

Sermon for 11am service
Sunday 13th March 2016
Lent 5
Holy Communion at St Stephen's

Series: Challenged to change
Theme: 'I have loved you.'

Readings:
Revelation 3:8-13;
Mark 15:1-15

Sermon:

Welcome to the 'home straight' in our Lent sermon series. Slightly unbelievably for this time of year, next Sunday is Palm Sunday and the following Sunday is Easter Day! So today we come to the fourth in our Lent series, Challenged to Change, and next week we conclude the series as we look at the last of the 7 letters to the churches found in Revelation and visit Laodicea.

We've been doing a bit of a grand tour of modern day northern Turkey. Visiting ancient towns that 2,000 years ago were in the Roman province of Asia. I am not going to bore you with the geography, suffice to say that all these towns and cities are close to each other. Today we are in Philadelphia which is a town in a fertile river valley on the road between Sardis and Laodicea, very close to Smyrna.

So far we have visited: firstly Ephesus, where we heard the challenge to not 'forsake our first love.' The challenge to be a church of love, a church that has love for God and for one another at its heart. Then we dropped in at Thyatira, where we were challenged to 'hold onto what we have.' To hold onto the truth of the Gospel and not let the world's demand for compromise and tolerance diminish its power or truth. Last time we were in Sardis where the challenge was to 'wake up!' Are we a living church? A place of growth and healing? Or have we slipped into the rut of being routine Christians? A church where it all looks good on the outside but in fact the inside is hollow and the Holy Spirit has left our lives and the building.

Today, as I say, we head up the road from Sardis and find ourselves in Philadelphia. It's another multicultural Roman town. This time agriculture is important as it is surrounded by fertile land that produces good crops. I don't know, but maybe, out of this more 'down to earth' experience of life and provision, maybe there is a different spirituality about the place. Maybe respect for the earth and its seasons plays out in more respect for each other. Certainly it is a place in which the Christians have been able to keep their faith. It hasn't been easy, there are those who oppose them, those who would try to deny the truth of Jesus and claim that the Christians are merely heretical Jews who have distorted and corrupted the Jewish faith. The letter calls them the Synagogue of Satan. People that we can only assume are trying to impose a strict and repressive form of Judaism that the Philadelphian Christians are commended for resisting.

In fact this is the only one of the 7 letters where the church to which it is addressed is only commended and not subject to any kind of condemnation. Even in weakness they have remained faithful, and their faithfulness means that Jesus has opened a door for them, a door no one can shut. It is the door that only Jesus can open. The door that only a descendant of David could hold the key to and had the right to open. It is the door that all of God's chosen people should have walked through. The door that all of David's descendants should have entered through, had it not been for their disobedience and corruption of their faith. But it is the door that, because of Jesus, is now open to all. Not because of ethnicity or a Jewish heritage, but because of faith. A door that is open to all who put their Faith and trust in Jesus as Lord and Christ. The door of course is the door into the very heart of

God himself. The door to heaven. The door to paradise. The door to eternal life. The door through which we leave this mortal life, with all of its struggles and disappointments and failures behind, and enter into the new life that is ours in Jesus Christ our Lord.

This is the Philadelphians reward, their reward of faith. But as you read on you realise that their reward is more than this. Verse 12 says:

Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him 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 him my new name.

There is something about the Philadelphians that means their reward is not just a place in heaven but a special place in heaven. OK, I know that in a way there are no special places in heaven because every place in heaven is special. But there is a specific promise here that has something special about it: Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. Him, or she, who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it.

Pillars are important things. They keep things up. If you take them out things tend to collapse. Somehow the weight of other things rests on pillars and in time they are proved to either be up to the job or, if they are not, the whole structure suffers. Why then we might ask are the Philadelphian Christians chosen to be pillars? What is it about them that means that they are judged to be strong enough to take the weight, to play this important role in the temple of God in heaven?

Well I think that there is a clue in verse 9: 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.

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There seems to be something about the Philadelphian Christians that speaks to the world of God's love for them. Somehow they seem to be living in a way that speaks to the world of Jesus' love for them. And somehow this witness is so strong that even those who oppose them will come and fall at their feet and have to admit that this love cannot be overcome.

And this is where I think this letter and its challenges connect to today, to this Passion Sunday. Today we are led to just one place, to the cross. Today we are led to the hill of execution outside of Jerusalem. Today we are led to open our eyes and gaze upon the horror of a man on a cross. Hanging and bleeding in the mid-day sun until burnt, blood-drained and dehydrated, he eventually gives up the fight and sinks into the darkness of death.

