

Sermon
Therfield Chapel
7th December 2008
Revelation 18
Why the world needs a warning label

Songs:

Abide with me MP4
Who can sound the depth of sorrow? MP766
He is the Lord and he reigns on high OH
Lord the light of your love is shining MP445
We shall stand MP737
A safe stronghold our God is still MP2

I want to speak tonight under the heading of why the world needs a warning label

Let me read you a few warning labels:

On a child's superman costume:
"Wearing of this garment does not enable you to fly."

On a Swedish chainsaw:
"Do not attempt to stop the chain with your hands."

On packaging for a Rowenta iron:
"Do not iron clothes on your body."

On Sainsbury's peanuts:
"Warning: Contains nuts."

Now in my time I've come across quite a few people who've abandoned the Christian Faith

When my wife Julie was at school she was friends with a girl called Lucy (not her real name)

In fact Julie and Lucy both responded to the gospel message at the same time at a Christian event for young people

And then for several years Julie and Lucy went to church together

I met Lucy a few times – I remember I was impressed by her passionate prayers and her deep convictions

And then off she went to university and soon she met a non-Christian student with whom she started going out

And it wasn't long before it became quite clear that she wanted little to do with Julie – or their mutual Christian friends

She didn't say anything much; it was just that the relationship from her end went cold

And time passed until eventually one of their mutual Christians friends – a girl called Vicky - sent Lucy a letter in which she asked her some gentle but frank questions about her faith

And before long she got a letter back from Lucy

I remember Vicky reading it to Julie in our lounge

Now I can't recall all of its contents, but one paragraph went something like this:

“I no longer believe what I used to believe. I just can't accept anymore that everyone needs to be converted; that everyone needs to become a Christian. I've come to think that there are lots of good people in this world – people who are kind and loving and helpful. You don't have to be a Christian to be good you know?”

Let me tell you about someone else

In the 1960s, the house church movement in Britain was growing and quite influential in the Christian world

And one of its prominent leaders was a man called George – my dad knew him a little

He had a charismatic personality and was somewhat gifted – he'd had been set part by the movement to be an apostle

George was a passionate conference speaker for perhaps ten years

And then in 1984 he packed his bags (metaphorically) and left the church

He took a regular job and cut himself off from the Christian Community

A few years ago I came across a letter that he'd written about why he left the church – it was entitled 'The One Who Got Away'

It finished like this:

“Discarding my siege mentality, I had to get out of the ghetto. Away from the doctrinal dualism which saw everything as either God or the devil.

The last message I was allowed to deliver at a large gathering was a plea to stop evangelising the world and start loving it. Well, I have now taken refuge in that world, setting up my stall in the market place. From here my view of the world has changed. I see God deeply involved with it. Far from writing it off, he's changing it because of the love affair he has with this world of ours.”¹

¹ In Restoring the Kingdom by Andrew Walker p 284-285.

Now what's interesting about Lucy's and George's letters is that they put there finger on something which – in my experience - always seems to comes out when people abandon their Christian faith

It's the issue of exclusiveness

I've been thinking about this all week in the context of the passage

Something that really seems to stick in the throat is the idea that somehow Christians have the truth and others don't

Or that you have to become a Christian to go to heaven or to live a good life

It seems to be highly offensive that the very essence of Christianity is to see people "saved" – saved if you like from other ways of living

The idea that there's only one right belief system

The idea that if you don't accept those beliefs you are wrong runs right against the grain of today's mindset

The idea that to be a good person, you have to be a Christian

This is how it's often put across

Do you see what I mean by the term exclusive?

Christians, we are told are so black and white; so rigid, so restrictive, so elitist, so 'them and us' – people who hold that there are two camps; the church and the world

Now there are some things which Lucy and George says that I half agree even if what they present is a caricature of the reality

But with a big qualification, both their letters point to something that is essentially correct; there is a division between the church and the world

This doesn't mean that God isn't involved in the society (He is) or that He doesn't care for non-Christians (He does) but it does mean that His people are special to Him and He calls them to be different from the world around

For didn't the Lord Jesus himself say:

^{19b} you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you. (John 15)

And the Apostle Paul

¹⁴ Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? (rhetorical question "nothing") Or what fellowship can

light have with darkness? (none) ¹⁵ What harmony is there between Christ and Belial ¹⁶? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? (nothing) ¹⁶ What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? (2 Cori 6)

The Apostle James 4:4

You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God.

