Session 5 The church in our times and places – Revelation 2-3 May 2016

^{2:1-7} "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. I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

"To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. I know your afflictions and your poverty – yet you are rich! I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you life as your victor's crown.

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.

"To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword. I know where you live – where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, not even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city – where Satan lives.

Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.

"To the angel of the church in Thyatira write:

These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze. I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering, and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of her ways. I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.

Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets, 'I will not impose any other burden on you, except to hold on to what you have until I come.'

To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations — that one 'will rule them with an iron scepter and will dash them to pieces like pottery' — just as I have received authority from my Father. I will also give that one the morning star. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

"To the angel of the church in Sardis write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

"To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:

These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars — I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge

that I have loved you. Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth.

I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. The one who is victorious I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on them my new name. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

3:14-22 "To the angel of the church in Laodicea write:

These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm — neither hot nor cold — I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Introduction

PP1-3

Hahn SuperDry advertisements – Are you a collector?

I have recently commenced in a pastoral leadership role in the Blue Mountains of Sydney in the Springwood/Winmalee parish with the Presbyterian church of Australia in NSW. The church has been without designated pastoral leadership for the past three years or so. The previous pastoral leaders were, after problems arose in the church, instructed by the Presbytery to resign.

We are about to commence a season of re-envisaging together. We plan to spend June and July in prayer, seeking the LORD, hearing God's word, discerning where to from here in times of waiting, listening, confession, thanksgiving and petition; August and September in imagining, evaluating, and planning; October and November in writing, producing, and putting together the products of our imagining and planning; and then enjoying December and January as months of thankfulness and rest. We trust that in 2017 and beyond we will begin to live out the results of that work.

I will be preaching through the book of Revelation from July through to next April. My plan is to spend about 30 weeks in Revelation, in blocks of 4 or 5; and to punctuate that preaching and wider church engagement with Revelation, with other shorter preaching series on topics, issues and portions of Scripture that arise for the church over those months.

In August and September, I want to explore three focus questions during our times of imagining, evaluating and planning. They will be asked and explored in light of the gospel of Christ, to which the Scriptures bear witness. They will also be explored in the light of what the church is, and our identity as a community in Christ. Perhaps we will write a narrative preamble, stating some of those key starting points for us.

PP4-6

What is our place and time?

- Creational features
- Cultural values and products
- Societal structures
- Stories
- Names
- o People
- o Traditions
- Symbols
- Idolatries
- Challenges and opportunities

• Who is God and what is God's word for our place and time?

- o Christ, Father, Spirit
- Scriptures
- Invitation
- Encouragement
- o Rebuke

Who will we be and what will we do in our place and time?

- Community life
- Church meetings
- Mission commitments
- o Ministry initiatives
- Partnerships

It is important to commence with an exploration and appreciation of our place (here) and time (now). This first focus grounds us. It insists that we think about the gospel for the here and now. Christian faith must be grounded. Incarnated. Otherwise it will remain theoretical and untrue to the Christ of incarnation, death, burial, resurrection, and presence.

Scriptures – Revelation 2-3 PP7

Revelation is addressed to **seven churches in Asia**, a province of the Roman empire, the western portion of Asia Minor (1:4). These small house churches, probably no bigger than 20 or 30 people, were located in large urban centres on "the great circular road that bound together the most populous, wealthy, and influential part of the Province" (Mounce).

The Roman empire claims and appears to be mighty and victorious, however as John commences his letter, he names Jesus as the ruler of the kings of the earth (1:5); he affirms that Jesus has formed these believers, who are gathering in house churches, into a kingdom (1:6). *To him* be glory and power for ever and ever, John writes.

In the initial revelation of Jesus (1:12-20), one like a son of man is seen walking among the churches (seven golden lampstands). Jesus *speaks* to them as a prophet. He is *among* them as a pastor. The seven stars, or angels of the churches, are in his right hand. He protects them.

I want briefly to ask the three questions of two of the seven churches – the church in Ephesus, the first of the seven, and then the church in Laodicea, the last of the seven churches to be addressed.

2:1-7 – the church in Ephesus

What was their place and time?

The small group of believers is located in a large, bustling Aegean port city of somewhere between 200,000-250,000 people. Ephesus is politically and economically powerful. It is home to the provincial proconsul.

There is a world-renowned temple devoted to the goddess Artemis (Diana of the Ephesians). It is one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The Artemesian was the jewel of Ephesus.

There is also a significant temple to Caesar, the Temple of Domitian, built in about AD 89. Ephesus was a temple warden to the cult of the emperor, a city custodian of the imperial cult.

In Acts 19:21 ff. we read of a magnificent theatre in Ephesus which had the capacity to seat about 24,000 people. Ephesus was a grand city! Those who had taken the way of Messiah Jesus must have been tempted to feel insignificant, a fledgling minority seeking to live in a manner that was counter-cultural, surrounded by the wealth and power of Ephesus.

Who was God and what was God's word for their place and time?

2:1 – these are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.

Christ is "holding fast" and "walking among" the churches. Holding, grasping, powerfully holding onto ... the church in Ephesus is reminded of his powerful presence in these introductory words.

2:2 – I know ... (x2) – Christ has inspected the church. He knows. Be assured that Christ knows.

