

## GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

14.9.14

### **To the Church in Ephesus – Joss Bray**

We have been looking at Revelation Chapter 1 for a couple of weeks – now we are on to chapter 2.

Chapter 1 introduces John – but his focus is very much on the person who gave him this revelation – Jesus - now full of risen glory and power in the heavenly realms. We also remembered that the Greek word for revelation is apocalypsis – from where we get the word apocalypse. We often think of this as a huge devastating event which changes things for ever.

In Revelation, John has a vision – or more accurately a total experience – of things that are yet to come which would definitely fit into that category. But before that, in Chapter 2, Jesus gives him messages for seven churches in Asia – real churches that existed then and who John would have known.

Jesus had some messages for these churches that needed delivering. These messages would have been taken around the churches and read out as John had written them down.

So, in his apocalyptic experience, John saw seven golden lampstands which he was told represented these seven churches. Jesus loves churches and they are obviously of high value and worth – the lampstands show that – they are golden. The function of lampstands is to provide a base for light to be shone out from.

The gospel – the good news of salvation and of God's love is referred to in 2 Corinthians like this:

2CO 4:..... light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

So the church needs to be fit for purpose to let the Gospel shine.

These messages are addressed to the angels of the seven churches – which are pictured as seven stars in Jesus's right hand – the hand of authority and also of greeting. Whether we take it that there is an angel for each church, or that this is addressed to

the “messengers” who are the leaders of the churches as some have suggested – it does not change the fundamental point about the message. I think I would rather believe that an angel is assigned to each church to communicate to us from God – as in other instances in the bible. Maybe this is because I don’t feel like much of a star as a church leader – and it is probably not helpful for any other leader to be held up as such!

### **Why seven churches?**

We don’t really know – but seven is a number used in the bible to denote completeness and to represent the whole - and often perfection as well - in the case of God.

These seven letters are there for us – they would not have remained in the last book of the bible unless God wanted them to. They have something to say to all churches now. They cover all sorts of topics and follow the general format of sections we could entitle “well done” then one on “not so well done” and some “warnings”, “instructions” and “a promise for the future”.

They are hard hitting and it is just as well that Jesus does love the church or these ones would be in even bigger trouble. When we look at what is said to them, there are several things to think about – which include what is this saying to us?

There will be things we will identify for ourselves as “well done”, things that are “not so well done” and then we can take the warnings, promises as encouragements for ourselves as well. We will not identify with all the issues, but many may ring bells for us – either from past or current experience of church.

### **Implications for us**

We as a church need to take on board what is said to the seven churches and try and see what is actually important to Jesus - rather than what we think is important for a church to be like and do. It is quite surprising what we see in these messages and what we don’t see – as we go through them we should be asking for more revelation to us, the church here, so we can be an effective lampstand for the gospel good news. Note that the original messages would have been likely to have been read out in all the churches – which could have been quite uncomfortable.

## The message to the Church in Ephesus

REV 2:1 "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: <sup>2</sup> I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. <sup>3</sup> You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

So here is the “well done” part of the message. Paul had spent at least three years with the Ephesians and Ephesus was the most important city that gets a message to its church. Timothy also stayed and worked there. Ephesus became Paul’s base for evangelising Asia. So it had had a lot of teaching and input in its early days – and was clearly doing some good things:

They worked hard – they did good deeds and persevered in doing them – they didn’t give up.

They persevered and kept going when times were difficult and they were persecuted and in hardship because of Jesus.

They were able to tell whether someone who claimed to have been sent to them to have authority to teach was the genuine article or not. They didn’t accept teaching and leadership without using their heads and making sure that what was said and done was actually biblical and Godly.

This is all good stuff. However, next came the “not so good” news:

REV 2:4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. <sup>5</sup> Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.

What had happened? What were they doing before, that they didn’t do later. After all, they were doing lots of good deeds and they were still clear on doctrine and teaching – surely that was enough? No – not at all! – They had fallen from a great height. They needed to repent – to literally turn around and go back.

