

Sermon – 26/11/2006 Pm

The Church at Ephesus

Study Text: Revelation 2:1-7

Husbands, love your wives...let each of you love his own wife as himself (Ephesians 5). The apostle Paul was exhorting married people in the church at Ephesus to love their spouses. Marriage counsellors come across many marriages where love has disappeared. The initial flame has dimmed and is barely flickering. The couple may be doing all their duties, working hard to pay of their house or to pay for their children's education. They may be going through all the motions of married life, but the love they once shared is hard to find. Few things are more tragic than a loveless marriage. Such a marriage is in great jeopardy. A loveless church also faces great danger.

John wrote down what he saw in the vision. Now in chapters 2 and 3 he writes a message to the angel/messenger of each of the seven churches, a message given to him by the 'First and the Last' whom he saw in the vision. These messages address the present situation in these churches, although they are linked to the first vision and to later visions. The messages were to be read by all the churches for this book of Revelation was a single letter. The messages were also meant to be read by churches down through the ages. *Blessed are those who hear the words of this prophecy, and keep those things written in it, for the time is near* (1:3).

The messages follow a predictable pattern with most churches being commended before being condemned in some way and exhorted to repent. They begin with a salutation related to the first vision and end with a promise related to subsequent visions. They also appear to be related to features of the particular city

Salutation

The message to the church at Ephesus was from the one standing in the midst of the seven lamp stands (2:2). He is the one who gives light and life to the people of God. *In him was life and that light was the life of man* (John 1:4). Jesus must be in the centre of the believer's life and in the centre of the church that meets in his name.

The church at Ephesus was now some 40 years old. Paul first visited this city on his second missionary journey, but did not stay long. He left Priscilla and Aquilla there to establish the church; Apollos later joined them (Acts 18). On his next journey Paul stayed three years so that *all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jew and Greek* (Acts 19:10, 20:31). Paul visited the church while returning from his third missionary journey – probably in the year AD 57. He met with the elders and opened his heart to them. He wept and they all wept freely (Acts 20:37). He exhorted them to watch out for false teachers. Later on Timothy was in the leadership of this church (I Timothy 1:3). And later still it is thought the apostle John was bishop of the church at Ephesus.

With a deep harbour and roads radiating into Asia Minor and beyond, Ephesus was a thriving commercial centre. Pagan worship also thrived in this city. It boasted the great temple of the goddess Artemis or Diana (Acts 19:35), and later on temples to Roman gods. Ephesus was home to all sorts of superstitions (Acts 19:19). They would have loved 'mind, body, spirit

festivals'! From the earliest times a sacred tree growing close to the temple offered haven for criminals; they were given asylum in this sanctuary.

The gospel of Jesus Christ impacted this city; so much so that trade in idols was threatened (Acts 19:27). But a generation later the tables had turned, and the city was impacting the church at Ephesus.

Commendation

The church at Ephesus heeded the parting words of Paul. They were very diligent in keeping false teachers out of the church. They rigorously tested anyone who claimed to be an apostle and hated those who were evil (2:2). The word 'apostle' means 'sent one'. There were only 12 apostles sent by Jesus, but other 'apostles' were sent by the church or were self-proclaimed. This church was acutely aware of any heresy. They diligently maintained the doctrine handed down to them. For this they were commended.

They also hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans (2:6). This must have been some group within the wider church that had compromised with the world. We are not told anything about their teaching but their deeds did not conform to gospel teaching. Their teaching was probably similar to other groups in the region, namely the followers of 'Balaam' (2:14) and 'Jezebel' (2:20). It appears that they compromised with the world through sexual immorality, and joining with pagans in their worship feasts.

The church at Ephesus worked hard to maintain true doctrine and pure worship. They were also patient and persevering in the face of persecution. It may well have been persecution that led the Nicolaitans to compromise their faith and works. But the true church stood rock solid. With no sign of weariness they pressed on in the work of the Lord.

Condemnation

Nevertheless I have this one thing against you said the Lord you have left your first love (2:4). What was this first love they had left or fallen from, and why was it such a terrible indictment? Was it love for Christ or love for one another? Can love be divided in this way? He who does not love his brother walks in darkness – he does not know the love of Christ. *Beloved if God so loved us we ought also to love one another* (I John 4:11).

Jesus summarised the Law in two commandments, and they were both about love. He gave his disciples a new commandment on the night before his death – *love one another as I have loved you* (John 13:34). Just as faith without works is dead, so works without love is dead. *Though I have the gift of prophecy and understand all mysteries and all knowledge and though I have faith so that I could remove mountains but have not love I am nothing* (I Corinthians 13:2). Though the church diligently upholds true doctrine and maintains purity of worship, though the church rejects outright all who deviate from this doctrine but have not love...then what?

After remembering the death of Jesus in the Lord's Supper some of the people probably asked the leader 'what did you actually mean when you said that the bread was the body of Christ?' When the leader suggested that a particular book of the Bible may have had a certain human author some would have accused him of heresy and sought to have him excommunicated. When the leader read a different translation of the Bible some probably left. Cold formalism had replaced love in this church. The joy of the Lord was nowhere to be found.

What had happened in this church? In the beginning members of this church loved one another deeply. They wept when farewelling Paul. There were no tears now. They supported the weak and the needy just as the church at Jerusalem did. They prayed together and ate together. They had no time for such things now as they were kept busy in meetings examining everyone's doctrines. The church was faithful to Scripture and was unpolluted by the world. But it had become a loveless church.

Exhortation

'Doctrinal purity and loyalty can never be a substitute for love' (Ladd). Maintaining true doctrine does not have to be at the expense of love, though tragically this is often the case. It was the case at Ephesus and it continues to be so in churches today. But it need not be so and must not be so. The church was warned that its lamp-stand would be removed; its very life would be snuffed out if it did not repent and return to that first love (2:5). It may not happen immediately but it would happen surely. Today there is no church at Ephesus.

The church had to refocus. It had to focus again on the light that it had been given. It had to focus on Christ who walked in the midst. They were so focussed on orthodoxy and maintaining true doctrine that they had lost sight of the person who gave them life, even the Son of God. They were told to turn back to their first works, to turn back to Christ in adoration and love. They must put Christ first, not doctrine. They must reflect on the love of Christ in their fellowship and into the world. In this way all men would know they were his disciples (John 13:35). *Beloved, if God so loved us we ought also to love one another* (I John 4:11).

Promise

If they heard and heeded this warning Christ would remain in their midst. They would overcome. In fact Christ has already overcome at his death and resurrection. They would overcome by remaining in him. Defending true doctrine must be done in the strength of the Lord. It must be done in the love of Christ.

They were promised they would eat from the tree of life which is in the midst of the Paradise of God (2:7). What a beautiful picture! Adam and Eve were put in this garden, but were thrown out when they sinned. In Christ we have a way back into the Paradise of God. Jesus Christ died to forgive us our sin when we repent. In Christ we will enter Paradise and eat of the tree of life for ever.

Some suggest that this promise had special significance for the Ephesians because of the asylum tree that was by the temple in their city. Condemned criminals come here for refuge – they came to live. But as we see in the Bible, it takes us back to the Garden of Eden. It also takes us to the end, for the tree of life is there in the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. It is by the river of life flowing from the throne of God, yielding its fruit every month (Revelation 22:2).

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon