

Sermon 14<sup>th</sup> February 2016  
11.00am at St Stephen's.  
Holy Communion.

Lent 1

Series: Challenged to change.

Title: Remember your first love.

Readings:

Revelation 2:1-87

Matthew 22:34-40

Sermon:

Welcome to Lent at St Stephen's, and welcome to, Challenged to Change, our series of Lent sermons. We are going to spend the next 5 weeks in chapters 2 and 3 of the book of Revelation looking at some passages that I think I can pretty much guarantee you have not heard many sermons about. And that's because they are passages that offer us some pretty difficult challenges. The Challenge to change offered to 7 early churches nearly 2,000 years ago, and a challenge to change still offered to us as well as part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century church today.

This morning we are looking at Revelation 2 and verses 1 to 7, a short passage that is addressed as a letter to the Angel of the church in Ephesus. And I've called the sermon: Remember your first love.

Let's put a bit of context on this passage and see if we can work out what it might be saying to us. St John is on the Island of Patmos. He is being held prisoner, and from his prison cell he has a vision and writes the book we now call Revelation, or the Revelation of St John. Now, we've got 4 other pieces of writing attributed to someone called John in the New Testament: The Gospel of course, 3 letters, 1 John, 2 John and 3 John, and then Revelation. Are they written by the same person? Well you'll probably be glad to know that I'm not going to try and answer that question as it is a point of argument and has been for many centuries. I'm inclined though to go with those who argue that it is perfectly possible that they are all written by the same person. And I'm particularly persuaded by the argument that the visionary interpreter of the story of Jesus who wrote the Gospel according to John, could be one and the same person who brought us the visionary book of Revelation.

There are in fact hints in some early Christian writings that the disciple John, the one whose care Jesus committed his Mother to while they stood at the foot of the cross, took Mary to live in Ephesus when Jerusalem became too dangerous for those professing a Christian faith. From Ephesus he would have got to know all 7 of the churches that are addressed in these short letters, and from there he was taken prisoner and shipped off to Patmos for a while. It is also said that he may have returned to Ephesus as an old man and been carried into the meetings of the Christians there where he would exhort people to love one another. Certainly his inclusion of Ephesus first in the letters suggest that maybe this was the church closest to his heart and uppermost in his thoughts as he sat languishing in prison.

So John is caught up in a vision of how God's kingdom will be brought to completion, of how the victory will be finally won, and he begins by including 7 short letters to Christian churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea. 7 letters that offer the challenge of Christ to each of these Christian communities, challenge to change. And letters that even now, nearly 2,000 years later, still bring us the challenge of Christ as well, The challenge to change.

The first important thing about a letter of course is to work out who it is from. We know that the source of the writing is Saint John, but what about the source of the words? Well John opens Revelation with these words:

The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ.

John tells us that what he has written are not his words, they are not his thoughts or judgements. Rather they are the words of God, the thoughts of God, given to Jesus Christ and revealed to John by an angel who guides him through the unfolding scenes of his vision.

Then secondly, but just as important, we need to work out who the letter is to, and it seems clear that it is to the Christian church in Ephesus. A church that has had more than its fair share of trouble and persecution over the years. Acts 18 and 19 tell us about how Saint Paul visited Ephesus and planted the beginnings of a Christian community there. The town was a cosmopolitan Roman town with pagan worship at its heart. It was dominated by the temples of Artemis and Diana. You can read in Acts 19 of how the silver smiths, who made their living from making images of Artemis, caused a riot in the town in protest at the new teaching that Paul was advocating and caused him to flee from the town. He left a young and fragile group of Christians who had to find their way within a society that was at best hostile and at worst violent towards them.

So what does Jesus say to the Ephesian Christians?

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. You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

So far so good. That would bring a smile to the face of any Christian. Words of recognition and encouragement from Jesus himself. But then:

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which 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.

You have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.

You have forsaken your first love.

The question to ask is: how can a church that has apparently got so much right, a church that has kept faith under persecution and ridicule, a church that has recognised heresy and weeded it out. How can a church like this also get so much wrong?

You have forsaken your first love.

It's pretty harsh isn't it. It is a harsh rebuke that must have hit the Ephesian Christians like a real body-blow. What he is saying is that they have fallen off of their foundations. Yes, they still seem to be a strong church managing to keep the faith in difficult times, but they are no longer built on the solid rock of the Gospel of God's love in Jesus Christ, but rather on the shifting sands of their human egos. They have become obsessed by what they do, rather than why they do it. They are obsessed with what they are not, rather than what they are. They are obsessed with what they look like, rather than what they believe. In short they have lost their heart. They have forsaken their first love. They have worked hard, persevered and endured hardships for Christ, yet they have forsaken their first love.

Is it possible? Is it possible to be a serving church, a worshipping church, a busy church, a committed church, but not a loving church? Is it possible to be a church with all the signs of success but a church that has lost its way when it comes to love, love for God and love for neighbour?

In Matthew 22 we heard Jesus being challenged about the law. Teacher, which is the greatest commandment? Something that the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law discussed endlessly. In reply Jesus says: The law is not about what you do or what you say. It is not about how much you pray or how much you give. It is not about your theological understanding or eloquence. It is not even about what you do for other people or how you are regarded by others. No, the law is about one thing and one thing only, love:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbour as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

Everything we do and everything we are as Christians must be rooted and founded on just one thing, love. Our love for God and our love for our neighbour. Love that can only come through an understanding of how much God loves you.

