

“LETTERS FROM THE LORD – 8: LAODICEA”

Revelation 3:14-22

Well, we've made it to the end of this short series of sermons on the letters which Jesus told John to write to the seven Christian churches dotted around the west of Asia Minor at the end of the first century. It hasn't been an easy ride as we have heard the challenges that Jesus Christ has thrown down to churches that are too complacent, comfortable or compromised. Although there have been compliments from Jesus about the ways in which the Christians in these seven cities are coping with the constant pressure on them from the worshippers of pagan gods, the enforcers of Caesar worship and the slanderers and informants amongst the Jewish ex-pats, there have also been some very strong words of rebuke which have echoed down through the generations into our situation in twenty-first century Lichfield.

And here we are this morning, in the city of Laodicea. Laodicea was one of three towns that stood quite close to each other in the Lycus Valley. Hierapolis and Colossae were the other two, each about six miles away from Laodicea, and they had a number of links, not least that Paul wrote to them as a group of three churches and they appear to have been overseen by the same leader, Epaphras. We can gather that much from what Paul writes in *Colossians 4:13,16*). The city was founded in 250BC by Antiochus II and he named it after his wife Laodice.

It stood in a commanding position at the bottom of the Lycus valley and was originally intended to be a military outpost to defend the lower valley against the barbarians from Phrygia, but its position at the foot of the valley also meant that it was an important commercial centre as three vital trade routes converged on it, bringing enormous wealth to the city. When the Romans took it over in 133BC it also became an assize town and so, by the time John wrote this letter to them towards the end of the first century, Laodicea was a town of enormous strategic, commercial and administrative importance. And partly because of the commercial situation, there was a large community of Jewish people who lived in the city.

There are four particular things about the city that are especially relevant to this letter. We've already mentioned the wealth of Laodicea. Not only was it the crossroads for a number of trade routes, but it was also THE centre of banking and finance for the whole of the province of Asia Minor – an early Wall Street or City of London. And that wealth enabled it to be self-sufficient in every way. We've mentioned a couple of times in previous sermons the great earthquake that struck this region in 17AD. There was help then from the Emperor Tiberius for the rebuilding of the city. But another earthquake in 60AD reduced the city to rubble and this time all offers of help were refused and the city was rebuilt using its own funds. This was a very rich place to live – and the people there believed they had it all.

Part of the wealth came from the textile industry – which was quite common in this area. Laodicea's wealth was based on the fine black wool which came from a breed of sheep reared in the city. Not only was the wool produced, but the garments made from it were exported all over the known world. Certain garments were particularly associated with the city – a waistcoat called a *trimita* was one and the city was even referred to as Trimitaria because of it. The link between clothing and textiles and the place of origin is still part of life today – Arran wool and sweaters, Harris Tweed, Brentford Nylons.

Thirdly, there was a famous medical school in Laodicea. The city had been associated with the Asian god of healing, Men, and his Greek counterpart, Asclepius (remember the Temple with the snakes in Pergamum). But the Laodiceans also applied scientific ideas to their treatment and an ear ointment was manufactured in Laodicea. And, more importantly, as we shall see, their principal export was something called "*tephra Phrygia*" – Phrygian ointment. This was a tablet which, when ground down and mixed with water became a very successful eye salve.

Finally, we need to note that Laodicea was built in a position that was determined by militarily strategic considerations, so it wasn't ideally situated for some of the necessities of life. There wasn't, for example, any water source nearby, so the city's water supply was carried six miles by aqueduct and when it arrived in the city it was usually rather tepid and unappetising. Archaeologists have found white deposits along

the remains of the aqueduct which point to the water being full of calcium carbonate as well, which didn't help. It was all in marked contrast to the nearby city of Hierapolis, which had hot springs with very sought after medicinal qualities, and Colossae, where the water supply came from cold springs in the mountain and was noted for being very refreshing.

So here was a city which was very rich, successful and self-sufficient, in a commanding position militarily, financially and commercially. It felt it needed no-one and was immensely proud of its situation. And it was in such a city that there was the only one of these seven churches of which Jesus Christ has nothing good to say.

This letter comes from Christ who calls himself "*the Amen, the faithful and true witness*". The second part of that, linked to 1:5, is really an expansion of the word "Amen". That little Hebrew word, which is very familiar to us in our prayers, is the word with which Jesus so often began his teachings – "*Verily, verily ...*" in the older versions, or "*Truly I say to you ...*" It's an indication that what follows is pretty serious stuff and that's certainly the case here. His readers and listeners – then and now – had better sit up and take note of what he's got to say. And the seriousness of that message is all the more apparent when we realise, as we've already noted, that this letter contains nothing to commend the Christians at Laodicea. Jesus begins with the familiar little phrase "*I know your deeds*". He is aware of what they're doing – or not doing – and it quickly becomes obvious that those deeds are not really worth talking about. Once again – just like the church in Sardis – the problem is **complacency**. Here is a church that, like the city in which it is situated, thinks it's the bees knees – but the reality is sadly a long, long way away from that. Let's look at what Jesus has to say to them – and keep our minds open to the idea that he might well be saying it to us as well.

Jesus Christ knows their deeds and they make him sick! Just like the water that flowed into the city along a six-mile aqueduct in the hot Phrygian sun, the Christians are lukewarm. They're not hot and life-restoring like the spa at Hierapolis, nor are they cool and refreshing like the mountain springs of Colossae. They're just a bunch of lukewarm, good-for-nothing churchgoers. It would seem that there is little commitment and no real enthusiasm. It's a kind of neutral, bland Christianity which is no good to man nor beast.

Now, I've always taken this to be about their attitude: they are lukewarm in a take-it-or-leave-it kind of way, with no real passion either way. That is an interpretation that is often put on this description of the Laodiceans. Indeed, Thomas Hardy wrote a novel called *The Laodiceans* (not one of his better ones, it has to be said) about a couple of people who rarely got passionate about anything. But Christ links it here very especially to their deeds, to what they do. And he wouldn't necessarily be commending them for being cold towards him rather than hot – "*I wish you were either one or the other*" (v15). It's clearly linked to the image of the water supply, as we've said – not hot enough for one thing, nor cold enough for the other. In fact, it's just totally ineffective, as well as being rather unpleasant – a bit like tepid tea when you were expecting something nice and hot, or tepid water when you wanted cooling down on a hot day. Their complacency has led to their being totally ineffective. They think they've got it all sorted out, but actually, they're going nowhere and not really achieving anything worthwhile. And Jesus says it makes him sick – "*I'm about to spit you out of my mouth.*"

You see, they think they've got it all sewn up – just like the populace at large in Laodicea. They think they're rich, comfortable, all sorted out. The money's there, the trappings of success are there, even the vision is there. But with great sadness, Christ has to say to them, "*you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked*". It's like Hans Christian Andersen's story of *The Emperor's New Clothes* – but, because everything seems to be OK, no-one really wants to acknowledge that there's any real issue.

Again in this situation – like the situation in Sardis – the Laodicean Christians are not being persecuted, despite the presence of the many pagan temples and the large community of Jews. They had no real opposition, no pressing problems in that sense. So they were sitting back and taking their ease. And that's the most insidious and harmful of Satan's tricks to nullify the effect of the Christian church – he

renders them ineffective. We need to keep asking ourselves if we are being effective, if we're actually doing any good in terms of the spread of the Kingdom of God. Are we making an impact with the gospel on this community? Or are we operating just as another arm of social services, a part of Nick and Dave's *Big Society*? There's nothing intrinsically wrong with that – so we convince ourselves – but we are called to do more than that. We were reminded at the Elders' Meeting this week that our membership is falling and we haven't had any baptisms for a long time now. You may not necessarily consider those things to be measures of our effectiveness, but we do need to pause and think about it. Have we become lukewarm – ineffective – because we are being complacent? And, if so, what's to be done?

Well, Christ offers these Laodiceans some advice. They need to sort themselves out – and he expresses it all in imagery that would have been very familiar to them. Forget the sham of riches and success – what they need is “*gold refined in the fire ... white clothes to wear ... salve to put on your eyes.*” These poor, naked, blind Christians are to be renewed as Christ offers them the right materials for growth and spiritual progress.

Firstly, he offers them the gold of spiritual riches rather than the dross of worldly wealth. And those riches are available to us as we pay careful attention to our relationship with him – through Bible study, prayer, confession, reverence. Then he offers the white robe of holiness. We've come across this symbolism before in these letters (particularly at Sardis, if you recall). Our sinful, fallible, self-sufficient and self-satisfied lives need to be clothed with his righteousness: we need to appropriate for ourselves, through the grace of God, the holiness of Christ. Finally Christ offers renewed vision. Just as the eye salve from Laodicea allowed the patient to see clearly again, so the ointment, the anointing of the Holy Spirit, will give us the ability to get things into perspective, to see what God really wants for us, to renew our vision of God and his purposes.

Part of the process that leads to that is the “*rebuke and discipline*” of Christ. He loves those Laodiceans, that's why he's saying all this. He loves us – that's why he challenges us. One of the amazing things about this letter is that, although Jesus knows their deeds, and knows them to be useless, he loves them enough to want them to have these gifts of holiness and grace. His rebuke is a means of discipline – and the Greek word that is translated “*discipline*” here is one which has at its root the idea of education. In fact, the word for discipline is also at the root of the word “*pedagogy*”. Jesus loves you and wants the best for you, so when things are starting to career off track, he calls us back and reproves us pretty clearly. It can be painful, but it's always helpful because it's a sign of his concern for us. St Jerome once wrote: “*The greatest anger of God is when God withdraws his anger from us*” – when he just gives up on us and lets us get on with it.

And the way into receiving those blessings, into participating in that grace, is to “*be earnest and repent*”. Rediscover your enthusiasm, he is saying. Get serious about it all. And, as he has already said to the Christians at Ephesus, at Pergamum, at Thyatira, at Sardis, repent. I wish he wouldn't keep using that word. It's not a word we like these days, is it? It implies responsibility. It makes it seem as if we have done something wrong that we need to sort out. We've got used to blaming it all on someone else, to finding extenuating circumstances, to hiring lawyers to prove that it wasn't our fault. Jesus is saying, “Look, you've got yourself into this position. Now, are you ready to sort yourself out, to put it all behind you and move forward in a different direction? If you are, I'm here to help you.”

There's actually an interesting contrast in the Greek tenses here. Well, I say interesting, but I realise there aren't too many people who would say they're interested in Greek tenses. I won't bore you with all the details but “*repent*” is seen to be a one-off response and “*be earnest*” is seen as a continual response (the difference between the aorist and present imperatives, for those of you who simply must know). In other words, the moment of crisis has arrived for these Laodicean Christians and they need to do something about it – to repent and change direction. That's a one-off action – do it! But then they need to get on and continue working on it, to be serious and to keep being serious. As always, the great William Barclay is able to sum it up better than I can: “*There can be no real zeal until the moment of decision has been reached and accepted: and the moment of decision is no real decision unless it is followed by a life of*

loving, passionate service of Christ.” Did you notice that word “*passionate*”? That’s where we came in several weeks ago, with that letter to the Ephesian Christians who had lost their passion. If you feel these words are applicable to you – or the words of any of these seven letters from the Lord – are you ready to repent? And if you repent – or have repented – are you ready for continuing commitment? That’s where Jesus finishes this letter – and it could almost be a coda to this whole set of letters.

This letter contains what many people consider to be one of the great evangelistic texts of Scripture, the inspiration for millions of sermons and tracts, for thousands of hymns and songs, for Holman Hunt’s timelessly popular painting (a painting that seems to hang in the vestry of almost every church and chapel in the land) – “*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me.*” How many great appeals to the audiences at crusades, missions and rallies have been built on those words! And yet – have a look at this letter. This isn’t an evangelistic tract: this is Christ speaking to his church, to his bride. This is Jesus talking to people who profess to be Christians, to his followers, to those who have already made a decision to commit themselves to following his ways – to you and me! What we have here is the sight of Jesus standing outside his own church and graciously asking to come in. Jesus, left out in the cold by his own people. How often are we guilty of that? A regular worshipper was getting carried away in prayer at a real blessing one Sunday morning. The band were on top form, the minister was cooking on gas, everyone was singing and praising, voices were raised in prayer and adoration, just as they had been the week before. And the man began to pray: “Lord, this is wonderful. Lord, this praise is uplifting. Lord, this is truly awesome. O Lord, we’re having a great time. But this is nothing, Lord. You should have been here last week and seen what happened.”

The NIV, from which we read this morning captures something of the force of Jesus’ words, which the older versions seem to me to lose when they translate it as “*Behold!*” Having rebuked the Laodiceans and told them what they need to do, he then has to say, “*Here I am!*” “Hey! Over here!”

We need to rediscover Jesus, to invite him back into our lives, to fall in love with him all over again, to rekindle our passion for him, to call him to take his place “*at the heart of the church*” and at the heart of our lives. We need to deepen that relationship, to get to know him through his word, to commit ourselves wholly to him again. Jesus says he wants to come in and “*eat*”, and “*sup*” with us. Most translations find it difficult to capture what’s really meant by this Greek word δειπνον (deipnon). J B Phillips writes “*dine with him*”. Eugene Peterson writes “*come and have supper with you*”, which is getting a bit closer. It means to share the food and the fellowship of the main meal of the day – you know, when you’re all around the table at the end of the day, taking your time over lovingly-cooked food and sharing stories of the day that’s drawing to a close. It’s great when the whole family’s there and you don’t have to hurry off to other things. We all sat down together at home over half-term and a friend of one of the girls said to her afterwards, “Does your family always spend an hour and a half at tea?” Unfortunately, we don’t always, but it’s great when we do. And that’s what Jesus is wanting to do – to spend time with you, to share your experiences of life. This isn’t some kind of courtesy visit that he’s offering: it’s not the minister dropping in for a cup of tea. It’s the crucified and risen Christ, “*the ruler of God’s creation*” as he calls himself here, waiting to come and have a good long chat, to offer and receive love and commitment. There’s a clear linguistic link here with the Last Supper – it’s the same set of Greek words that are used – and so often we let that, too, become a rushed and peremptory affair. So what are we going to do about all this?

