

Sermon – 17/12/2006 pm

The Church at Laodicea

Study Text: Revelation 3:14-22

When we lived out west the town water came from a bore. It took some time to get used to drinking the slightly brackish water. Further west at Bourke the bore water was warm when it came out of the ground. It was great for the swimming pool but horrible to drink. It would make you nauseous and vomit. Yet when cooled with ice, or boiled for tea, it was drinkable.

We come to the last of the seven churches to which John sent this letter of Revelation; the church at Laodicea. The most severe condemnation is reserved for this church – *you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked* (3:17). They made Jesus sick; he said *I will vomit you out of my mouth* (3:16).

At the same time the most wonderful of promises is reserved for this church – if they repent and welcome Jesus back into their life and fellowship. They are promised not only a seat at the table with Jesus, but a seat on his throne in heaven. To dine with someone signalled a quite intimate relationship in those days. To sit on a throne means to rule, to rule as co-heirs with Christ (Romans 8:17).

The church at Laodicea must be the best known of these seven churches – it is the lukewarm church, neither hot nor cold. It is well known because of verse 20 – *behold I stand at the door and knock* – although this verse is often used without reference to the church to which it was directed. This verse is a favourite with many evangelists, but as we will see it is actually a warning to a severely backslidden church, not a call to the heathen to believe in Jesus.

No Need

The city of Laodicea was directly east of Ephesus and just a little west of Colossae. When Paul wrote to the Colossians, he also wrote to the Laodiceans, but we do not have this letter today (Colossians 4:16). Epaphras brought the gospel to Colossae and may have brought it to Laodicea also. Laodicea comes within the circle of churches to which John ministered when he was at Ephesus.

Laodicea was situated at the confluence of the Maeander and Lycus rivers. Nearby hot springs supplied warm mineral water to this city. Laodicea was a trading city, full of wealthy business people. It was the home of millionaires, ‘self-made men who worship their creator’ as they say. In AD 40 the city was flattened by an earthquake, but the people refused help from the government to rebuild. Such was their pride and spirit of independence. The Christians in this city reflected the same spirit – as is so often the case.

Jesus introduced himself as *the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of the creation of God* (3:14). In his lengthy introduction to this book John referred to Jesus as *the faithful witness* (1:5). Here Jesus refers to himself as the faithful and true witness. He is faithful to the unchanging truth declared by God through him. He is the Amen, which means ‘so let it be!’ Nothing can change the Amen, or the word that he speaks.

Jesus as God spoke in the beginning – ‘let there be light’ and there was light. In Colossians Jesus is called the firstborn over all creation. *All things were created through him and for him – he is before all things and in him all things consist* (Colossians 1:16). The church at Laodicea would have read these words some forty years previously, but did they remember them now. Let them know that Jesus still speaks with the same power and authority; let us all know this even today.

‘Like its counterpart in Sardis, the church at Laodicea does not appear to have been troubled either by the external pressure of the emperor-cult nor by the distractions caused internally by false teachers. The problem at Laodicea was that the quality of church life did not match the churches own high opinion of itself’. They said of themselves we are *rich, have become wealthy and have need of nothing* (3:17). ‘We are all good, respectable people’ here they said of themselves. ‘Just look at our beautiful church and the good order we maintain. We don’t want anyone coming in here changing things’. Tragically not even Jesus or his word was welcome if he was going to change anything in their church.

Imagine what it would have been like for a new minister going to this congregation. What trouble he would have had if he did not go along with their traditions. If they had been cold, if they were new believers or even unbelievers they would have been ready to listen and learn. If they had been hot they would have been ready to join in the proclamation of the gospel, reaching out to the lost of the city. But they were just warm and comfortable, ready for nothing but to reject any interference in their church.

Some years ago a lady colleague fell down the stairs in front of me. A group of female students also saw her fall. She lay there bruised and bleeding. I went up and offered to help her up and bandage her wounds. ‘I am alright, I don’t need your help’ she shouted. The students came over and saying ‘madam can we help you’. She shouted at them ‘I am alright; I don’t need your help either’.

