

Sermon for Sunday 20th March 2016
11.00am Morning worship at St Stephen's.
Palm Sunday

Series: Challenged to change
Theme: 'Gold refined in the fire'

Readings:
Revelation 3: 14-22
Mark 11:1-11

Sermon:

Welcome back to the end of our grand tour of some of the towns and cities in the Roman province of Asia, or modern day northern Turkey. As you know, it has been a bit of a whistle-stop tour and we haven't had time to call in at all the places we would have liked to visit. But, having had a short break in Ephesus and heard Jesus' call to 'Not forsake our first love,' then moved on to a few days in Thyatira, where we heard the challenge to, 'hold onto what we have,' followed by a stop off at Sardis, where we were challenged to, 'wake up!' We spent last weekend in Philadelphia, where we heard Jesus' words, 'I have loved you,' and were challenged to think about whether we are a 'cross shaped' church that shows this love in humility amongst ourselves and to the world. Today we've moved on again, to the last of our destinations in this coach tour. We've stopped at Laodicea which is a fairly large and historic city close to two other cities, Hierapolis and Colossae.

So what do we find as we arrive? Well it's very nice! It is clearly a wealthy place. Grand buildings, workshops with skilled craftsmen at work. People are well dressed, they look good. There is a comfortable, wealthy, middle to upper class feel about the place. Laodicea is in fact like Thyatira, a centre for the manufacture and dying of fabric and the manufacture of clothes. It does a good line in makeup as well, particularly known for the eye salve it produces and then sells across the Roman world. Beware though, beware of drinking the water! It is supplied via a long aqueduct from some 12 miles away and on that journey it becomes tepid and polluted. It is in fact not fit to drink and is well known for making people ill. No if you want good water you have to go either to Hierapolis where there are hot springs and the water is hot. Great for washing, pure for drinking and useful for many manufacturing processes, or to Colossae where cold springs supply the cleanest and purest of water. Laodicea's water though is neither hot nor cold. In fact it is pretty putrid and many people who drink it don't just spit it out, but end up vomiting, it's that bad. It hasn't stopped Laodicea becoming a wealthy place though, in fact a very wealthy place. Wealthier than many of the surrounding towns. In AD 60 when a devastating earthquake hit the region, the Laodiceans were able to finance the complete rebuilding of the city from their own wealth without going cap in hand to the regional or the Imperial treasuries for a grant as everyone else did.

So welcome to Laodicea, after that description you might be thinking of moving on, heading off somewhere else. But we are hanging around for a while to see what it

is really like. And in particular we are going to hang around the church and see who we might meet.

Well, this letter to the Angel of the church in Laodicea is probably the saddest of all the 7 letters. Last week in Philadelphia we saw that the Philadelphians were the only church who are only commended and not condemned. In Laodicea we are visiting the only church amongst the seven to be entirely condemned and not commended in any way. Interestingly though, they are not condemned for falling prey to their persecutors, or allowing or tolerating immoral behaviour, or being so wishy washy that their distinctive Christian identity is fading away. No, the Laodicean church doesn't seem to face any opposition. They are a well-established, well-funded, well-resourced church. It seems to them that God has blessed them. Blessed them with wealth and prosperity, with comfort and provision. But the message of the letter is simple really: Whatever you believe about yourselves in Laodicea, the opposite is true.

They are, Jesus is saying, like the water that is piped around the city, neither cold nor hot. Not useful for anything, putrid, nauseating. Jesus says: So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. The Greek used for 'spit you out of my mouth, is in fact a bit stronger than it sounds in this translation. It is in fact the word for vomit. To put it in plain English, Jesus is saying to them: You make me sick! You make me want to vomit!!

It seems that the Laodiceans believe in some sort of 'prosperity theology.' It's not that uncommon today still. They believe that their material wealth is an indication of their spiritual health. They are rich, they are comfortable, so surely they must be right with God.

But Jesus' words in the letter pull no punches: You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so that you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so that you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so that you can see.

Everything about this church is the opposite of what they think. They think they are hot. A fired up church with great worship, plenty of charismatic gifts, and a few dramatic preachers who can stir their hearts. They think they are enjoying the riches of God's blessing in every way. But the problem is that it is all manmade. It is all material, it is all earthly, and so ultimately it is all useless, fading and fleeting.

