13 May 2012
The Fifth Sunday after Easter
Choral Evensong
Song of Solomon 4 v. 16– 5 v. 2, 8 vv. 6–7
Philippians 3 vv. 13b–end

O Lord, open our lips – In sure and certain hope

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For our conversation [citizenship] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things to himself

As you heard earlier, the next chapter of my life has just begun, with a move from St. Mellitus College in London and Essex to serve as Principal of St. John's College in Bramcote, an outlying suburb of Nottingham. The transition has been exciting, but also revealing - not just in terms of contrasts and similarities between the models of ministerial formation offered in each place, but also in terms of social and cultural dynamics. Just a few weeks ago we were living in Bow, a key part of the deprived East London Borough of Tower Hamlets. Now we live amidst the green fields and gardens, the trees and hedges, of the St John's campus. Some of the difference between the two environments came home to me when I notified our home and car insurance firms of our change of address, and was told that the premiums would be cut by a quarter.

There are other differences, too. St Mellitus is a non-residential college operating on multiple sites from Shadwell in the East End to Kensington in the West, from Chelmsford to Hoddesdon in Hertfordshire. Commuting – often by tube across London – was a daily feature of my life and work. Now the 'commute' to my office is a one minute walk from my front door to the main St John's College building. Oh, and parking is a comparative breeze compared to the obsessive checking of yellow lines and restriction notices that is the lot of all London drivers.

Put this way, I suppose my new life might, for many people, seem more amenable, more salubrious - even more 'heavenly' - than my old one. In London itself, among London folk in London churches, I never ceased to be struck by the preponderance of posters and PowerPoint slides depicting life in Christ, or life in the Spirit, through images drawn from well beyond the likes of Bow and Tower Hamlets – images of mountains, open fields and cool rushing streams. No doubt these images *are* found in Scripture when Scripture presents life in all its fullness, the life to which Jesus calls us, the eternal life of heaven. But true Christian hope - the 'sure and certain hope' of the funeral liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer - is not hope for a purely 'rural' or 'suburban' idyll. As our New Testament reading from Philippians 3 makes clear, it is hope for a city, or more specifically for a transformed citizenship. Verse 20 in the New Revised Standard Version puts it like this:

But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from here that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

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In the Authorised Version, whose 400th anniversary last year so complements this year's 350th Anniversary of the *Book of Common Prayer*, Paul's image of Christian citizenship can easily be lost on the modern reader. The word used by the AV is 'conversation', and that seems a long way removed from city-dwelling. Yet understanding the Greek term in the original text can help us close the gap. The word Paul uses is *politeuma,* from which we get 'politics', 'body politic', and so on. In some other translations it is rendered 'commonwealth', and the underlying sense is of the to and fro, the interaction and exchange, that characterize civic life. Just as politics in our own constitution is related vitally to Parliament, and just as Parliament is quite literally a forum for discourse and debate – of 'parley' – so the translators of the AV were trying to capture something of the co-operation and collaboration – or dare one say it the coalition - that might from time to time be required to ensure what Jeremiah called 'the welfare of the city', or what Catholic theologians and others have since termed 'the common good.'

But even without these etymological details the basic point is clear: Christian hope for the future is not hope for individualized escape, for separation from the world. Wherever Christians live - in urban, suburban or rural settings - they can never be disconnected from or indifferent to those issues of governance and economics, of poverty and alienation, that find their most intense and concentrated expression in the city.

As St. Paul wrote this letter – most likely from prison in Rome – he was acutely aware of how seriously Philippi took itself as a city. Re-founded by Philip II of Macedon in the mid-fourth century BC, it had grown rich on mineral wealth, and on its strategic location as a major East-West trading route. In 167 it had come under Roman rule and Octavian has granted it the privileged status of a *colonia.* This meant its inhabitants would have been able to claim Roman citizenship, and thereby enjoy rights denied to many others in the Empire. Indeed, as a Roman citizen himself, Paul had been granted release from jail in Philippi after he had confronted a fortune-teller there – an episode recounted in Acts chapter 16.

So the apostle understood the concept of citizenship very well, and as he writes to the citizenship-conscious Philippians here, he stresses that civic duty and social responsibility are in continuity with the hope of heaven, not in separation from them. At the beginning of the letter he has prayed that the Philippians might 'be able to discern what is best', that they might be 'pure and blameless until the Day of Christ' (1:10). And although he later speaks of being torn between 'departing to be with Christ' and remaining in the body (1:23), there can be little doubt that the ultimate heavenly destiny of the disciple should have this-worldly consequences – that it should bear fruit here and now. Indeed, in verse 20 of our reading from Chapter 3 Paul offers a glimpse of Christ the coming king – the Lord who will return to complete the work of his church *on earth*, who will rule and reign in the earthly Philippi and the earthly Jerusalem before joining earth with heaven and establishing a renewed and glorious city at the centre of a redeemed cosmos.

St John's College may be located outside the urban heart of Nottingham, but over the past few years it has sought to bear out this Pauline vision of Christian citizenship in the Malt Cross project. Malt Cross began some years ago when churches across the city came together in mutual concern for the 100,000 or so people who flock to Nottingham every weekend to participate in the night-time economy. Now, in a flourishing network of street pastors, non-alcoholic bars, temporary accommodation and coffee shops, Malt Cross brings the heavenly citizenship of its Christian staff and volunteers 'down to earth', and offers a foretaste of the coming kingdom to those who make use of its many different ministries.

A similar witness is borne by Nottingham Citizens, part of a broader UK network of community organizers that involves many Christians and churches from a variety of denominations. With its particular focus on the poor and the dispossessed, Nottingham Citizens recently persuaded the UK Border Agency to provide transport to the many refugees in the city who previously had to walk every week to their nearest Reporting Centre in Loughborough.

These and other such works of justice and mercy join earth to heaven and heaven to earth – they show here and now what it means for us to be 'citizens' in the fullest sense. In the process, they confound those who would corrupt and despoil the city – those whom Paul here calls 'enemies of the cross of Christ.' That phrase reminds us that Christ himself rode triumphantly into a corrupt city, only to be rejected by it and executed outside its walls. Yet on the third day he was raised from death and became the first fruit of our resurrection to glory – our eternal citizenship in heaven. That is the basis for the 'sure and certain' hope declared by the *Book of Common Prayer* at the Burial of the Dead, but it is also the reason why we must hope, and work, for the welfare of the cities in our midst. And as that old AV term 'conversation' reminds us, we are most powerfully citizens in this sense when we are citizens *together*…

As an Anglican, I cherish the lucidity and fluency of the BCP, its theological richness and depth. But prior to joining the Church of England I was a minister in the United Reformed Church – a union of Congregationalists, Presbyterians and Churches of Christ. In that context '1662' had a rather different connotation compared to that which it usually bears in Anglicanism: it was the year when the forebears of the URC were ejected from the national church for failing to conform to the re-imposed Prayer Book. Yet earlier *this* year, at Westminster Abbey, leaders, members and parishioners of each denomination gathered for service of reconciliation, in which they pledged themselves afresh to shared witness and service, to renewed ecumenical effort, and to mutual Christian citizenship.

The 'sure and certain' hope of the gospel is, then, hope for a future that begins today. Our 'heavenly citizenship' is to be worked out together in our cities and communities now, even as it reminds us that a more perfect city awaits:

For our conversation [our citizenship] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ: Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things to himself.

Amen.