Some churches, and some individual Christians, take a similar attitude towards any offer of help or any word of criticism, even when it is Jesus offering to help. When they are counselled from the word of God itself they still refuse to listen. Pride is a very dangerous thing.

Naked

The Laodicea church said we need nothing. They were proud and fiercely independent people, qualities admired by the world but not by Christ. Jesus saw them differently. He saw them as wretched, poor, blind and naked. Imagine how these words would go down if told to some churches in our city. How do they go down with you?

Jesus was of course referring to their spiritual condition. The trouble with the Christians at Laodicea, and with many today, is that they equate their spiritual status with their material status. If they are rich they assume that the Lord is pleased with them. What a terrible mistake! Nothing could be further from the truth. The Laodiceans were rich and had need of nothing, but they were poor wretched and naked according to Jesus.

James counselled the churches to which he wrote telling them not to be deceived by those who wore gold rings and fine clothed to church (James 2). They were not to be treated

differently to the poor man who came. The man driving his BMW to church must be treated the same as the man driving his Hyundai. Is this what happens in our church?

How did Jesus counsel these rich and respectable Christians at Laodicea? Firstly he said *buy from me gold refined in the fire* (3:18). What they were boasting of was fool's gold. It would not stand the fire test. Remember there is no mention of persecution in this city. What they needed was true gold, spiritual gold, gold that does not perish. Jesus is the only one who can give such gold. *Buy from me* does not mean they can buy it with their earthly riches. He means come to me for I am the only source of this gold. Isaiah reminds us that is free – without money and without price (Isaiah 55:1).

Secondly, Jesus counsels them to get white garments to cover their nakedness. Laodicea was famous for expensive black wool. It had an industry based on this product. The rich probably paraded around in black garments. Jesus said they needed white garments. White is the symbol of purity and righteousness. Such garments were of course spiritual. The only source of true righteousness is Jesus Christ. Only when we are clothed in the righteousness of Christ is our nakedness and our sin covered in the eyes of the Lord.

Thirdly they needed ointment for their eyes for they were blind. Whether the ointment that Laodicea was famous for was medicinal or cosmetic we do not know – maybe it was both. Indian women layer black ointment around the eyes of their babies in the belief that it will improve their beauty and their sight.

Jesus told the Pharisees they were blind because they did not believe he was sent from God the Father (John 9:39). Only Jesus can open the eyes of the blind. These Christians were very short sighted and in danger of total blindness. 'Get eye ointment from me' said Jesus 'before it is too late'. 'Anoint your eyes that you may see again'.

Knock

The church at Laodicea had fine buildings, a great team of elders and hard working women. They all came to church well dressed. But it was a totally inward looking and self-assured church. They did not welcome outsiders, especially any who did not conform. They were not interested in mission. What would they do with anyone who was converted? It was not easy to get into this church. Not even Jesus was welcome anymore! *Behold I stand at the door and knock* said Jesus.

As mentioned earlier, this verse is often taken out of context. Jesus does not stand at the door of the heart of unbelievers wanted to be invited in. In his sermon on the mount (Matthew 7:7) Jesus said 'seek and you will find, knock and the door will be open to you'. He told outsiders to seek him while he may be found. It was church members to whom he was speaking in this passage.

As many as I love, I rebuke and discipline. Therefore be zealous and repent (3:19). Jesus calls upon this lukewarm church, this church he was ready to spew out his mouth, to repent. He is gracious and ready to bless when they repent. He will come in and be the centre of their fellowship once again. Any fellowship must be centred on Christ if it is to be a true fellowship of Christians. Meeting to play housie or to have a fete does not count. Meeting to have a barbeque or picnic does not count if that is the focus of a fellowship.

Not only will Jesus come in and eat with his people – even these blind and stumbling folk at Laodicea – but he will grant them to sit with him on his throne (3:21). What an amazing promise. How great is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. He has overcome this world; he has overcome death, and is now seated on the heavenly throne with his Father.

In Jesus you also will overcome. This is the promise of the Risen Jesus – if you submit to his discipline and repent. As many as I love I discipline says the Lord. Therefore be earnest and repent. If you think that church at Laodicea represents some other era in the history of the church and does not apply to you today, you of all people need to hear this message and repent.

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