

Well I hope Christmas was good for you. But we always eat and drink too much and end up flabby and needing some exercise to get us back into shape. The same happens with our minds, we can switch off over Christmas, watch dross on TV and end up needing a mental kick start.

The last book of the Bible, Revelation, certainly does challenge our mental capacity. It is a hard book to understand but in the first couple of months of 2009 I thought we would look at just a couple of chapters from this book and my prayer is not just that it will stimulate our minds but that it will stimulate our hearts as well.

We are going to look at these seven letters, spoken by Jesus and written down by the Apostle John for seven of the churches in Asia Minor. As we listen to what the Lord of the church was saying to those churches we will hold the passages up like a mirror and see what they have to say to Christ Church Chineham today.

Why was John given this revelation? He was given it, as we see in 1:1, "to show to his servants what must soon take place". So he was given it for the church and to explain the world in which they were living. But we must not misunderstand soon as meaning tomorrow but as meaning that which is to come and which is repeated throughout the history of the world until Christ returns. The things facing these churches are facing us today. The message for these churches is the message for us today.

The book was written to assure these Christians who were living in a world opposed to the message and church of Jesus Christ the ultimate truth that God is in control. One preacher put it like this, "And that is the great reality which this book points to continuously: the Lord reigns; His nature is unchanging; His word is dependable; His power is unrivalled, it is limitless and indestructible. And the Church on earth needs to know that, needs to believe it, needs to live in the light of it because that is the only way that grace and peace flow into our lives."

The message was for a church in troubled times focusing that church on Jesus its Lord and calling that church to remain faithful and true to him because he is the Lord and the Lord reigns despite how it may look as they faced the world around them. That is its message to us today.

The message

So we come to the first letter the message to the church in Ephesus.

I was in our lounge at home the other day. I was at one end of the lounge doing a jigsaw I'd been given for Christmas while my son Phil was watching 24 on TV - 24 is an American adventure series. Anyway I couldn't help hearing what was going on and occasionally I'd turn round and look at the screen. In the episode the baddies wanted some information from Jack Bauer one of the goodies and were torturing him. As I say wasn't giving it my whole attention but for some reason when the TV was turned off I felt disturbed and the sounds more than the picture stayed with me for a while.

I find the same as I have been thinking about the central message of this letter. It disturbs me and the sound stays with me.

What was the message?

What was it that Jesus, Lord of the church, said to his church in Ephesus?

He said that their love for him had paled and that they needed to renew that love or they would cease as a church.

As I listen to that as a leader in this church it disturbs me and as I listen to that as a Christian it also disturbs me. The message 2:1 was

given to the angel of the church

and I think we can understand the angel as the prevailing spirit of the church or simply that church. There was something to be said to this church in Ephesus. Ephesus was a large and important trading centre. It was a flourishing city with its theatre, libraries and the heathen temple of Diana dominating it all. In this cosmopolitan multi-faith city was the church of Jesus Christ, founded by Paul. The message

came clearly from Jesus.

In each of the letters an aspect of Jesus as he was revealed to John in 1:13-16 is used and here he is referred to as "him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands."

It is right at the beginning of what Jesus had to say to this church that I get a bit uncomfortable. The message began with the words

"I know" (v2.)

These are the words of the Lord of the church who sees and knows his church and who judges his church in the light of what he sees and knows.

Do you realise how many times you are on camera each day? You are seen walking about in Festival place. You are seen as you drive your car down the motorway. They know what you are doing But here the Lord of the church sees and knows what is going on in his church.

But as we follow on we see that what Jesus knew about this church was

good.

He knew they were hard working. They were an active church, involved in the ministry and mission of Christ. He knew they were persevering, that is despite the opposition and probably persecution they faced they were continuing as faithful soldiers of Christ and they were doctrinally true. We see in v2 they'd weeded out some false apostles and v6 had hated the false practices of this group referred to as the Nicolaitans.

There was much to recommend this church, hardworking, persevering and true. Most of us would be delighted if our church got a recommendation like that.

bad

But all of this was overshadowed by the central message there in v4, "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love."

What did Jesus mean? I think what he meant was that while they had begun their Christian life with a great love for Jesus, a great devotion to him, a great joy in his presence and a great enthusiasm to please him things now have changed. That love seems to have gone. We have to ask why did that love die and what was the result?

When I was a teenager I was going out with a girl and like most teenagers I was besotted with her. I thought about her every moment of the day. I doodled her name on the edge of my exercise books. I couldn't wait to be with her. I took every opportunity to see her. I even got up early in the morning so I could walk her to school before getting to my own school. Now I can remember her name but nothing much else. I don't know where she is and what she is doing and vice versa. Basically what happened was we eventually drifted apart no great row or anything we stopped going out and my love for her died. As I look back I would say my love for that girl died for a number of reasons. I got in with a group of friends and they made demands on me. There were lots of other demands on my time sport and things. I got a bit weary of getting up early, her attraction for me waned and eventually I found someone else. The final result was that I felt nothing for her and she had no claim upon my life.

