

Line 1

It is a long reading this morning and so I've made an executive decision to read only chapter 2 of Revelation, otherwise we could be here for quite a while.

[Reading Revelation 2:1-29] Amen.

Let's pray.

Lord as we come to look into your word, will you teach us, will you challenge us, will you help us to have those ears that hear what it is that you were saying. We give this time now into your hands, thank you Lord, amen.

I discovered that there's a website which records the experience of secret worshippers – these are people who would visit your church, and you just think they're an ordinary visitor but, actually, secretly they're checking you out. What's your worship like, what's your teaching like, do you serve decent coffee, what are your priorities. And then they write this up on the website. I'm not sure that's a fair way of judging a church, but what they would write would be quite interesting, wouldn't it? I mean it would be curious what they would write about Woodside, you might even think...what would you write? Good points and bad points?

Now, in chapter 2, and can I encourage you to go home and read chapter 3 as well, we've got seven letters which are addressed to churches in places which now are in modern Turkey. These are places that would have heard the good news of Jesus, probably through Paul's missionary travels around 50-60 AD. Small churches that are under pressure. They are under pressure from the pagans in their midst who would like them to compromise some of their beliefs. They're under pressure because they're part of the Roman Empire, and there is persecution, serious persecution, happening. They're under pressure from Orthodox Jews who don't like the fact that these people are sort of part of Judaism but they're not part of Judaism and they're talking about Jesus. So there's a lot of pressure happening here.

Now the letters we're reading here are not written by some secret worshipper, they are coming from the heart of the Lord Jesus as he reveals them in his vision to John. If you read chapter 1 of Revelation, John has this vision of the risen Jesus. And again if you're not familiar with that passage when we go home and read that because some of the bits we'll see in the letters refer to that vision in chapter 1. I think there is so much here that we need to learn.

There's a pattern you find in these letters: not every church gets everything in this pattern, but most of the letters start with something about the character of Christ which is linked to things you find in chapter 1, and so the letter might begin, you know, "From the one who holds the seven stars..." or "The one whose eyes are like blazing fire..." Then you get a commendation. Sadly there's one church that doesn't get a commendation. Commendation's things like, you know, "I know your hard work", "I know your deeds". Then in most of the letters, not all of them, there is a complaint, you know: you're lukewarm, you tolerate false teachers, you're not this, you're not that. You then get a correction, a sort of "You need to repent", "You need to wake up", "You need to do the things you did at first or there will be consequences". And then there's the conclusion. Often the conclusion is "Whoever has ears let them hear what the spirit is saying to the churches."

Now I made an attempt to try and summarise all of this, and I know the writing's quite small (I'll sort it out) but you get the sense so that even if you can't read the writing and you just see the gaps: for Laodicea, nothing in the good column; Smyrna and Philadelphia, nothing in the bad column. All of them, I've called it "The Good, the Bad and the Remedy". For all of them, there is some suggestions of things they should be doing [slide from presentation]:

CHURCH	GOOD	BAD	REMEDY
EPHESUS 2:1-7	Hard work, perseverance Rejecting dodgy teaching	Forsaken first love	Return to first love
SMYRNA 2:8-11	Standing firm despite suffering and poverty		Stay faithful
PERGAMUM 2:12-17	Staying true despite persecution and pressure	Following corrupt teachers; pagan, immoral, idolatry	Repent
THYATIRA 2:18-29	Love, faith, service, perseverance	Following corrupt teachers; immoral, dodgy 'deep teaching'	Hold on to truth
SARDIS 3:1-6	A few loyal people	Dead (pretending to be alive), unfinished deeds	Wake up, repent
PHILADELPHIA 3:7-13	Kept loyal despite lack of strength. Endured patiently		Hold on. There is an open door
LAODICEA 3:14-22		Lukewarm and arrogant	Repent and let Jesus in

So what I've done to make it easier I've put the good stuff on a separate slide [slide from presentation]:

Hard work, perseverance
 Rejecting dodgy teaching
 Standing firm despite suffering and poverty
 Staying true despite persecution and pressure
 Love, faith, service, perseverance
 A few loyal people
 Kept loyal despite lack of strength.
 Endured patiently

So this is a sort of summary that you see: these churches are commended for their hard work, their perseverance, for rejecting some dodgy teaching, for standing firm despite suffering and poverty, staying true in the midst of persecution and pressure (of that list I love Thyatira: Love, faith, service, perseverance; the other two loyalty: loyalty despite lack of strength, loyalty even though there's only a few of you, and enduring patiently).