And that's just a tiny selection of texts that we could quote

And that brings us to tonight's chapter (18) – for here we find one of the clearest accounts of the division between the people of God and what Jesus called “the world”

For here in chapter 18 we find a graphic account of the fall of Babylon – the city of the world

And in verse 4 we find a voice from heaven speaking to the Christians:

“Come out of her my people so that you will not share in her sins, so that you will not receive any of her plagues”

So as people who accept the authority of the Bible we hit this radical division between believers and non-believers everywhere – we can't help it – it's right though the Scriptures

But just what is wrong with Babylon?

What is wrong with the world?

Why - and this really got to Lucy and George – why is the world so bad that we are commanded to distance ourselves from it?

Why is the world so bad that God is bent on destroying it as this passage so vividly and graphically reminds us?

Now I know that in one sense we are called into the world to serve it and redeem it – not to live in some monastery or convent somewhere

But there is a separation that is right and proper – and I want to explore this a little more tonight

Just what is the nature of the separation of the church from the world?

Let's go back 1600 years to the 5th Century

In the year 410 AD King Alaric laid siege to Rome and eventually overran it and sacked it²

By this date lots of the Roman Empire had been overwhelmed by those whom the Romans termed Barbarians or Vandals, but the sacking of Rome - The Eternal City – the very heart of the Empire - left the Empire stunned and shaken

And as, so often happens when people are humiliated, rather than blame themselves the citizens of Rome looked around for a scapegoat – they found one in the Christian Community

The reason, they decided, for their defeat was that the empire and the city in particular had neglected of the worship of the historic gods of Rome

And everyone knew what was to blame for that – it was the Christianity

Soon the talk on the streets turned nasty and the Christians were in for a hard time

Living during these years was one of the most famous Christians who has ever lived – Augustine or Saint Augustine as he's often known

Two years after the sacking of Rome, Augustine took up his pen and began writing what has become a classic – The City of God

In it Augustine set out to show that it wasn't Christians who were to blame for the fall of Rome

Instead he persuasively argued that it was the worship of their immoral gods that had made them immoral – and the result was decline, corruption and military weakness

Once he'd done that Augustine then went on to outline a Biblical perspective on history

He did this by tracing through the Bible two distinct groups of people each devoted to a specific city – or perhaps we should say to a specific society

And the two cities or societies are poles apart

One city is devoted to the advancement of the glory of man and is represented in the Bible by the City of Babylon

And the other is the society of God's people dedicated to the glory of God – this society is represented in the Bible by Jerusalem or as we see in a couple of Chapters, the New Jerusalem

As we heard two weeks ago from Andrew Proudfoot, the City of Babylon finds it's origins in the building of the tower of Babel

² This account is taken from James Montgomery Boice, Foundations of the Christian Faith p 559ff.

This (to quote him) “was the site of Man’s first united stand against God, when mankind tried to prove how big they were and that they could live without God”³

Babylon in the Bible is a symbol of humanity opposed to God in its arrogance and pride – it is a world in opposition to Him and against Him

Jerusalem on the other hand is the city where God dwells with His people – it is the place where God is at the centre – it is society that constructs itself around His truth and His priorities

In the Scripture wasn’t it the Babylonian Empire that besieged and sacked Jerusalem in the days of Jeremiah and Ezekiel?

But let me read to you from Daniel 4 to get a flavour of the theme of Babylon:

²⁸ All this happened to King Nebuchadnezzar. ²⁹ Twelve months later, as the king was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, ³⁰ he said, "Is not this the great Babylon I have built as the royal residence, by my mighty power and for the glory of my majesty?"

Babylon is a picture of pride and self-sufficiency

With its architectural splendours and hanging gardens the actual city was built to represent the pinnacle of human excellent, triumph and power

And yet by the time we get to the rebuilding of Jerusalem by the Jews, the City of Babylon is soon to be destroyed never to be rebuilt

Today, if you put ‘Babylonian ruins’ into Google you will find loads of photos of a site in Iraq that obviously was once an ancient city but is now crumbling and deserted

Now although the earthly Babylon was destroyed long ago, the picture it still paints in the Bible is one of humanity living without its Creator

Babylon is the story of fallen man

It is man seeking to build a city – a society - whose maker and builder is man

It is a world where the version of reality espoused has no place for the its Creator

It is humanity seeking its own good; its own priorities; its own pleasures with no reference to its Maker

And this is where the gospel of Jesus Christ becomes so offensive to the minds of so many in our society

For this takes us back to where we began, to Julie’s school friend Lucy and to George the former church leader

³ Sermon by Andrew Proudfoot on Revelation 17.

I think that both in some ways missed the point

For Babylon – or the world – is not necessarily a bad place or an evil place

It's not that many good things aren't done within it by many well-intentioned and kind people – for they are

Many good things are done by people who are after all made in the image of God

No, Babylon is offensive to God and needs converting because it is society trying to define itself and perfect itself in many case with its Creator shut firmly out of the door

That's why it needs to be witnessed to and evangelised

What Augustine reminds us is that in its most blatant form, the City of Babylon is human beings trying to unseat God and replace Him as the final deciders of what is right and wrong

It is really the collective fulfilment of the fall in Genesis 3

It is the spirit of Adam and Eve that finds expression in their descendents who declare –like they did - independence from their Creator and who announce, “we will do our own thing and make our own way”

Babylon is the collective desire to be independent and god-like in oneself

It is mankind seeing itself as the owners of this world rather than as tenants in it

To be part of Babylon means to construct a world that revolves around me rather than around the Lord Jesus

And in Britain today, it is constructing a world where it seems normal not to believe in God

And – perhaps most seriously of all - it is rejecting the One who God sent into the world as its Saviour – something our society calls an intellectual decision but which is to God deadly treachery

It is the unwillingness of the human heart to admit their need of God

And in the end that is the essence of sin

It is – and this sounds harsh – it is entering into the same mode of that crowd on the first Good Friday day and faced with their Creator joining in the chorus “crucify, crucify”

Its saying in the deepest recesses of our hearts, “We will not have the man to reign over us” – that's the cry of fallen human beings

Imagine if we'd been around in 1953 and for some reason had been invited to Westminster Abbey to witness the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II

Let's imagine that once she'd been crowned we'd decided to rush up to the front and grab the crown off her head and place it on ours, announcing that we are king or queen of the land – it would be treason

But that's the spirit of the City of Babylon and why God hates her and calls His people out from her

The world, says theologian David Wells is: “The collective expression of every society's refusal to bow before God, to receive his truth, to obey his commandments, or to believe in his Christ”⁴

And that's why there is a divide between God's people and those who are not His

That's why to talk about the world can seem so divisive and exclusive – but to some extent it is inevitable

Not every lifestyle choice is equally valid – the fact is that some lifestyle choices are highly offensive to God and incur his wrath and judgment

That's why the world needs a warning label on it

God is not equally accepting of us regardless of how we live

The point – going back to Lucy and George - is not that Christians are better than non-Christians

That misses the point

The difference between the two cities Jerusalem and Babylon, between the church and the world is that those from the former have confessed their need of a Saviour and have thrown themselves on God's grace and said, “Have mercy upon me a sinner”

And on that basis they have found that God is delighted to accept them

But Babylon in its refusal to recognise its need of God – in its self-sufficiency and pride and unwillingness to accept the need a Saviour is grossly offensive to God

And so the difference between both groups is huge

Because you see, the success or failure of a life is bound up with what we do with Jesus

Now this chapter concerns the fall of the great city of Babylon – the fall of the world system

⁴ God in the Wasteland p39.

And when we study it we find idolatry, complacency, arrogance, economic exploitation, materialism and opposition to God's people

But the point is that God has decreed that all forms of Babylon will come to nothing – whether it be the literal city of Babylon or the Roman Empire or the Third Reich or the Communist world or the society based upon Liberal Democracy – all will come to nothing if it is constructed on anything other than God

And there will come a day when the final form of Babylon will be judged and wiped away to be replaced by the true eternal city, The New Jerusalem which – as we shall see - comes down out of heaven

For the City of God will stand forever and ever