Dying love

Why does the Christians love for X die? I think for those Ephesians it may have been similar to my love for my girl friend. The Christians in Ephesus may well have had friends outside the Christian group who encouraged them to other things, through them they found the attraction of other activities even other gods in that pagan city. To put Biblically in the words of the parable of the sower they were probably "choked by life's worries, riches and pleasure" (Luke 8:14). Someone or something else came along and claimed the love that had previously been given to Christ. It happens now and I'm certain it happened then. The love of things in the world choked the love for Christ.

Can I ask whether you see that in yourself as you think about your life with Christ this morning? Do you recognise that your love for him has withered? Are you aware how things in the world around have crept in and choked your love?

I'm sure many of us do if we are honest.

The result

What was the result? The result was a doctrinally pure church but a loveless church and therefore not a true church. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "if I have not love I am nothing" (1 Cor 13:2). Take love for Christ away from the Christian and all that is left is religion, a pattern of rules and rituals to be gone through but without the heart without real love for Christ and so an empty shell.

Now I bring this passage before us because I think it speaks a warning to us in our day and specifically to our church. We may pride ourselves on our doctrine. We may be guilty sometimes of looking down on those who aren't as doctrinally correct as we are but the question comes have we that love for Jesus in our heart? A love which consumes us and which motivates us in love for others? As we look into ourselves individual and as we look at our life as a church is there a love for Jesus at the heart? It is easy to grow complacent as a church to be doing all the right things to be believing all the right doctrine and yet not to have a genuine love for Jesus at the centre and so to be guilty of religion not relationship.

That was the situation in Ephesus and we take that and hold it and measure our lives as individuals and as a church against it. As I do that it disturbs me, unsettles me because I think Jesus would say it to me and more I think Jesus would say it to us as a church.

The response

Jesus called for a response from this church in Ephesus. He gave the church then three things to do as a result of what he saw of that church.

1. Remember,

v5 "Remember the height from which you have fallen!" Just take a look back he said and see how it was when you first came to faith, when you first fell in love with me. See that and compare it with now. Can you remember how it was when you first came to faith or perhaps how it was in the early years of your Christian life? Can you remember what your prayer life was like, your church attendance, your worship, your service? If you feel that perhaps you have lost your first love then let me encourage you this morning to look back, to remember.

2. Repent -

repent means to change direction. How should those Christians in Ephesus change direction? I think by turning away from the things that were harming their love for Christ and to draw closer to Jesus that their love for him might be rekindled. That call to repent comes

to us today. Repent of things that get in the way of our love for Jesus, things that choke that love. I can't tell you what they are but you will know. All I can do is prompt you to reflect upon your life to see what are the things that turn you away from Christ and, in the light of that, issue Christ's call to reject what is wrong, to confess the loss of love and be restored. We need to do that as individuals and as a church. John Stott commenting on this says "How sane and matter-of-fact is this word of Christ! So many of us admit to our present state, but wait for some emotional upheaval to set us right. We are like children who fall in a puddle and sit in the mud waiting for someone to pick them up. But they should get up at once. So should we, just as soon as we are conscious of having fallen."

3. Resume -

v5b... do the things you did at first. Where does our lack of love for Jesus show? Is it the fact that to be here to worship him Sunday by Sunday no longer really grabs us and we allow other things to draw us away from being with Christ and his people? If so then that needs to be sorted out and we need to make sure we are here to worship. Is it that we have dropped out of service? Perhaps we used to be involved in an area of ministry and through that our spiritual life was alive but since we gave it up well our love for Jesus has waned? Then look for an area of ministry to be involved in. Or is it your own personal time with God that has gone by the board? We cannot grow in love if we never spend time alone with God listening to him through his word and speaking with him in prayer.

These are some of the practicals but we must not imagine that some how they or we can work up a love for Christ. Only God by his Holy Spirit can stir our hearts with love for him but if we remember if we repent and if we reopen our lives to him then God will warm our hearts. If we resume the things we were doing when our hearts were on fire for Christ then we are allowing the Holy Spirit to have full rule in our hearts and we will grow in love for Christ we will be renewed. If we come close to God then he will come close to us. His love never fails and his love will refresh our love and renew our relationship with him giving us a new desire for him and a new love for others.

The letter closes with a severe warning v5c.... The lamp has been removed, church and city no longer exist. It is a warning to us as a church to watch over our heart to make sure that it is in tune with God and in love with him.

So what are we to do? Let us hear the call to remember our first love, to think back and see if we have fallen away. Let us hear the call to repent of those things which hinder our love for Jesus and let us resume, let us offer him rule in our hearts and lives that that love for him may be rekindled and that the light of Christ may burn brightly in our church. Now these things need to be done by us separately but also corporately for it is as we worship, minister and serve together that we encourage each other in the faith and together keep our love burning bright. It is like that old metaphor of the coal in the fire burns hot but out of the fire grows cold. So if we would renew our first love it will be as we meet share worship and serve together.

So v7.... if we have ears let us hear.