

ROUND CHURCH

Love Actually!

We begin a new series today in the book of Revelation! Revelation is often thought to be a challenging book – and it is! One of the difficulties is understanding what kind of book it is. Revelation is sometimes given the title “Apocalypse” and these words come from the Latin and Greek words meaning “unveiling.” Some understand the book of Revelation as referring only to events that happened in John’s day – that is, past events that happened towards the last few years of the 1st Century AD. That is certainly true, but not the whole truth.

Others understand the book to be more of a panoramic view of world history, continuously unfolding. It is history written in advance, but as we stand now, most of the major events have already taken place. This view may contain some truth. The danger with this view is that you tend to try to fit world events into what you read rather than letting the text speak!

Others want to understand it mostly, with the exception of the first three chapters, as the story of the end times – so it’s about the future. In this view most of the prophecy in the book has yet to be fulfilled. There must be truth in this view, but if that is only what it’s about it is a very narrow view and denies perhaps that it spoke directly to the people it was written to in the 1st Century AD.

Others see it as a book about principles, that it is symbolic and stands for all believers in all times. The point here is that victory lies at the heart of the Christian faith! Wonderfully true! But perhaps it is a bit more real than that too!

For me the book of Revelation is a bit of all of those views but not one at the exclusion of the others. Think of it like this: building up a colour picture for a magazine, you start with one colour, then you add the next; blue, then red, then yellow until you have built up a complete picture full of different colours but making one image!

It seems Revelation really tells one story from lots of different perspectives. Each one gives something new and different, but part of the whole. Sometimes it's a heavenly perspective that is being told. Sometimes the theme, or colour, is judgement. Sometimes it's the story of victory! It's the story that stretches from Christ's first coming to his second coming. It's for the readers in the First Century AD to whom John was writing, but it's also very definitely for us today, right now in the world as it is today.

This book was written to strengthen the Christians in John's day and in ours. It was written to bring encouragement in the true apocalyptic manner, to believers under great pressure assuring them that their enemies would, in the end, be destroyed and God would be triumphant. It was also written in the true prophetic manner to bring the challenge that believers must combat the subtle forces of evil within themselves because Satan must be overcome and Christ given his rightful place here, and now, in their own lives – both spiritual and moral.

Are you ready?

We're going to look at the part of Revelation where John writes specifically to seven churches. I've called this series Round Church – and here's why. This was a letter that would have been carried to, and read in all seven of the churches. Each church would have read and heard words written to itself, but also read and heard words written to the other six churches.

Biblically 7 is the perfect number. Could it be that the symbolism here is about the whole church? Could it be that when we read what is written we're not meant to identify with just one of them, but be challenged and encouraged by all of them? Could it be that if we now, today, in our time, can learn from Revelation, we become more the Round Church that is truly the church of God?

Well from where I stand that's the challenge. So... here we go!

To the Church in Ephesus

“To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands. ² I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. ³ You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

⁴ Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. ⁵ Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. ⁶ But you have this in your favour: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

⁷ Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God. (Revelation 2 v 1-7)

As does the book of Ezekiel, Revelation begins with a vision of God. God reveals himself to John and gives him a message for his people.

Prologue

1 The revelation from Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, ² who testifies to everything he saw—that is, the word of God and the testimony of Jesus Christ. ³ Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near. (Revelation 1 v 1-3)

God, through Christ himself wants to speak to his church, and friends, he still does! Friends, when we come to this place week by week, it is Christ we come to meet, the risen Christ we come to worship. Christ still has words for his church, for you and for me. Christ describes each church as a lampstand (1v20) bringing truth and light for a world in darkness. And that would be an impossible task, an unattainable dream, a back-breaking chore, were it not for a vision of Christ at the centre of our lives together. So, as in Ezekiel, this message begins with a vision of God, the God who sees, and knows, and comes to encourage, challenge and strengthen.