Jesus urges them to buy 'gold refined in the fire.' He is urging them to see what pointless rubbish the things they count as precious are. The things they count as precious, as signs of God's blessing, would not last more than a few seconds in the fire. But gold is another matter. That is refined by fire, purified by fire. All the rubbish is burned out of it and what is left is pure. Pure gold, nothing but gold.

It's nothing to do with gold at all of course. Gold means nothing to God. In fact you probably all know the old joke about the wealthy man who died with 2 suitcases full of gold by his bed and as he headed for the gates of heaven found himself carrying

the bags. 'What you got there?' asked St Peter. 'My entire life's work!' the man announced proudly, and I've brought it with me.' St Peter opened the bags and stared at the gold bars and the man incredulously. 'What?' he asked, 'you've worked all your life and all you've got is a few bits of pavement to show for it!'

No, the 'gold refined in the fire' cannot be bought with your lottery winnings. And that is because it is not a gold bar, but a golden heart. It is the heart of a life that has put everything into the fire. A life in which you have allowed all material and useless things to be burned up so that all that is left is the simplest, purest, most unpolluted and uncluttered life where the only wealth that you know you need, the only riches that you know you need, are the riches of heaven. The riches of Christ Jesus our Lord.

As we read in Matthew 6:

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

This is Palm Sunday as you know. We are called today to the roadside. Called to stand in a crowd as a man on a donkey rides by. Called to shout and sing and welcome this man as King and Messiah and Christ! 'Hosanna in the highest. Hosanna to the coming King! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest!' We know what lies ahead. The accusations, the last supper, the betrayal, the trial, the condemnation, the torture, the mocking, the crucifixion and death. What we see in all of this is Jesus walking step by step, further and further into the fire. Step by step, further and further into the fire that consumes everything. It consumes his dignity, it consumes his authority, it consumes his mind, and finally it consumes his body. It is an all-consuming fire. As Jesus is laid in the tomb and the sun sets across Jerusalem on Good Friday, there is nothing left. The fire has got it all.

Well of course, that is what appears to have happened. But the refiners fire, as destructive as it is, is not kindled to destroy. No, it is kindled to expose what really matters. It is kindled to purify, to drive out impurity. It is kindled to leave something small, very small, but so much more valuable than the sum of all the things it has destroyed.

In Jesus' death our humanity was destroyed. Everything human in Jesus was destroyed apart from one thing. Everything was destroyed apart from one indestructible quality, love. All that was left was love. Love refined in the fire. The purest of love. Love so pure and so powerful that it lifted the destroyed Jesus from his slab and filled him with new life, resurrection life.

As Christians our relationship with the world is not an easy one. We live in a material world, and to live in this material world we need material possessions. Yes I know some do take vows of poverty, give away all they have and live in

communities of grace. But that's not right for many of us. No, most of us live in the world that requires us to have possessions, pay bills, mend the roof and so much more. Most of us live in the material world and so it is really important that we work out the relationship between our spiritual lives and our material lives. It is really important that we discover how we avoid finding, when we meet Saint Peter, that we have wasted our lives chasing after irrelevant things, but rather that we have allowed the refiners fire to consume all that is irrelevant and useless and lived our lives building up treasure in heaven. Treasure that moth or rust cannot destroy.

And this of course is the big mistake that the Laodicean's have made. Their material lives and the material world around them have blinded their eyes and stopped their ears and closed their hearts and minds to the truth of the Gospel. They have replaced the treasure that God in Christ is offering them, his love refined in the fire, his love that cuts through every human experience, and replaced it with material treasure. Replaced it was stuff that has no lasting quality, no intrinsic value, no real beauty. As the man clutching his suitcases with pride finds as Saint Peter inspects the contents, they have replaced the eternal joy of knowing the fullness of God's love in Jesus Christ, with a few bits of pavement!

But is all lost for the Laodiceans? Well no, there is good news! It is not too late to turn and repent and change.

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 him, and he with me. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

The Famous Holman-Hunt painting inspired by the words: Behold I stand at the door and knock,' has one striking feature. As Jesus stands with lamp in hand knocking on the door, the door has no handle on the outside. Like many doors in London, something that was new to us when we moved here, there is no handle on the outside. The door can only be opened from the inside. There is hope for the Laodiceans, but it is hope that is in their hands. It is they that have to change their lives. It is they that need to change their life-style, their outlook, their priorities. It is only they who can walk into the refiners fire and allow all of their baggage to be burned up. Allow all the rubbish that they have accumulated to be destroyed. Destroyed so that at that moment when they meet Saint Peter his words are: 'Ah! We've been expecting you. Come and see your treasure! The treasure you have stored up in heaven. The gold refined in the fire that is now yours to enjoy for all eternity.'