Paul had written to them in Ephesians 1:

EPH 1:15 For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, <sup>16</sup> I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.

It seems they may have lost their first love for Jesus and for other Christians. They had been commended for this and had now lost

their first love. They were still able to do lots of things and appear completely sound – but the heart was missing. Their heart for Jesus and their brothers and sisters in the faith had grown dim and cool. The passion had diminished from the inside. This was very serious because Jesus goes on to say:

REV 2:5 If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place

What will happen if they don't get their first love back? Quite simply, Jesus will close the church. It is sometimes said of specific church disasters that “the enemy got in” and therefore the church failed and stopped meeting. I believe that it is God who closes churches – not the devil. God said he would build His church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it – therefore the devil has no power to prevail over churches.

However, if the church at Ephesus continued to misrepresent church as it should be, Jesus would close it - personally. He does not want a church that does not reflect him and his kingdom. The church at Ephesus had lost its heart of love and that was a disaster. They may have looked good on the outside, but inside they were empty and dying.

Jesus does add a footnote of encouragement though:

REV 2:6 But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Clearly this was important – who are the Nicolaitans and what were their “practices”? It is interesting to note that Jesus did not hate them, rather he hated what they did.

There are a differing views on who they were, but the most likely one seems to be this from Ireneaus a church leader and martyr who wrote a book against heresies in approximately AD 180.

The Nicolaitans followed Nicolas, who was one of the first seven deacons appointed in Acts 6. They were apparently Christians who believed that since they were saved by grace through faith, then they could do whatever they wanted to and moral teachings and practice did not need to be followed (this is called antinomianism). This ended up in sexual immorality and in other sin – and clearly Jesus hated this as a complete misrepresentation of the gospel.

Remember that the bible clearly teaches that although we are saved by grace – that is the undeserved gift of God, and that is through faith which is also from God – it is precisely that which will help us to sin less:

TIT 2:11 For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. <sup>12</sup> It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age,

RO 6:1 What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? <sup>2</sup> By no means! We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer?

Others have suggested that the Nicolaitans were leaders who lorded it over others and compelled them to submit to them. This of course is another disaster for a church – and completely unacceptable.

MK 10:42 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. <sup>43</sup> Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup> and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

## **So what does this all mean for us?**

REV 2:7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Jesus wants us to hear what he is saying –

It is good to persevere in doing good things and to keep going through difficulty.

It is good to test what is taught in the church and to look at the people who bring teaching to see if they are the genuine article – and there is to be no question of leaders demanding submission from anyone else.

It is vital to realise that the grace of God teaches us to want to avoid sin rather than believing we have the freedom to do whatever "feels good" and that God doesn't actually mind about sin.

But it is also vital to keep our first love for Jesus and for our brothers and sisters. What goes on in this church should be based on our love of God and other people first – rather than on activity for the sake of it – or because "that's what we have always done" or "it seems like a good idea".

Remember what it says in 1 Corinthians 13:

1CO 13:1 If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and can fathom all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have a faith that can move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. 3 If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.

Remember our “motto” for Gateway church – Love God, Love each other, Serve the community – we seem to have got that in the right order!

The question now to ask ourselves is – are we motivated by God’s love and how do we keep that and not fall as the Ephesians did? I suggest that this is a challenge to us individually as well. Since we are a body - if the parts are healthy then the body will be healthy. The church is us – not an organisation or anything else – it is us – so:

Am I loving God and seeking him and his kingdom first in my life? Do I worship him enough? Do I try to find out what he is saying to me through the bible? Do I try and listen enough to the Holy Spirit when he prompts me and whispers in my ear? Have I been captivated by the love of Jesus and his ascended, risen glory?

Remember – a promise comes after the warnings –

REV 2:7 .....To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

There is a great future at stake for us and the church – life for ever in paradise. What’s not to like about that! Let’s go for it together and hear what Jesus says to the church – and let’s not be just hearers of the word, but doers as well.