The trouble is, that’s the wrong question to be asking this morning – what are we going to do about all this? The question we should be asking is “What *am I* going to do about all this?” Christ’s words are addressed at a personal level. I actually went back and changed them when I was writing this – I’d phrased the words in that appalling but apparently necessary genderless way (“*I will eat with them and they with me*”) – but it’s personal and you can’t convey that in any other way in English than by gender-specific pronouns – “*I will eat with him and he with me – I will eat with her and she with me*”. We can’t evade our own personal responsibility by going all first person plural. It’s you who has to decide what the next step is, what the response will be.

It may be that you feel some of the things we've been saying over the last few weeks as we've looked at these letters don't apply to you. Fair enough – it's the Holy Spirit's role to convict, not the preacher's job to browbeat. But I'm sure that, if you've been taking all this seriously, there are those who feel that, yes, God has been speaking to you – you do need to return to your first love, to rekindle that passion for Jesus, you do need to sort out your priorities, you do need to seek Jesus and his grace once again. In that case, there's no point saying, "The rest of the church needs to hear this" or "We're not going to be effective until we sort this out" – there's no point saying that until you yourself have sorted out your relationship with Jesus Christ.

He's still standing there, twenty centuries on, gently knocking. Don't worry, he won't try and batter down the door: he'll wait until you open up, to him and ask him in. And there's the challenge: are you ready for that? What are you actually going to do about what Jesus has been saying? Do you want it to make a difference? Are you prepared to pray, to repent, to recommit, to seek a deeper relationship with Christ, to plead for the anointing of the Holy Spirit – to do whatever it takes to sort yourself out? The leaders of the church can give direction, can seek vision, can devise programmes – but if the people of God are happy to sit in their complacency and enjoy the comfort of the ride, it could all be a waste of time and energy. *"He who has an ear to hear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."*

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LETTERS FROM THE LORD – 8: LAODICEA
Revelation 3:14-22

Laodicea was one of a group of three towns which stood close to one another in the Lycus Valley. (The other two were Hierapolis and Colosse – cf. *Colossians 4:16*.) It was founded as a city in 250BC by Antiochus II and named after his wife Laodice. It had been a military outpost and was also an important trading centre, which brought it great wealth. In 135BC the Romans made it an assize town. There are four things about the life of the city which are especially relevant to the letter we have here in *Revelation*.

- It was a very rich city and self-sufficient in every way
- It was well-known as a centre of the textile and fashion industry
- There was a famous medical school in the city and a treatment for eye disease was produced there (*tephra Phrygia*)
- Water was carried into the city by a six-mile long aqueduct, which made the water tepid and unappetising (unlike the hot springs of Hierapolis and the cold springs of Colosse).

Laodicea was a rich, successful and self-sufficient city, in a commanding position militarily, financially, commercially and politically. It needed no-one and was proud of its situation. It is in this city that we find the one church about which Christ has nothing good to say.

The opening words of the letter indicate that what follows is to be taken very seriously indeed, and that becomes apparent as we see that there is no commendation for the Laodiceans. The problem is complacency, the proposal is to listen to the counsel of Christ and the remedy is personal commitment.

Complacency – Christ knows their deeds and they make him sick! The Christians at Laodicea are lukewarm, bland and ineffective because they think they have got it all sewn up. They are rich, comfortable and content. Deep down, maybe, everyone knows the problem, but no-one has the guts to say anything about it. This is the most insidious and harmful of Satan's tricks to nullify the effect of the Church.

Counsel – Christ advises them to forget the standards of the world and to realise their need of "*gold refined in the fire ... white clothes to wear ... salve to put on their eyes.*" Christ is offering to provide the right materials for growth and spiritual progress. Part of the process is "*rebuke and discipline*" and, once again, the Christians are called to "*repent*".

Commitment – *v20*, which has been used so often as an evangelistic text, is actually addressed to Christians. Jesus has been left out in the cold by his own people! The Laodicean Christians needed to rediscover Christ, and the question we are left asking ourselves is not "What are **we** going to do about it?" but "What am **I** going to do about it?"

Questions for discussion

1. Complacency has been one of the main criticisms levelled at the churches in most of these letters. Why is it such a danger for the church?
2. How can you spot a lukewarm Christian? What can be done to guard against becoming lukewarm?
3. In what ways does Christ "*rebuke and discipline*" his people?
4. Which of these seven letters do you think would be most likely to have been written to Wade Street Church at the beginning of a new millennium? Why? How might we respond?
5. Has any of this made any difference to you? Or has it simply been an interesting (or boring!) series of Bible studies? What are you going to do about it?