Is there a challenge in this for us? Well maybe actually that is a personal question that we each need to answer. Is there a challenge in this for you? Are you prepared to step into the refiner's fire? Are you prepared to let God burn up all that weighs you down and ties you up in this life?

Are you prepared to let it all burn until all that is left is something pure and truly valuable? Gold refined in the fire? The pure gold of Christ's love for you. The same pure love that took the dead Jesus and raised him to his feet. Because as we enter Holy Week, as we approach Easter, that is what God is offering to you. New life, resurrection life. Not just when you die, but now, at this very moment. Life that is not tied down and burdened with the worries of the material world, but life in which you are truly free, released to live life as it should be lived.

It is a personal challenge to each of us, but it is a challenge to all of us as the church here at St Stephen's as well. In a few weeks' time you will be reading our annual report and pouring over the 2015 accounts, if you are that sort of person. You'll see lots of big numbers, hundreds of thousands of pounds. You know, it is very easy to get trapped in and by all of this. It is very easy to find that money becomes a straitjacket. A straitjacket for us and for God. A straitjacket that ties up and stifles the work of the Holy spirit amongst us. I think one of the challenges of this letter to Laodicea is to challenge us not to look at God and the work of the Holy Spirit through our accounts, but to look at our accounts through the eyes of God and in the light of the work of the Holy Spirit amongst us. The question we need to ask is not: 'What will the money allow us to do?' But: 'What is the Spirit leading us to do that the money will enable.'

We worship an extraordinary God who in Jesus Christ changed the world. He didn't do it because the numbers added up though! No, he did it because empowered by the Spirit he did his Father's will. The challenge of Palm Sunday is the challenge to follow. To follow Jesus into Jerusalem. To follow him into the fire. To follow him as inspired by the Holy Spirit, He does his Father's will, even though the cost was so great. The challenge for us is, are we prepared to do this? Are we prepared to follow? Are we prepared to take the risk of following, in our personal lives and as a church?

There are some who interpret the 7 letters to the churches as being prophecies of the 7 ages of the church or the Christian faith. From its small beginnings as the early church struggling to take root in a hostile environment represented by Ephesus, through its adoption by Constantine as the faith of the Holy Roman Empire, through the Dark Ages, the Reformation and all the way to today. In that interpretation the church today is the Laodicean church. A church caught up in materialism. A church that is dancing to the tune of the material world. A church that is shaped by the priorities that the material world imposes upon us. A church that is neither hot nor cold, that thinks it is rich but is in fact poor, that thinks it can see but is in fact blind. But, and maybe the most important 'but' of this series. But a church where all is not lost. A church where Jesus still stands at the door and knocks. A church where Jesus still says: 'Let me in! Let me in and I will sit and eat with you and show you the way into my kingdom.'

Maybe the challenge to all of us in this is to ask: Can you hear him knocking? Above the noise, in the midst of the busyness, when everything is pressing in around you and the demands are too much to even think about let alone to try and do something about. In all of this, can you hear him knocking? His quiet,

persistent, gentle knock? His knock on the door of your heart, on the door of your life, on the door of us as a church. Jesus is knocking now, all you have to do, all we have to do, is to stop what we are doing, to lay aside all that is eating up our time and attention and energy, and open the door.

Jesus says, he says to us, he says to you today:

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 them, and they with me. To those who overcome, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I overcame and sat down with my Father on his throne. They who have an ear, hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Let us pray:

Lord,

You know the world in which we live,

For you came in Jesus to walk its streets and bear its burdens.

You know how the world places demands upon us, sucks us dry, forces priorities upon us.

You know how we fail as we make material things a priority,

As we dance to the rhythm of the world rather than to your heartbeat of love.

And yet Lord, you still knock.

Quietly, gently, persistently.

Help us to hear your call to the Laodiceans to repent, to change,

To put the demands of the material world aside and to turn and open the door and let you in anew.

Into our hearts, into our lives, into our homes, into our families, into this church.

Come sit with us, eat with us, touch us and change us,

That the only thing we desire may be gold refined in the fire.

The pure gold of your love poured out in thorns and nails and blood and sweat and your cries of pain.

Lord, may we here in St Stephen's have ears to hear what you are saying to us as your church today,

In your most precious name we pray. Amen.