Today we are led to wonder at this extraordinary sight. To wonder at our creator God submitting to this pain and torture. Submitting, not because he is forced to, but because he has chosen to. He has chosen this, and he has chosen it for just one reason, his love of you. His love of you.

There never has been, and there never will be, a greater act of love. There never has been, and there never will be, a greater outpouring of love. For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that all who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life. The cross is the centre of our faith, the cross is the centre of love, the symbol of love, the shape of love. And if the Philadelphians are somehow a church that shouts to the world that Jesus loves them, a church that shouts this out in an undeniable and compelling way, then there must be something about them that is 'cross shaped.' In some way the cross must be rooted in their hearts and at their heart as a church. Rooted in a way that shapes their life together and their lives as individual followers of Jesus. They must be in some way a cross shaped church. And I think the challenge of this reading and the challenge of today is to ask ourselves: are we cross shaped? Is there something about us that speaks of this love, this extraordinary love poured out for each of us by Jesus on the cross

So what does a cross shaped church look like? Well maybe we find a bit of a clue in this well-known passage from Philippians:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death- even death on a cross!

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. And of course, no one was more cross shaped than Jesus.

What does it all mean? Well for me it centres on the word humility. As we see the baby Jesus laid in the manger, the man Jesus asking John to baptise him, Jesus washing his disciples feet, even the feet of Judas Iscariot, and Jesus allowing Pilate to sentence him, soldiers to mock him and nails to be driven through his hands and feet, we see humility in all of its fullness. The creator, the all-powerful, the almighty, the God of heaven, putting all of his status and authority aside and becoming a slave. A slave who then became a criminal. Willingly walking the way of the cross, the road to death, so that each of us, you and me, could be set free from our slavery, pardoned of our criminal past, and enter into the glorious freedom of the children of God.

Somehow I think these Philadelphian Christians have got it right. Somehow they have become a crossed shaped church. A church with humility at its heart, a humility that shouts to the world of Jesus love for them, his humble, self-sacrificing, servant love within which he was willing to give up all of himself for you, and the person next to you, and all the people on your pew, and everyone here, in London, across the world, past, present and future.

The challenge to us is to ask whether as a church we are cross shaped. Do we have a humble heart? Do we have a servant heart? Do we have a self-sacrificing heart? Do you have the same attitude as that of Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God, let go of all that was his and was obedient to death, even death on a cross?

It was Jesus' main condemnation of the Pharisees and teachers of the law in Jerusalem, that they craved status, that they grabbed hold of authority and threw their weight around, that they showed no humility but rather hypocrisy as they spoke to others of the need to be humble but showed no humility in their own lives. And what did Jesus say? The first will be last and the last will be first. Many that you are dismissing as less than you, many that you think are below you, inferior to you, those you judge and condemn, those you think have no place in God's kingdom, they will be the ones who are there ahead of you. Those who think they are worthy will find they have a long wait whereas those who know they are far from worthy, those who recognise their unworthiness and brokenness and have the all-embracing servant attitude of Christ, will find themselves at the front of the queue, because it is for them that the door has been opened, the door that can never be shut. The door directly into God's heart!

And be warned, this is not about what you do, it's about what you think. It's about what your true motives are. The Pharisees and teachers in Jesus time were not showing the attitude of humility that God expects and Jesus was looking for, but they did lots of good charitable things. They were kind to widows and orphans. They gave to the poor and the beggar. They did many good things, but their motives were wrong. Paul's call to us in Philippians is not that we should do what Jesus did but that our attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus. Because in the end, to be a cross shaped church, to be a cross shaped person, your humility needs to be far more than just skin deep. It needs to be an attitude that springs from the very core of your being, from the very centre of yourself. If we are to be a truly cross shaped church then humility needs to be a core value and driving force throughout every part of church life, within every part of our church structures, at the heart of all that we are as a church.

This is what the Philadelphian Christians are commended for. Their attitude is truly that of Christ Jesus. And it is through this humble, servant attitude that Christ's love is shining through. Shining through and touching even those who oppose them.

Can we be like that?

Well let me tell you, it is a challenge that we cannot afford not to take to heart and respond to. A challenge we need to take seriously if we want these words of promise to the Philadelphian Christians to be words of promise to us as well.

I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. They who overcome I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it.

Let us pray:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death- even death on a cross!

Lord Jesus,

In your journey to the cross you show us what true humility is.

Show us how to live with this same attitude.

Challenge us to be humble in every circumstance.

Change our hearts that together we may be a truly cross shaped church that speaks of your love to all;

In your precious name we pray. Amen.