paul is saying – Don't take any of this for granted!