

REVELATION 2:1-7  
PEOPLE WHO LOVE JESUS?

Have you ever played one of these word-association games? I give you a word and you have to say the first thing that comes into your head. We played one on Wednesday at the beginning of the *Lost for Words* course and there were some easy words to start with: strawberry, television, chocolate; the word we wanted to get to in that game was "evangelism", to begin to think what that word meant. If we were to play that game with the word 'Church' I wonder what we'd end up with? *We were given: people, gathering, building, worship and a number of others.*

Playing that game raises another question: "What is the most important thing about Church?" When you buy a new Hoover you sometimes find a card inside the pack of instructions and the guarantee - "What made you buy this product?" and you are given lots of options: "price, someone told you it was good; it looks nice in magazine"? You've only just bought it; you don't really know yet whether it is any good for cleaning carpets! Ask me in six months time whether I think it was a good buy because then I'll know whether it can clean my carpet! "What is most important to you about Church?" Given time to consider an answer, would you come up with something else? Or is your word game answer the one you'd stick with?

There are all kinds of answers to the question "what is most important about Church?" Not quite everyone in the room would have a different answer, but we might all express it in different ways, some of us from long experience of the life of the Church, others just new, others tasting the life of the church for the first time. When we begin to ask that question of the Bible and how the Bible looks on the Church, there are lots of places we could begin. We're going to take the next seven weeks to answer that question by looking at the very last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. Before it gets into its difficult pieces with lots of symbolism and pictures, chapters 2 and 3 are letters from Jesus to seven churches. Each of these letters is written to a particular Church, dealing with some particular issues and each one highlights something important about the Church. Most of all, though, we begin with the clear thought that when the Bible talks about the Church, we're talking about people, the people who believe in and follow Jesus. There is something to learn from these first century people for our 21st century life.

These seven churches were all in modern Turkey, though it was called Asia Minor then. The first of these churches is in the city of Ephesus, now a ruin, but in Bible times, the largest city of the area. It was a wealthy and prosperous city; it was the seat of government, where the Roman governor lived; it was a commercial city, a seaport, and the place where the great overland trade-route to the East began; it was famous for its temple of Diana, one of the wonders of the ancient world and tourists came to see it in much the same way as tourists now visit the ruins of the city. It was an important city for the Christian Church, being the strongest Church in the area: Paul had spent 2 years there in its early days, building the people up in their faith; it still had an apostle as its leader, John, though he was in exile by this time, and the man who wrote the book of Revelation. 40 years on, we're into the second generation of Christians; the church is firmly established; it is a church with a great history. What does Jesus think of His Church?

*"These are..." (Revelation 2:1)* Here's something so important right at the start: the Church belongs to Jesus. John writes a lot in pictures and starts with two of them: first, Jesus holds seven stars in His hands; secondly, Jesus walks amongst seven lampstands set up to shine with candles. These stars and lampstands are meant as pictures of the seven churches in Turkey, the churches to whom these letters are written. Jesus is holding these Churches in His hands and Jesus is walking amongst

these churches, with His people. These Churches were finding life hard: the whole book of Revelation is designed to help these Christians persevere in their faith when they are Christians under pressure! Jesus is holding them in His hands; Jesus is with His people even when life is hard. Life for the Church in Scotland is tough in 2014; in more than 30 years of ministry, I have never known so many issues that are causing the Church to feel under pressure, but the Church still belongs ultimately to Jesus, He still holds us in His hands; He still is with His people, even under pressure.

There's a little pattern to each of these seven letters: there is something to commend each church, good things that these Christians are doing; there is some kind of complaint; and there is a way of correcting the complaint.

What does Jesus see in Ephesus that is good? "*I know...*" (*Revelation 2:2f*) Here's a group of people who have worked hard at their faith, who have understood that faith makes demands on them and they have risen to the challenge of these demands. They have been doing all kinds of good things; they have worked hard, to the point of becoming weary; they have persevered when faith and church life have been hard; they have endured these hardships for Jesus. No-one is very sure who the Nicolaitians were, but they were some group of people associated with the Christian faith, but who changed it: they said that it didn't matter how Christians lived but God wouldn't mind and would forgive us anyway, so Christians were free to live any old riotous life and it would be fine. The Christians in Ephesus saw that this was wrong and resisted it; they knew the truth and stood by it. The difficulty the church faces is not always from the outside, but here are people inside a church who have lost their way. The church understood these troubles and charted way through them for the good of the Church and to remain faithful to Jesus!