Just take a moment to think about that list. If somebody was describing Woodside Baptist church, are these things they would see here? I'm sure there are people here who are hard working - would that apply to all of you? People standing firm, challenging when teaching isn't right - would

we find people here? I don't know you so don't that this wrong. Would we find people here who you would commend for their love, their faith, their service, their loyalty, their endurance? These are the qualities that the Lord Jesus was looking for in those churches nearly 2,000 years ago, and I think these are the qualities the Lord Jesus is looking for us in his church today; qualities that we should find in the church, qualities that we should find in our own hearts.

So before I go on to look at the difficult list, I'd like us just to be quiet, and as you look at that list [above], let us just in the silence say "Lord what are you saying to me here, is the Lord challenging you about?" Your faithfulness? Or maybe he's challenging you about your work, or challenging you about needing to stand firm when you're in your workplace during the week. So let's have a silence before we go on to the next list.

[Short period of silence to consider the list.]

Lords challenge us that we might be people who work hard for your kingdom, who persevere, who stand against wrong teaching. Lord that we might be people who stand firm despite the cost, who stand true despite the persecution and pressure, people who are loyal and loving, faithful, people who serve you, people who can endure. Oh Lord that that would be us. Lord, thank you that you promise you will help us if we repent other things that are not us yet. Lord help us we pray, amen.

From the bad I want to pick out three particular areas: I want to look at losing your first love, of lukewarmness and some of the dodgy teaching that we can come across. I've pick these out because in my role as Regional Minister, which I've been doing for nearly 5 years. I get to visit lots of churches, and not just on Sundays, sometimes I'm there midweek, sometimes I'm there for their most glorious times of celebration and growth and happiness, and sometimes I'm there because there's a big fight broken out in the church, or there's disagreements, or there's anger. And sadly I see some of these things as well as some of the lovely things on the first list.

Losing your first love. The one of the saddest parts of my job is when I'm meet individuals who having faithfully served their Lord and their church for many years, have now become hindrances to growth in their churches, because they have become protectors of tradition who say no to the new idea before it's even out of somebody's mouth. They are risk averse and they know what's best because they've been here years. They've confused tradition with biblical teaching, and all their energy now just seems to be focused on maintenance. I am saddened because I know they didn't start like this. These are people who have lost their first love; these are people who if I'd got to know them years back, they were the people whose energy was there to serve their Lord and serve their church - they were the enthusiastic people for the Good News of the Kingdom. And now they are a hindrance to the growth, because you sense they have lost that first love.

I'm going to say this isn't an age thing: none of us are immune from this. Please, please will you search your heart, because we can all end up sliding down this road where we have lost our first love and our priorities change, and instead of being as people enthusiastic for the Kingdom we become the people who are hindering the Kingdom's growth.

And then there's the lukewarmness. Again, people who are on fire for Jesus don't suddenly wake up one morning and go all lukewarm. We slip and we slide and we hardly notice the change. I always think it would be a good thing if all of us (I know I'm not wild about New Year's resolutions because they tend to last till mid January or something), but actually, if every year we took time to review our year, and review the priorities, and found a lovely Christian friend who would speak truth into our lives, to sit down and see where we are. Here's some of the warning signs to look out for in your life:

- Do you spend less time in private prayer and worship, now whether that's a morning quiet time or reading the Bible on the bus, or listening to Christian music, is that now getting squashed? And I'm sure you've got a good excuse but, are you spending less time in private prayer and private worship?
- Has church attendance become just a bit less of a priority. It used to be that's what I do on Sunday and nothing else, but now it's maybe down to 2, or 3, or 4 on the priority list. Have the priorities of how you spend your time and your money slipped a bit, changed a bit?
- Do you still tell other people about your faith in Jesus? You know, when people tomorrow say "Well, how was your weekend?" what you going to be talking about, or has that slipped?
- And have actually, as I'm saying this, if I was talking to you one-to-one, you would say, "Yeah, yeah, Carol, you know life has changed a bit, you know I can't spend that time I used to spend, and I need to do other things with my money now, and I get to church most weeks, and, yeah, I pray as I'm walking down the road – I don't bother with this sitting quietly in a room any more..." We're great at these excuses, and I'm speaking to myself as well!

We need to take time to see whether we aren't the people we used to be in the wrong sense of the word. Are we seeing these signs which mean we are slipping into lukewarmness?

These letters were written to the churches so that they might wake up, so that they might change, so that things would be different. We serve a God who if only we will say "Lord I'm sliding down this road...", he will joyfully walk with us, and restore us, and renew our energy and our lives. Are you losing your first love? Are you slipping into lukewarmness?

Now the dodgy teaching one is an interesting one because actually again, if somebody, if I, got up here now and I was encouraging you to worship Satan, and I was encouraging you to give all your money to me, and if I was encouraging you to hurt people, you'd all clearly know that was false teaching, and you would clearly reject it.

