

Revelation 2: 1 - 11

**“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.”** I think this famous line fits with today’s passages too!

**Firstly we have a section to the church in Ephesus.** This is a church Paul founded along with Timothy, the church to which the letter to the Ephesians is written. And by the sounds of it they’ve been doing well, they have worked hard they have persevered, they have tested claims, they have endured hardships they have not grown weary.

Doing well – well done them! Churches lasting throughout the generations is something to be celebrated. A church that has stood the test of time as it were.

But they’ve got something wrong. They’ve moved away from the ‘love’ they had at first. The Love for God or each other has fallen by the wayside. They’ve gotten too bogged down in other things and forgotten what they were there for. And they are called to repent. To listen – **‘whoever has ears’**... And this call to repentance is rewarded with a sharing in the paradise of God.

**Secondly we turn to Smyrna.** Here people are again doing well, sticking to their faith, persevering – but they are struggling. Struggling with finances, struggling with persecutions, with arrest, imprisonment, death-threats. And amongst this struggle the church is called to be faithful. To remain faithful.

To listen – **‘whoever has ears’**. And to be rewarded for their faithfulness by not being **‘hurt by the second death’**

**So two calls – a tale of two churches ...**

As the passage opens Jesus walks among the lampstands – the churches – Jesus is close to the churches, he knows what is happening, he is there with them. He is paying close attention. Deeds, hard work, perseverance ... lots of ‘ministries’ lots of things going on ...

Don’t tolerate wickedness and test those who claim to be apostles. They are ensuring they are morally upright and they uphold truth, they have suffered loss, and hardship. **But they have forgotten their first love.**

**The church in Ephesus** has been working hard – doing well, yet lost its way.

How often I wonder does this happen? Sometimes I think churches get hung up on how many people are in the building on a Sunday. How many ‘ministries’ the church has or how many people they serve. Now – these are all good things, a church that is growing, a church that is serving in many ways is wonderful – but only if there is love ...

Love for Christ. That is the measure of a healthy church Spiritually.

They are doing good things – but not out of the right motivation. They aren’t doing these things for the love of Jesus (as they used to) but instead are doing them for a different reason ... He calls them to repent. Not to wait, to see what happens, to remember and repent.

Love for church has come before love for Jesus.

**If this letter were written to us here in Whitchurch, would it say the same thing?**

I think it would be wrong to definitively say yes, or no. I think it would be a ‘perhaps’ or an ‘at times’ or maybe you might go as far as ‘some of us’ at which point I think you might need to think about specks and logs ...

I think all of us can be guilty of sometimes doing good things – great things, wonderful acts of ministry or service for the wrong reason. Sometimes we do something and we present it in a certain way, or so that we appear a certain way to others. Or sometimes we do things because: “well we always have, so we will” a sense of compulsion or an external drive that isn’t for the Love of God.

The love of God should be our driving force, we should do all things with love. As **1 Corinthians** tells us: **‘Repent, turn and be forgiven.’** The forgiveness is there – God is ready and waiting each and every time ... again and again – this is what we are celebrating at Easter surely!

And when we do – we will be rewarded – Revelation speaks of the reward of sharing in the right to eat from the tree of life.

Did you spot the Genesis imagery here? The paradise that was the garden of Eden – a perfect place, walking with God for all eternity ... **That's one church – in the best of times, having the worst of attitudes.**

**The second church: The church in Smyrna** is also known and loved by God. But they aren't doing so well. Things are hard, the times are tough. They were suffering and struggling. In Smyrna following Jesus meant not only would you lose your property but maybe even your life ...

Once again, here we have the words: **"do not be afraid"** and it's paired with: **"be faithful"** it's an encouragement to keep going, to remember Jesus with them.

Discipleship, following Jesus means giving up everything and suffering loss for his name.

Sometimes we avoid suffering by compromise – there is a lot that comes against us as the church, lots of accusations, some founded, some unfounded ... some hated for holding onto the truth of Scripture and the idea that sin is serious and we can't sort it out by ourselves and we need God's grace – it goes against the grain for so many and they are opposed.

I think sometimes there's a temptation to dilute the gospel, to lower our standards to reduce offence. I'm not suggesting we should stir up arguments but can you imagine what would happen if we maintained the high moral standards Jesus calls for?

I think we would lose possessions, wealth, friends, family, work, perhaps even our lives.

But this is what Jesus is saying faithfulness requires sometimes willing to suffer such losses for the sake of Jesus.

**If this were the letter written to Whitchurch, would it say the same thing?**

Can you answer a definitive yes or no to this one?

It may not be, as perhaps we explored a moment ago, that we've diluted things or we've not been faithful ...

But actually I think it may do – it may speak of perseverance, of faithfulness even through the dark times of Covid. Of faithfulness to God through prayer, through service, even through adapting and changing due to circumstance, not to keep up appearances but through love - the opposite of what we talked about a moment ago.

And Covid has been hard, and there are moments when we are fearful and scared – but here we have another reassurance and encouragement – we will not be hurt by the second death – we will spend eternity with God.

**This is about having the worst of times but having the best attitude.**

So our tale of two churches is complete - Love and a willingness to sacrifice are the two things highlighted here that distinguish healthy church and followers.

**Love God** – be motivated because of his love for you – even to death on a cross – to love in return ...

**And be willing to sacrifice** – be willing to give up everything – to lose life for the sake of Jesus and the gospel – in order to save it.

At the end of A Tale of Two Cities there is this line – just after a rather unhappy ending ...

**"It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to, than I have ever known."** I guess we could adopt this slightly here – putting aside the drunk selfishness of Sydney Carton – the lead figure of the tale, who takes the place of another person to help the woman he loves – he maybe makes the sacrifice selfishly – as in to be remembered for *something* or actually out of a self-less love for Lucie and wanting her to be happy with the man he died for.

**I wonder if we could do a far better thing – remember Christ, be motivated by his love, his desires for all. To remain faithful even to death ...** And do so knowing that the far better rest, that we could ever know, awaits us – a rest, a paradise of Eternal Life with God. Amen.