But the thing about love is that, if we are really honest, we don't take it seriously enough. We talk about it, we write it on letters and texts and emails, we even say it from time to time, but that isn't really love. No, Christian love is only real when we are prepared to bear its cost. Christian love is only real when we are prepared to give up something of ourselves in order to share love. Christian love is only real when we are prepared to be uncomfortable, when we are prepared to give something of ourselves, physically, mentally, spiritually, materially, for another person. Christian love is only real when we, when you, are prepared to kneel at the feet of others and wash the dirt and grime and filth of their lives away in loving service.

But you can only do this if you yourself have come to a knowledge and understanding of the depth of God's love for you. You can only love in this way when you know that God loves you with an everlasting love. An everlasting love that brought Jesus to give up, not just part of himself, not just a few minutes of his time, not just a portion of his wealth, but the entirety

of himself in order that you, yes you, could know how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ for you.

This is our first love. This is your first love. This is the love that the Ephesians have forsaken. The love that they have forgotten about. The challenge of the letter is to ask ourselves, have we? Are we a community rooted in love? Are we a community prepared to bear the cost of love? Prepared to pay its price? Or, and this is where it gets even more challenging, are we a church that has become caught up in its busyness? Maybe even become proud of its busyness, and at the same time lost its heart, its heart of love.

There is a lesson to learn from verse 6 of Revelation 2. It says this:  
But you have this in your favour: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

The Nicolaitans were a parasitic sect that had attached its self to the Christian church. It was probably led initially by a man called Nicholas but that is not certain. The Nicolaitans practised a faith that mixed some Christian belief with the pagan practices of Rome. In Ephesus this meant being associated with the temples of Artemis and Diana and getting up to all sorts of things that were in no way compatible to the teachings of Jesus or Saint Paul or of living a Christian life. Now clearly this was very off the rails, but the lesson for us today is in thinking about what lies behind this.

Now, many of you will know that St Stephen's is famous for having a glut of Johns! Everywhere you turn, there is a John of some description. I think 7 or possibly 8 of us. So Johns, I wonder if any of you can tell me what the name John means?

Suggestions:

Well, John originates from the Hebrew name, Johanan, which means: Yahweh is gracious, which of course makes it a name to be pretty pleased about.

I have another name though. My second name is Nicholas. Anyone willing to offer any meanings for this name?

Suggestions:

Well, the 'Nicho' bit means one who conquers or subdues, and the 'las' bit means the people. So Nicholas is a rather different name, it means: one who subdues or conquers the people. Interestingly for me, because of the job I do, or the role I have, the 'las' bit of Nicholas is the root of the word laity, the word the church uses to describe everyone who is not ordained. So my middle name Nicholas actually means: one who subdues or conquers the laity! I'll leave it up to you to tell me if it is a name I live up, or maybe rather, live down, to here at St Stephen's.

What there is no doubt about though is that the charismatic leader of the Nicolaitans lived completely up to his name. The sect was one that drew people in, captured them and then manipulated them. Nicholas and his followers were definitely people who knew how to conquer and subdue the people. They were in fact the total polar opposite of the model of a Christian community rooted in love and loving service of each other. The lesson is this: It's not enough just to hate what is wrong, you have to do what is right! It's not enough just to hate what is wrong, you have to do what is right!

It was nearly a year ago that I preached my first sermon here at St Stephen's. In it I said something that at first worried me when I felt it was part of what I should say. I said: God loves everyone, even the person you like the least.  
God loves everyone, even the person you like the least.

If we are going to be a community rooted in love, then we need to be a community where everyone is loved. There can be no picking or choosing, no one 'more deserving' or 'less deserving,' no one seeking power, no one written off or judged, because if we do any of these things, if any of these things are allowed to settle within our community, then we too, just like the Ephesians have forsaken our first love, the unconditional, undeserved, boundless all-embracing love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Is it possible to be a busy, apparently successful, serving church and still have forsaken our first love? Well yes it is. The challenge to change is to look at ourselves and put love at the very centre of who we are, what we are and what we do.

The challenge is to ask ourselves with true honesty, what is Jesus saying today to the angel of the church of St Stephen's, Canonbury? Yes we are busy. Yes we do a lot, serve a lot of people. But what about love? Our love for one another and those who come through our doors.

Are we rooted in a self-giving love that values and welcomes and embraces everyone? Or is there something that we have forgotten and need to rediscover?

Let us pray:

Lord,

These words cut a deep challenge right to our heart.

Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love.

Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.

It is very easy for us to become consumed by busyness

Or to find our ears and eyes closed to our brothers and sisters in Christ who are different from us.

Teach us what it means to be people of love.

People whose lives and actions are rooted in a knowledge of your abiding love for us.

And empower and inspire us to be people who are willing to bear the cost of love,

The cost of loving even those we find it hard to like.

Show us where we have forgotten our first love,

And renew us as people of love as we seek your renewal here at St Stephen's;

Through Jesus Christ our Lord.