I've had the privilege of visiting a number of Churches around Edinburgh over the last few years and most of these churches have to be commended for their hard work, and their perseverance. There are lots of Churches who are doing lots of good things, worshipping God and caring for the people in their communities, just as we are trying to do. I also get the sense that these same people are beginning to weary of it, as some of you are in the good things you've been doing. They are longing to have someone else take on some of the hard work, but they're not sure who that someone else might be. We should be commended for that hard work, for perseverance in the face of mounting difficulties, but we're not very good at commending; these are the qualities that Jesus commends.

However, there is also a complaint: "*Yet, I...*" (*Revelation 2:4*) Jesus was once asked about what was most important; He gave two answers - "Love God; love other people!" The Christians in Ephesus had lost their first love; we're not sure in which of these two ways to take the complaint; it might be either their love for God that they had lost, or their love for other people; it might even be both! When the people in Ephesus first became Christians there was a flush of enthusiasm and devotion to Jesus; they were keen to believe, keen to live out their faith because of their deep sense of devotion to Jesus because they had come to see and to know just how much Jesus had done for them and given to them. But the Christians had lost that deep sense of love for Jesus, being devoted to Jesus. Perhaps the second generation hadn't caught that love in the same way as their parents had done; they had inherited the truth but not caught the love. Equally, they had lost their love for one another. They had become good at sniffing out people who didn't believe the truth, but the danger of that is to create an atmosphere of suspicion and fear of one another. Where that climate of suspicion exists, brotherly love finds it hard to flourish. Being good at one of these, often comes at cost! They did good things, but forgot to

love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ! They were ticking boxes, but the love had gone! The loveless Church, beware!

Here is a people who have lost their way. They are trying hard, but they've forgotten something so important, to be a people who love, who love Jesus and who love one another. That's even the remedy: "*Remember...*" (*Revelation 2:5*) They have lost their way and they need to find their way back to what matters most. That will mean remembering what is important and turning back to these important things. Sometimes people who've lost their way don't like to be told: they get stuck in a rut and can't find the way out, but they don't want to be told they're stuck in a rut. People who are busy working hard for the Church don't always realise that they've lost their way a bit and that the most important things are lost amongst so many good things. Remember to love Jesus and be devoted to Jesus; remember to love with all our hearts; repent when we've forgotten to love Jesus with a heart full of devotion; repent when we've forgotten to love one another, but have treated others with suspicion.

What inspires us to be Church? Where do we take our inspiration? Devotion to Jesus is a key part of that inspiration for one very simple reason: our devotion to Jesus and love for Him and for others, comes from the fact that He has first loved us. We are people who are loved by Jesus and because we are loved by Him, we love Him back. This was the question Jesus asked Peter: "do you love me?" Nothing else! Peter's answer was inspired by the love Jesus had shown him, forgiving him, accepting him even after his three-time denial! Jesus loved Peter and Peter learned to love Him back. That's what inspires us; that's what gives us strength and energy to persevere; that's the heart of Church, a people who love Jesus and who love one another. We need to be inspired! We can do things out of a sense of duty, but duty will only take us so far; it works well when life is easy and smooth, but what sustains us when the going gets tough? Life can be pretty mundane at times; even church life can be mundane in some of the tasks we're asked to take on. We need to be inspired; we need something to make our hearts sing, something to fill our hearts with love and delight. Remember Jesus and how He has loved us; love Him back!

"Where is the blessedness I knew,  
when first I saw the Lord?  
Where is the soul-refreshing view  
of Jesus and His word?"

What peaceful hours I once enjoyed!  
How sweet their memory still!  
But they have left an aching void  
the world can never fill.

Return, O Holy Dove!  
Return, sweet messenger of rest!  
I hate the sins that made thee mourn  
and drove thee from my breast"

Wm Cowper has a sense of this, what inspires us, and how easy it is to lose that inspiration. Remember Jesus and how He has loved us; repent of the loss of love; find it again! Be a people who love: who love Jesus and are devoted to Him from the heart; and who love one another with all our hearts! This is who we are most and best of all; this is what matters most!