But sometimes false teaching doesn't quite look like that. And the danger is: some people make use of this passage to equate false teaching with teaching that "I do not like". And the people almost weaponise it; so for some people if I start talking about change: "Oh, wickedness! This is from the devil." I've known people who have, you know as a woman in ministry there's people who don't agree with that, who will see that as wicked dodgy teaching. I'm seeing as debates in our churches, around same-sex marriage are coming up; people going into camps and not being prepared to listen and look at what others who love the Lord are saying.

A wise friend of mine who I was talking with. We were talking about, you know, which of the gifts of the Spirit is the most important. You know, possibly in days like this the gift of discernment gets pretty near the top of that list. "Oh Lord that I would be able to discern when teaching is false, when I would be able to discern that actually the teaching is right; it's my heart that's false. When I would be able to discern that though I don't agree with my brother or sister, I need to be listening to them and together we need to be listening together."

I found as I was reading the commentary on this from Tom Wright he wrote these words: "The main point we can gain from the mention of the Nicolaitians is that the church must always be on the lookout for individuals, or groups, who try to teach strange new ideas, or to introduce strange new practices. This doesn't mean that God never has new things to say to the church, and new

things for us to learn (far from it), but these new things will come from prayerful, spirit-filled study of the scripture – for me that's the key.

Are we people who are spirit-filled? Are we people who are studying and prayerfully reading the scriptures so that we might discern when teaching is good, and when teaching might not be so good? Paul himself in the letters encourages us to test what people are saying, to weigh what people are saying. Let's be careful, let's be prayerful, as we look out for false teaching that we don't do this whole “everything's false that I don't agree with”, or the other extreme “it's all lovely, isn't it?” Oh Lord give us discernment.

So my prayer is for all of us, we just so need the Spirit's help that we might spot if we are losing our first love, that we might know that we are becoming lukewarm, that we might perceive that we are not being discerning when judging teaching.

Finally, and what I Love if you read all these letters, there's two letters which talk about doors. In Philadelphia they get this promise: “See I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and not denied my dad my name.” As Jesus did for this church in Philadelphia, so he does for us: he sees our love, and our faith, and our service, and our perseverance; he knows our struggles, he knows our loyalty. Our Lord Jesus is a door opener. And I am seeing, as pandemic is subsiding I'm away covid hasn't gone away, but I am seeing God beginning to open doors of opportunities for churches, and my prayer is that you who are loyal and serving the lord, and prayerful – will you be bold and go through those doors? Push the doors and see what's on the other side, be encouraged because we have a Lord Jesus who promises to enable us, and to strengthen us. Don't be discouraged. Keep on holding on but keep on moving forward – these are not times to just hunker down till it all gets better, these are times to go through those doors that Jesus is opening.

The second church, poor old Laodicea, did not receive any good comments in that chart. They are lukewarm, wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I'll go through that again: lukewarm, wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. However, Jesus offers them a way back: if they will repent, if they will be earnest in that repentance, he makes an amazing promise – it's a promise you often see on Christian bookmarks because there's a famous picture that goes with this “Here I am, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in, eat with that person, and they with me.” You may have seen, I think it's Holman Hunt who painted a famous picture of Jesus standing at the door and knocking; the door handle, he pointed out, was only on one side: it needed us to open the door and let Jesus in.

You may be sitting here and thinking, “you know what Carol, if I'm honest I'm a bit of a failure: I know I'm lukewarm, I think I probably have lost my first love – I've certainly compromised my faith.” Jesus makes that same offer to you as he made to this poor, wretched, pitiful church in Laodicea. If you will ask, if you will knock, if you will return to that first love, if you will open the door, Jesus will come in. Jesus will welcome you home. I love our God: he is a God of second and third, and fourth, chances. So think about those doors: the open door before you in mission and work to take the gospel out. That door that you can open so that the Lord comes more fully back into your life.

As a church, my Prayer is that we will all hear the words of commendation, and take serious the words of rebuke. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Again a moment of silence. Again, just simply say “Holy Spirit, what are you saying to me today?” And if you need to write it down because you know you'll forget after coffee: make a note.

Lord Jesus would you speak to each one of us today.

[Short period of silence to listen.]

Lord, I bring my sisters and brothers before you now: you know their hearts. You know those who would confess that they've lost that fire. Would you renew their first love! Would you warm them up again Lord! Lord, you know those here who have served you loyally despite the struggles, who continue to work hard for you. Lord, I pray that they will hear your commendation. I pray that all of us will be ready to boldly step through those doors you are opening for us, and that we will all be people who open that door to let you more fully into our lives. Bless you and thank you Lord. Amen.