Keeping the Love Alive

Revelation 2:1-7

Imagine if Jesus was to write a letter to us this year. If, in the church mailbox this morning Jesus had deposited a letter in his own hand writing for us. What would it say? What would he commend? What would he say about our worship? Our teaching? Our love for one-another? Where would he encourage us and where would he rebuke us? But here's the scary part: what if it wasn't just us that got to read this letter from Jesus to us about our church, but all the other churches in the area also got to read it! C3, Westlake Nyon, All Saints in Vevey, the Anglican Church in Lausanne, they all could read it. But they all had a letter too from Jesus, specifically to them, and we got to read theirs! We all got to read each others' mail! Be interesting wouldn't it? Well if you've ever read the first few chapters of Revelation you'll know that that's exactly what happened in the first century church. Jesus sent 7 letters to 7 different churches in the area of Asia Minor (Modern day Turkey). These were specific letters to individual churches and are a mixture of encouragements and warnings, and Jesus intended each church to read all of them. And this morning, at the start of this New Year, I want us to look at one of these letters - the letter to the church in Ephesus.

By all outward appearances, this was a solid church that worked hard. It was serious about doctrine. It had great teaching programs, and stood strong in the face of persecution. And Jesus commends them for all this. But he's also saddened by something. You see, despite all their hard work and diligence, this church had managed to let their love grow cold. They'd got so busy defending truth and resisting persecution that they'd started to neglect their relationship with Jesus. And this is no small thing in Jesus' opinion. Because, when a church loses its love, it loses its identity! A church that doesn't love can't really claim to even be a church.

And so at the start of this New Year, I want us to consider Jesus' words to the church in Ephesus and at the same time, I want us to take stock of how we're doing. This morning is an opportunity to let Jesus show us our condition going into the 2015. And so right now I'm going to pray and ask that Jesus would come and speak to us.

And so we'll be in Revelation 2 and we're reading verses 1-7. Please open your bibles if you have them and follow with us.

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 favor: 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 2:1-7

And so I have 3 points that I want to discuss with you from this passage, but before we dive in, I just want to mention a few things, by way of background, especially as Revelation is not always the easiest book of the Bible to understand! As I mentioned, Revelation chapter 2 begins a series of 7 letters, which are prophetic words from Jesus, hence their being in red, to various churches in Asia Minor in the first century. If you were to read them all you'd notice that each letter follows a similar structure:

1. An address to a particular congregation – in this case Ephesus. The reason the letter to Ephesus is first is because this would be the first stop for the postman coming from Patmos (where John wrote the book), before he headed off in a circular route to the other 6 churches. Not only does the first letter to Ephesus make geographical sense, but Ephesus is the most prominent, most powerful city in the province of Asia Minor. It's a very secular place: a bit like Switzerland! With a great influence: it's a religious, cultural, and economic center. Indeed, a cool place to be, but a very difficult place to be a Christ follower!

    - Notice as well it says in verse 1: 'To the angel:' this angel may be the pastor of the church at Ephesus, or an angelic being "looking in" on the workings of the church at Ephesus. In some way, this angel represents this church. But its addressed to the whole church and indeed all the other churches….and us!

2. Then we get an introduction of Jesus – this time he is introduced as 'the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands.' This image emphasizes the authority of Jesus in the Church and His immediate presence: in other words, Christ moves among the churches to attend to the purity and brightness of the light they give to the world. The church is meant to be a light to the world as we know, and especially in dark Ephesus, but it's is not much of a light if the love has grown cold…we'll come to that later.
3. A statement regarding the condition of the church

4. A verdict from Jesus regarding the condition of the church
5. A command from Jesus to the church – e.g. return…
6. A general exhortation to all Christians – e.g. to overcome
7. A promise of reward…you can find this structure in all the 7 letters. And the audience goes further than just the church involved. Jesus says in verse 7, that these letters are for 'anyone who has ears!' That's us. That's anyone who is open to the Holy Spirit.

And so, as we get into the verses, my first point this morning is,

Jesus sees it all

Sees all what? He sees all the hard work of the church in Ephesus: their labours and efforts (v. 2). He praises them for their discernment and their perseverance. He starts by saying, "You guys are doing a great job guys – I'm proud of you". Notice that Jesus isn't so quick to point out their faults. Sadly, I think many of us have this view of God that he's a stern disciplinarian, who issues warnings and threats without praise, only ever focusing on what we don't get right and never noticing the good stuff. That's not who God is! Look how he affirms the Ephesians! Jesus is an encourager. He affirms us.

And how much better we respond to criticism when it's preceded by affirmation! If someone pulls me aside and says, "Mark, you're great at this. I really enjoyed your sermon, I thought that this, this and this were good and I see great potential, but if you don't mind me mentioning, I think you could improve on x…I'm all ears! Advice is followed in a spirit encouragement. It's just how we're wired. We can take correction when we are confident that the one giving it has our best interests at heart. And Jesus has the Ephesians best interests at heart. And he has your best interests at heart. He loves you. He affirms you. He takes great delight in you! I'm reminded of a great verse in Zephaniah 3:17 which says 'the Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing." – literally twirling around letting put shouts of joy! That's what God thinks of his children! He twirls around over you letting our shouts of joy because he's so proud of you! And 'He will not forget how hard you have worked for him and how you have shown your love to him Hebrews 6:10 tells us. God sees it all. He's not unfair. He's not a disciplinarian; he's not a taskmaster. He's a loving Father who wants the best for his children.

