

"First Love"

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| <u>Occasion</u> | Evening Service at Therfield Chapel |
| <u>Day, Date & Time</u> | Sunday 8 th June 2008 at 18:30 |
| <u>Basis</u> | Revelation 2:1-7 |
| <u>Reading</u> | Revelation 2:1-7 |
| <u>Songs</u> | from Mission Praise: 346, 381, 318, 302, 447, 494 |
| <u>Author/Speaker</u> | Paul Rydon |

Tonight, I want you to recall your first love.

For some, this may be painful,
because that first love may not have worked out.
It may have been disastrous.
Or it may never have happened at all.
But bear with me if you will.
What was it like?
Do you remember that first touch?
That first kiss?
That special time when suddenly the world got brighter
and you had that delicious feeling in the pit of your stomach?
Maybe you lost your appetite.
Suddenly there was something different.
Someone had come into your life in a very special way
and you knew, you just knew, that he or she was the 'one'.
The 'one' you had been looking for
and now you had found.
The search was over.
This was the beginning of a new life?
A fresh chapter in your existence that would be brighter
and better than the one before?
Will this love last?
Will this excitement continue?
Is it real?

Ruth and I still recall when I,
as a young self-conscious 21 year-old,
picked her up and carried her over the sand,
to save her shoes.

Something happened at that moment

that changed the course of our lives.
It is good to remember such times,
for they become defining moments
that need to be preserved from the ravages of life.

Maybe for you the ravages of time have destroyed those moments.
Maybe you have lost your first love and found another.
Or maybe you have never found another and you feel cheated. -
that life, or God, has let you down.

Yet strange as it may seem,
that very moment that you feel that loss of love,
is the time when you are able to empathise with God himself.

It is this very idea of lost love
that leaps out of our passage today.
The notion that there was once a very special personal relationship,
something to be treasured and preserved,
something beautiful and delicate,
yet now it is gone.

We had it,
we experienced it in all its sweet emotion and joy,
but it is no more.

Again, I ask you to think back in time,
to when you first believed.
Can you recall the moment that you felt the thrill of knowing Jesus.
Can you remember the day,
the month,
the year
that you said 'Yes' to Jesus?

Many cannot.
I cannot.
For from the cradle, I was taught that Jesus loved me.
But I can remember at the age of seven,
that I confessed I loved Jesus.

When I was about fourteen,
I stepped forward (so to speak) and aligned myself with His people.
I asked to break bread (to take communion) with the Christian Brethren,
on the basis that I loved Jesus and accepted him as my Lord.

Think back to *your* time.
The time *you* knew that Jesus would be the Lord of your life forever.
Remember the emotion.
Remember the commitment.
Remember the love and the promises you made.

Are they still there,
or are they lost in the mists of time and the busyness of life?
Or were they never there at all?

So, turning to our passage,
we find John, in exile on the isle of Patmos,
writing, as bid by the risen Lord,
to the seven Churches in Asia Minor.

What we have before us is John's written record of his vision.
He sees the risen Lord in all his glory,
standing amongst seven lamp stands.
In His hand he holds seven stars
and out of His mouth comes a sharp two-edged sword.

From other scriptures we understand that the two-edged sword is the Word of God
and we are told in verse 20 of chapter 1,
that the seven stars are the seven angels or messengers
of the seven churches
and the seven lamp stands
are the seven churches.

In verse 11 of chapter 1
John is told to write down what he sees
and send it to the seven churches,
to Ephesus,
Smyrna,
Pergamum,
Thyatira,
Sardis,
Philadelphia
and Laodicea.

In Chapters 2 and 3,
John records specific messages to each of these seven churches
and today, we look at the message to the church at Ephesus.

It is believed that in his later years, John, the son of Zebedee,
the much loved disciple of Jesus,
moved to Ephesus, together with Mary, the mother of Jesus.
There he continued to build up the church,
becoming bishop
and probably arch-bishop of these seven churches in the same area.
It is thought that while in Ephesus, he wrote his Gospel,
the three epistles included in our Bible,
and the book of Revelation was written on Patmos in the same period.
The date would be in the last decade of the first century AD.

When we look at these letters to the churches as a whole,
we see some common elements.

Each letter is addressed to the 'Angel' of that church.
The word in the Greek is Angelos,

which not only carries the meaning of Messenger,
but also of Bishop.

So the letters were written to the Bishops,
or leaders, of the respective churches.

A pertinent reminder that the risen Lord holds the leaders responsible
for the spiritual health of his church.

To each church
the risen Christ introduces himself with an aspect of the image
which John has just seen.

So to Ephesus, he says,
'these are the words of 'him who holds the seven stars in his right hand
and walks among the seven golden lamp-stands'.

To Smyrna,
He is 'the First and the Last, who died and came to life again'.

To Pergamum,
He is the one 'who has the sharp, double-edged sword'.

To Thyatira,
he is 'the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire ...'.
and so on

Then come his words of approval and reproof.
He knows their deeds.

And these vary greatly from church to church.

And finally there is an exhortation to hear what the Spirit says
and an encouragement to the over-comer.

Though Pergamum was the official capital of the province of Asia Minor
Ephesus was by far the biggest and most important city in the region
at that time.

Its deep water port,
its position on the trade routes
and its prestige as the centre for the worship of Artemis,
Diana of the Ephesians,
made it a centre for pilgrimage and trade.

The apostle Paul first visited Ephesus in Acts 18,
then returned again in Acts 20
and spent two and a half years around 53-55 AD establishing a church there
which would become the most important Christian centre in the region.

When the Jews were banished from Jerusalem,
John came to Ephesus and continued the work started by Paul.

If you go there today, you will find the ruins of a pagan city.
The emphasis is on its religious history
as a centre of the worship of the pagan god Artemis.

