

Sermon for 6th May 2018 (Sixth Sunday of Easter)
Song of Solomon 4.16 - 5.2, 8.6,7; Ps. 45; Rev. 3. 14 - 22

May I speak in the name of the living God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.
“Listen, I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you.”

These are some of the words of Jesus Christ to the angel, that is leader or bishop, of the church in Laodicea and through him to all the members of that church community. John, to whom the Revelation of Jesus Christ was given when he was on the island of Patmos, records seven messages in all, to be sent to “the seven churches that are in Asia”, starting with the church in Ephesus at which the apostle John was resident at the end of his long life. Whether the apostle John and the John to whom this Revelation was given were one and the same person is not agreed as certain by all bible scholars, but it is more than likely. Although the seven messages to the churches in Asia were presumably intended to be conveyed at the time the Book was written, yet those messages are still relevant to the Christian Church today and to all the constituent parts thereof. It is good therefore for us to be reminded of the advice given in those messages and to reflect on how they might apply to us today. Now that Jesus has been revealed to the world as our one and only Saviour, anyone and everyone has the opportunity to believe in and follow him. Those who have committed themselves to Christ through baptism and confirmation need to be reminded of our human frailty and the pitfalls that may entrap us. It is so easy to be distracted, by anxieties about comparatively trivial concerns, by resentments at other people, by envy or greed, and so to lose our concentration on the one whom we have promised to follow. It is I hope worth then running through the messages given to all seven churches, although I will concentrate later on that given to Laodicea which we have heard this evening.

The church at Ephesus is praised for several things - toil, patient endurance, testing and rejecting false apostles - but found wanting in that they ***“have abandoned the love they had at first.”*** It is not clear in what way, but, as we were reminded in the gospel last Sunday and again this morning, we should do our best to abide in God’s love, which means abiding in God, who is love, and in His Son Jesus Christ, who through his love for us freed us from our sins by dying for us on the cross. Smyrna is encouraged to be faithful unto death. Pergamum and Thyatira are warned about those among them who eat food sacrificed to idols and practise fornication. Sardis is reproved for being spiritually dead and forgetful of the gospel message. Philadelphia is commended for its patient endurance. Laodicea is condemned for being lukewarm, thinking they are rich and need nothing, but in reality being wretched and poor in spirit. The underlying concern for all the churches, I suggest, is not their capacity to endure persecution and imprisonment, but rather the risk of being deceived as to what is required of them, and indeed of us too. Each message ends with a word of encouragement to those who conquer or overcome. Overcome what? Overcome the temptation to think that we are doing all right and so to lose our concentration on the one whom we have promised to follow.

The message to the church in Laodicea accuses them of being “lukewarm” neither cold nor hot. The greek word for hot in this context is the root of our word “zest”. Being a Christian is not for someone expecting an easy, quiet life; there is work to be done, as Jesus himself in his humanity found once he had started out on his three year mission - we know nothing about his life during the period from when he was twelve until when he followed his cousin John the Baptist to proclaim that the kingdom of God had drawn near. That message needed to be proclaimed loud and clear with zest and, after John the Baptist was imprisoned and then killed by one of the Herods, Jesus was the man to continue the work. The message has of course changed or rather been greatly extended following the laying down of his life by Jesus on the cross for us and for all humankind. The kingdom of God is still close at hand, in that God is always at work in the world through the Holy Spirit, as the followers of Jesus Christ continue to proclaim that part of the message. But the good news is now even better, for we know that at some time, at any moment, God will send again his Son into the world, this time to establish his kingdom that will last for ever - in which kingdom we shall abide truly in God’s love for ever. Until that great and marvellous day comes, our work is to continue to live as followers of Christ, trying with zest, with zeal, to abide as fruitful branches in Jesus, the true vine, and thus to abide in the love of God the Father.

I come to the text that I quoted at the start. ***“Listen, I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you.”*** What wonderful words of encouragement Jesus thus gives to all of his followers, at whatever stage of their Christian development they may be, even to those who may be just lukewarm.. Jesus loves us, just as the Father loves us, and he is ready to come in and dwell with us if we will just respond when we hear him calling us to turn back to him in earnestness. If we are truly earnest, zestful, in our response, then we will be enabled to proclaim the good news in the way we live our lives, by showing God’s love to everyone we meet. Isn’t this what the world needs when all around us seems doom and gloom, with wars and abuses of all kinds rampant, - some good news? We as Christians know, because of God’s revelation of himself through his Son, that those incomparably better times he has promised will come when we are all changed into resurrection life, in the fullness of God’s time. We also believe that all people, particularly those of faith of whatever century, will have the opportunity to learn about the good news of Jesus Christ. For what is clear is that only Jesus Christ is able to reconcile us to God the Father, and this he has already done through his death on the cross and his rising to life again. As Peter put it, when he and John were interrogated by the Jewish leaders over their preaching about Jesus, not long after the first Pentecost, ***“There is no salvation through anyone else; in all the world no other name has been granted to mankind by which we can be saved.”*** That is the good news that we are encouraged to proclaim over the nine days between Ascension and Pentecost this year, by joining with our brothers and sisters in the UK and around the world to pray ***“Thy Kingdom come”***, as we ask the Holy Spirit to prompt us to respond to Jesus’s invitation to open the door so that he may come in.

Amen.