Be encouraged this morning that that's what God thinks about you. He sees how hard you're working. He sees how you're persevering in your marriage, in your parenting, in your work, in your prayers. Well, God has logged it! He doesn't miss a thing and he's proud of you. He sees it all. And you know, because he sees everything, he also sees your heart, and he knows everything that you even

think. He even knows your motives and intentions! So he knows where your heart is! My second point today is

Jesus wants your heart

After his affirmation, Jesus shifts gears, and he says, "Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first". In other words, 'I appreciate all you're doing for me, but there is one thing wrong; you don't love me like you once did. Remember how it used to be between us? You used to tell everyone about me! You used to get excited about reading my Word. It used to be so great between us. But look what's happened. You've got too busy. You've let task lists replace me. Your job now takes all your energy. You're even so busy serving me at church that you forget to ever sit at my feet and just soak in my presence. Come back!

Guys, there is nothing more important than our relationship with Jesus. Nothing. If this is out of kilter, everything is. We can't live without him. We were created to enjoy a relationship with him. But we choose our own way don't we? We replace him in our lives by trying to find satisfaction and fulfillment through money, achievements, food, through education, sports, music, family, work, even religion – the list goes on. But that just leaves a big hole in us. Only God can fill that hole! I mean look at these guys. They were a model church: rich in good works, discerning false teaching, willing to endure hardship for Jesus' sake. They did all this without growing weary. These Ephesians would outdo most of us in their service for God. And yet hard work was not enough. Their sacrifice was not enough. Doctrinal purity was not enough. Perseverance was not enough. This congregation had left its first love. That's scary, because it means that we can be doing everything right – we can be working hard for Jesus, staying doctrinally and morally pure and persevering and yet let our love for Jesus, the most important thing in our life, grow cold.

So what happens if that describes you this morning? What should you do? Jesus tells us in verse 5: Repent, and do the things you did at first. So what do we do to restore that first love? The answer's simple: we must pursue intimacy with Jesus. Knowing Him and walking with Him must be our highest goal in 2015. He has to be our number one priority, the primary focus of our energy and our attention.

It's like a marriage? What happens when a couple grows distant from one-another? If you want to rekindle the flame and keep the love alive, and not just fall into routine, then you have to take practical steps that will help you to correct the problems. You can't just expect it to get better on its own! You have to remember what is was like in the early days, when you used to call each other several times a day, or if you were like Nix and I, spend all day together then get

home and call each other and talk till midnight, or until our parents would come in and tell us to get off the phone coz it was costing them a fortune! Perhaps you used to go on special dates, you'd leave little love notes where they could find them. You'd keep telling them how much you loved them. What does a husband or a wife need to do if the busyness and machinery of life has robbed the romance that there was at first? They need to do that stuff again. And guys, that's exactly what we need to do with Jesus, when our love turns cold. We need to renew the relationship! We need to set aside blocks of quality time to meet with Him. We need to pour out our hearts to Him in prayer. We need to share all our thoughts and burdens and concerns with him. We need to praise Him. Worship and adore him. We need to saturate our minds and hearts with His Word. And we need to share him with others whenever we get the chance. But you know when you are in love with someone you can't stop going on about them! You tell everyone anyway. You just can't shut them up!

Listen church, no amount of religiousness, labour or loyalty can make up for a deficit in Christian love. Look at what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13:2: 'if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing'. It's all about love. The Christian life is about loving God and loving others. Jesus is calling you this year. He awaits your move back towards Him. He can't wait. And as you go back to him, His Spirit begins to flood our hearts again. Then, all our good works – serving Him, sharing our faith, giving sacrificially – these all become expressions of love overflowing from a grateful heart. Not just going through the motions, but come from a passionate love relationship. So set aside quality time with him this year. This week! If you don't plan it, it wont happen! Walk with him. Drink coffee with him! Pour out our heart to Him. Get a Bible reading plan. Read books about him. Share him with others. Consider again what he did for you on the cross. That's exactly what Heb. 12:3 tells us to do – if we want our spiritual passion renewed – to consider Christ and all that he did. Allow the wonder of His amazing grace and all that he accomplished on the cross to rekindle your love for Him. This brings us to our final point this morning:

Jesus offers you life

Jesus concludes his letter to the Ephesians, verse 7, by saying 'whoever has ears; let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who is victorious, to the one who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.' What a promise! Only Jesus can make an offer like that! That's the offer of eternal life. It's the hope of the gospel: that Jesus Christ, God's own son came into the world to save humankind because we can't save ourselves – none of us can – no matter how good we think we! If we want to be made right with God, it is only through Jesus Christ. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life and anyone who calls upon his name shall be saved.

And here he is - offering us eternal life – to live with him, forever! Because of what he's done, because he has overcome, we get offered to eat from the tree of life in the paradise of God. You know what that word paradise literally means? Pleasure Park! Pleasure Park! That's what heaven is: God's theme park. Imagine that? Psalm 16 says that at the right hand of God are pleasures forevermore! We think skiing is good? We think the wine is good in Switzerland? We think the Alps look cool? Imagine what God's got in store in his pleasure park? Revelation 21 gives us a slight glimpse: it's a place where there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever. That's where I want to be – where God is. Where he dwells. Like David said in Psalm 84:10: 'better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere'! What hope! What an offer! Surely that's worth overcoming for?

After all, He overcame death and hell for us, and he offers us redemption by his blood. So come to him at the start of this New Year. He sees all your hard work from last year; he sees each tear you've cried as you've worked patiently for him. He doesn't miss a thing. But he doesn't just want your service, he's not interested just in what you can do for him, he wants you, he created you for relationship with him. He loves you so much that he was crushed for your sins. He was crucified to buy you back to a relationship with him. And he offers you a relationship with him and in the future, tickets to his pleasure park! To be with him forever! So if you have ears to hear this morning, then listen and respond. Come to him at the start of this New Year. Give him your heart. Ask him to set you ablaze for him once again. Keep the love alive. Amen.