Yet you will also find the remains of the St John's Basilica,
a huge Christian Church built after John's death,
and the 'house of the virgin Mary'.

It is not surprising therefore that Ephesus should be the first church
to receive a message from the risen Lord.

He introduces himself as he 'who holds the seven stars'
Remember the stars are the messengers -
the leaders -
those whose duty and privilege it is to guide and teach
and minister to the people of God.

He holds them in his hand.
There is comfort and strength in that hold,
for they are his
and he will sustain them.

There is authority and dependency.
He guides them and cares for their needs.
They have been given authority by him,
but they are dependent on him to fulfil their role.

But then he is also he 'who walks among the seven golden lamp-stands'.
He walks among the churches.
He watches and listens.
He approves and disapproves.
He praises and condemns.
He judges and rewards.

We sometimes say that if Jesus of Nazareth in modern form
came into our churches today,
few of us would recognise him.

Maybe that is true and maybe it's not,
for in Jesus' day only those whom he called
or who sought him
found him.

But when the risen Lord speaks -
the one out of whose mouth comes the double-edged sword -
there is no mistaking that voice,
for it cuts to the core,
discerning between good and evil.

And so to the church at Ephesus, he says,
"I know your deeds".

Humbling, isn't it?
He would say the same to us in Therfield Chapel;
"I know your deeds".

The omnipresent Lord knows not only our deeds,
but our thoughts
and our motives too.

The secret things,
the desires of our hearts,
the wickedness that lies within -
all is known to him who walks among the churches.

I wonder what he thinks of us.

So here, He gives them his approval for their hard work
and their perseverance.
They were an exemplary church.
They did all the right things.
They conducted their church affairs in the right way.
They taught the Scriptures as they should be taught.
They hated evil
and had dealt with the wicked men who would have wrecked the church.
They had listened to the false apostles
and rightly judged them to be counterfeit.
They had upheld the truth.
They hated those who taught falsehood,
in particular the sect of the Nicolaitans.
They had stood against persecution
and had not grown weary in the work.
They were a model church
and to the outside world, there was nothing wrong.

"Yet," says the Lord,
"I have one thing against you.
You have forsaken your first love".

It reminds me of Paul's famous treatise on love in 1 Corinthians 13:
"If I speak in the tongues of angels, but have not love,
I am only a clanging cymbal.
If I have the gift of prophecy
and faith that can move mountains,
but have not love,
I am nothing.
If I give all to the poor,
but have not love,
I gain nothing."

As men and women
we love to build.
Created in the image of God
we have the inherent ability to create.
But because we are proud, arrogant and self promoting,
even what we build for God,
can become something we do for our own satisfaction
if we forsake our love for Christ.

Much should be made of the word 'forsaken' or 'left'
as the King James version has it.
They had not 'lost' there love,
they had 'left' it.
Things are 'lost' by accident, or by the fault of someone else,
but to leave or forsake is an act of the will.

We can get so wrapped up in the mechanics of church life,
that we forget why we do what we do,
and who we do it for.

In fact we become so convinced that the show must go on
that we neglect our fellowship with Christ.

We do what is right ,
But the spark has gone
the light grows dim
and if we are not careful
it will go out altogether.

The church is the lamp-stand,
but the light is Christ
and if he is not at the centre,
the light goes out.

We sing that song, we sang it at Dave's funeral,
"Jesus, be the centre
Be the reason why I live
Be the wind in these sails ...
Be the fire in my heart
Jesus"

If we neglect our love for Him,
If we forsake Him,
All that we do is just a clanging symbol
Empty noises,
Drumming on an empty tin can.

Our first commitment is to Jesus.
And everything else will follow.
But without it, everything else will fail.

So what is the remedy?
The remedy is to think back to the time we first believed,
as we did earlier in this service,
and then repent of our unbelief.

Jesus says, "Remember the height from which you have fallen,
and do the things you did at first".

But what were they,
Surely not more Christian service,
they did plenty of that already.

No. The call is to renew our fellowship with him,
the giver of life.

If they do not repent,
the lamp-stand will be removed and the church in that place will be no more.
There is little evidence of Christ among the ruins of Ephesus today.

"He who has an ear let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches".

There is a message here for us today.

The Spirit speaks to each one of us, both directly
and through the ministry of the church.

There is a warning in these verses

that we here in Therfield Chapel should put our house in order
and renew our fellowship with Christ

both as individuals and as a church.

Unless we repeatedly seek His face

maintain our love for Him,

put Jesus at the centre of our lives,

the Church will fade and die.

Finally there is a message to the overcomer.

Christ is not unaware of the pressures we face

in the strange and self-seeking world of the 21st century.

We may not face overt persecution,

but we face many seductions

that would lead us away from devotion to Jesus.

The temptations come at us from all sides.

We listen to worldly ideas and ideologies from morning till night.

We face a thousand reasons every day why we should not believe in Christ

in the modern world

and we are ridiculed,

ignored

and regarded as inferior minds if we continue to do so.

So the risen Christ holds out hope to the overcomer.

In this letter,

it is to eat of the tree of life in the paradise of God.

Back in Eden,

God placed a flaming sword to guard the tree of Life,
so that Adam and Eve could not eat and live for ever.

Here the one who overcomes is rewarded with access to that tree
so that he will live for ever in the paradise of God.

We look forward to that day.

But until then,

may the risen Lord touch our hearts
and draw us to himself.

May our neglected love be rekindled

so that he in all his victorious glory becomes our centre
and our strength,

that our church may not die,

but remain the place where the glorious light shines out from our lamp-stand
for generations to come

or until he himself returns in all his glory
to take us to himself for evermore.

May God grant us this in his loving mercy.

Amen

Paul Rydon – 8 June 2008