2:7 – to the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

Clearly there are echoes of Genesis 2 and the Garden of Eden here. However, there also appears to be a pointed reference to the Artemis Temple in Ephesus, which contained within its walls, a tree-shrine, a holy place of worship to Artemis. It was the most sacred section of the Temple, and may even have been referred to as the "tree of life". Jesus tells the church that worshippers of Artemis will not "conquer". Those who are faithful to Jesus are conquerors. This word, so important in Revelation, is also the word from which the Roman goddess of victory (nikē) is named.

Who were they to be and what were they to do in their place and time?

2:2-3, 6 – continue in hard work, perseverance, endurance, testing false apostles, hating the practices of the Nicolaitans.

2:4-5 – reignite their first love; repent, or the lampstand will be removed. This church had a deficit of love in its life and witness to Christ.

3:14-22 - the church in Laodicea

What was their place and time?

Laodicea was a large city of about 100,000 people in the Lycus River Valley, the wealthiest city in the region. The city was located on a strategic crossroad and was as such a commercial centre. Laodicea prided itself on being self-sufficient and somewhat independent of Rome.

Laodicea was a centre for banking. Shepherds in the region had bred a sheep famous for its black, glossy, soft wool. The city was also a medical centre, significant for the treatment of eye disease. The countryside around Laodicea was rich and fertile, fruits and corn were among the crops that were grown. However, Laodicea lacked a good water supply. There were hot mineral springs about 8 kilometres away in Hierapolis. Water had to be piped into the city from that region. It arrived lukewarm and mineral laden. It was very distasteful drinking water.

It appears as though the Laodicean church has become complacent, half-hearted, compromised with the practices of the city. It seems to have embraced the values of the elite and powerful. The Lord does not commend the church as he has commended the church in Ephesus.

• Who was God and what was God's word for their place and time? 3:14 – these are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation.

Amen – the affirmation of God; the "yes" of God!

Faithful and true witness – truthful and reliable

Ruler of God's creation – the beginning (archē) of the creation of God; preeminent ruler over all things that God has made.

This is who God is to this complacent, wealthy church, living in a greatly blessed region.

3:15 – I know ... as per Ephesus. The LORD knows!

3:19 – those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. As per Hebrews. God's discipline is generated by his love.

3:21 – to the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne.

The church is not in fellowship with the Lord. Still, Christ here invites the Laodiceans to sit with him in honour and rest at the Father's throne. This is a glorious promise to a complacent, unfaithful church community.

Who were they to be and what were they to do in their place and time?

3:19 – be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

Jesus is on the outside of this church. The church is not fellowshipping with Jesus. It needs to again invite the Lord into its midst.

The Lord of the lampstands says to the church at Laodicea that like your own water supply you are lukewarm and disgusting to my taste. I wish that you were either a fresh, life-giving drink of cold water or else a healing, hot

mineral bath. But, because you are neither refreshing and life giving nor healing, you are simply disgusting; and I will spew you out of my mouth. (Patterson)

So what?

Imagine the letter that Christ might write to your congregation. What would Jesus bless? What challenge might he give you for faithful living?

Gorman encourages us to "listen to the Spirit of God identifying our own church's peculiar unholy spirit and offering us the presence and grace of Christ to transform us into a more faithful people of God."

PP8

We have suggested that the church in current society is increasingly experiencing exile-like conditions. Mark Sayers contends that we need to take the posture of living as a "creative minority". He writes:

Throughout history God has replenished cultures, through the witness of minorities of believers who hold true to their beliefs while blessing the surrounding culture. It is to this position we must return. However, to live with gospel resilience as a creative minority, we must come to grips with the essential nature of our post-Christian age.¹

In his book *Disappearing Church: From Cultural Relevance to Gospel Resilience*, Sayers draws on words from Jonathan Sacks, former Chief Rabbi of the UK and Commonwealth. He writes:

... there are moments in history, and we are living in one now, when something new is taking shape but we do not know precisely what ... the results lie all around us: the collapse of marriage, the fracturing of family, the fraying of the social bond, the partisanship of politics at a time when national interest demands something

larger, the loss of trust in public institutions, the buildup of debt whose burden will fall on future generations, and the failure of a shared morality to life us out of the morass of individualism, hedonism, consumerism, and relativism. We know these things, yet we seem collectively powerless to move beyond them.²

If we are to live as "creative minorities", what will that mean?

Sayers continues:

Creative minorities find themselves withdrawn and distant from what they know and find comfort in. This distance enables them to see the myths and blind spots of their own culture, to reject these myths, and find a greater dependency in God. This dependency on a source of power and truth outside of the dominant culture leads creative minorities to refresh and reinvigorate ailing cultures. To be a creative minority is to live with a creative tension, as Sacks explains: "To become a creative minority ... is not easy, because it involves maintaining strong links with the outside world while staying true to your faith, seeking not merely to keep the sacred flame burning but also to transform the larger society of which you are part."

The gospel invites us into this tension of withdrawal and return, of which the death and resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate expression.

Sayers contends that "the response to a culture built on superficiality, which reduces the world to a shallow secularity, is depth. We need sources of life and sustenance not found in the adulation or respect of the public. In the third culture which rips at roots, which tears at foundations, we need depth, we need roots, and we need foundations. As churches, we need to move to a strategy of rebuilding."⁴

May the Lord bless and guide us as we seek to be faithful in worship and witness in the era of which we are part. These are wonderful days to serve Christ. The gospel of the risen Lord continues to be the only hope for the people and nations of the world.

Endnotes

¹ Sayers, M. Loc 183

² Sayers, M. Loc 663

³ Loc 682

⁴ Loc 680