Ephesus was a major port on the east coast of Asia Minor. It looked across the Aegean Sea towards Greece. It was a thriving city and a centre for business,

trade and commerce. It was known as a city that had everything. Even by the time this letter was written it had a rich history of church leaders. Paul spent three years in Ephesus and John, now writing this letter, was in the church many years before. It is the only church to have two letters written to it, the one written by Paul which we call Ephesians, and this one written by John!

Now, though, God has some words for them which are crucial for its very life. "These are the words of Him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands." Christ walks amongst his church. Christ walks among you here, right now, today. That is surely both an encouragement and a challenge. It's an encouragement because he is with us, right here and right now in these very moments. How much do we welcome him? It's a challenge because he sees, us, right here, right now in these moments. What does he see?

In the church in Ephesus he sees some really good things: he sees their deeds, their hard work and their perseverance. This was a church that was busy, but they worked hard. This was a church where even though they worked hard, they did not grow weary. What they did was costly in time and energy, yet they gave exhausting service to their church and to God. They were busy and working hard but they did not get tired of the jobs they were given. They were a church that demonstrated perseverance in the face of severe social pressure. They were being snubbed, ostracised and hated and suffering violence for their faith...but they were hanging on. This is a church that has not been drawn away by false teaching. This is church that has a passion for the truth of God and will not be easily led by something that sounds good, but isn't.

Does any of this remind you of any church you know?

Well I know a church that God would commend for their deeds. I know a church that is busy but where people work really, really hard. I know a church where even though they work hard, they don't grow weary – they always want to keep serving! I know a church where what they do is costly in time and energy, yet where they give exhausting service to the church and to God. And I say "Well done! And thank you Crawley Baptist Church." Thank you for persevering; thank you for keeping on keeping on; thank you for your unwavering service in the deeds of this church. And I honestly think that as he walks among us in these moments, Christ himself would say to you: "Well done, good and faithful servants."

Your dedication and commitment to this church community is worthy of the gospel of Christ – a prophetic statement!

Christ says to the church in Ephesus: “But I have this against you, you have forsaken your first love.” One commentator writes this: “These believers had not only become professional and perfunctory in the expression of their faith, they had become deluded by the importance of service, placing it above their love for Jesus Christ.”

No one is quite sure if “first love” refers to love for Christ, love for one another or love for those outside the church. In truth it is probably all of them since one flows from the other! Does this remind you of any church you know?

Let me ask you another, really quite important question: “How’s your heart?”

You may notice there are a number of similarities between the book of Revelation and the book of Ezekiel. At the end of Ezekiel we talked about the river of life where salty water became fresh; where there was an abundance of fish and where trees grew producing fruit. This is the river flowing from God to us, and then from us to others. It seems to me the only way this happens is through personal transformation. That means I must be transformed and you must be transformed.

People said to me what a great service it was three weeks ago – the last in Ezekiel. What difference has it made to you? To this community?

Personal transformation comes when we are confronted with the love of Christ. How’s your heart?

The challenge in this letter is quite frightening: without love, the lampstand will be taken away. Without love there is no church! Tragically the lampstand was removed, church and city have vanished – all that remains is a commemoration to, ironically, John!

Paul writes that if I don’t have love I am nothing. Round church is a church with love at its core. It is a church that has the love of Christ at its centre and out of which flows love for one another and for others.

The church in Ephesus was urged to remember what Christ had done and remember how they were in the throes of their first love. They were to repent, to turn around from things that had drawn them away, and they were urged to repeat the things they once did.

Friends, some people have told me they think things are changing in this church. I really hope that's true. I know it starts in my heart - personal transformation. And friends, in your hearts - personal transformation. It comes through walking the Ancient Paths; praying and fasting; reading God's word; meeting together. It comes when we choose to love one another in all its various forms; when we, you, I, choose to move towards one another in love. When our love is rekindled, growing, fervent, it grows for those outside this community!

So as we seek to walk towards a new vision, it will be nothing without love! Wouldn't it be great if when asked why they came into this community, people's first response was to say, "Oh that's easy. It's love actually!"

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 10th May 2015, by Rev. Ian Phillips.