

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

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What does the Spirit say to the Churches? - Joss Bray

Over the last few weeks we have been looking at what Jesus had to say to the seven churches in Asia (which were in Turkey) - in the first 3 chapters of the book of Revelation.

There were some difficult things for the churches to hear. There were also encouragement and promises. We thought about how not to fall into the traps that some of those churches had fallen into.

We also thanked God that we have promises and a hope for the future that is so much better than we can ever imagine.

The question I want us to explore today is:

What does this tell us about how Jesus views the Church?

Remember that we are part of a huge universal church that spans time and space - from the earliest believers in the first churches to all of Christians alive now - so in 2010 that's approximately 2.2 billion out of the total population of 6.9 billion.

So that's a very large number - and in Hebrews it says:

HEB 12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.....

We know that the Church is God's plan to demonstrate his Kingdom on earth - there is no Plan B. The gospel must be preached to all nations and then the end will come - this is what is says in Matthew:

MT 24:14 And this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

And then what happens?

¹CO 15:24 Then the end will come, when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power. ²⁵ For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. ²⁶ The last enemy to be destroyed is death.

And then:

REV 21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.

The Church as the bride of Christ

It is an amazing picture that is given in the New Testament about Jesus being likened to a bridegroom and the church as his bride.

John the Baptist prophesied this and said:

JN 3:28 ... 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.' The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less.

Jesus continued the theme:

MK 2:18 Now John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting. Some people came and asked Jesus, "How is it that John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees are fasting, but yours are not?" Jesus answered, "How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them. But the time will come when the bridegroom will be taken from them, and on that day they will fast.

And eventually - as we have already read in Revelation the New Jerusalem comes down out of heaven as a bride:

REV 21:9 One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb." And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.

It is all very mysterious - indeed Paul said as much in Ephesians 5 when he seemed to be talking about husbands and wives - but in fact he says this:

EPH 5:32 This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church.

So the idea of the bridegroom and the bride is an intimate picture which conveys a sense of anticipation, love, longing and passion on the part of Jesus. We will not understand the picture fully I guess until we see it all worked out in eternity.

But what it shows us is very important for us to grasp:

Jesus loves the Church

And yes, we see that in the letters to the seven churches. But there were many things that Jesus wanted to be put right. But remember, it is done from the standpoint of love:

REV 3:19 Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline.

He wants the church to be the best it can be. He wants it to be dressed in pure white, ready for the groom. He wants it to reflect the kingdom in all it is and does - a fitting bride for eternity. That's where he is coming from when he addresses the churches.

So what did the seven churches get right - and wrong?

Ephesus worked hard - they did good deeds and persevered through difficult times. They tested out teaching and wouldn't tolerate false doctrine and leaders. But they had forsaken their first love for Jesus.

Smyrna was hanging in there - they didn't have much and they were under pressure. Jesus encouraged them in their faithfulness and told them that in their poverty, they were in fact rich in other ways.

Pergamum was a faithful witness to Jesus even under huge persecution. However, they had let wrong ideas about the grace of God take hold. Some of them thought that because they would be forgiven, then they could sin as much as they like. Jesus clearly told them this was completely wrong.

Thyatira were loving and faithful and did good things. They served and persevered and indeed were increasing in good works. But some have "committed adultery" with Jezebel - in other words,

their behaviour was not glorifying God - rather there was manipulation, scheming, undermining of authority, seduction and the likelihood of outbursts of great anger when opposed. There was also a sense of spiritual “cliqueiness” where some thought they knew secret and important truths that had not been revealed to others. These in fact came from Satan - not God.

Sardis was in trouble. There were a few who were still walking with God - but even though the reputation of the church was that it was alive - in fact it was dead. They were asleep. They needed to wake up. The things they did were “not complete”. They had lost the life of the Spirit and needed to be energised again - to be alive in God.

Philadelphia had kept the word of God alive even though they were weak. They had been faithful in honouring the name of Jesus. They had endured patiently. They had done well.

Laodicea had completely the wrong idea about itself. They thought they were rich but they were the complete opposite. They thought they had it all - but they had nothing. This was the lukewarm church - neither cold nor hot - no use at all for either drinking or bathing. Anything they did was worse than useless.

Jesus warned some of the churches

He would in effect close them down if they didn't repent and change their ways. He didn't want a bride that was not radiant and pure, that didn't love him, that committed adultery with the world, at thought of herself far more highly than she should and was concerned more about reputation and outward appearance rather than inward beauty.

He promised great things to all in the churches who listened, repented and persevered

There would be eternal life and sustaining nourishment and refreshment from heaven. They will be given a new name - a heavenly name given personally by Jesus - an everlasting family name and indeed, the very closeness of Jesus himself. There are white robes - spotless and washed clean as befits a bride - signifying sins forgiven and a new life beginning.

There is the promise of permanent citizenship in the heavenly city and more than that - authority over nations and the right to actually sit with Jesus on his throne.

What does this mean for us?

Jesus repeated the same phrase seven times:

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

First of all - we have the benefit of learning from others' mistakes. As we have gone through the seven messages we have been thinking about how this applies to us. After all, people haven't changed in 2000 years and neither has God. So there is no reason to think these are all "someone else's problems" - they are potentially ours if we don't hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches. That is fairly obvious.

However - what I want to leave us with is this:

What does Jesus think of the church?

We need to grasp this. We know that the church is us - Christians who are a local part of the huge family of God. There is no other "thing" called the church. It's us.

He loves us as a bridegroom loves his bride. He is passionate about us. He wants us to be pure and spotless and to reflect his glory. There is no other bride. This marriage is for eternity and it is eagerly awaited in heaven:

REV 19:6 Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear."

The amazing thing is that Jesus gives us everything we need - he bought the wedding dress! He literally paid the highest price he could for it - his life. And that garment is so special, it makes whoever is wearing it just as clean and spotless and new inside.

That is how much he loves us - he is passionate about us - and that's how much wants us to be with him for ever.