

First Love - 21st February 2021

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] Hey everyone, how we doing? Good to be in your company for this, our latest Sunday session, our weekly web-based way of working out whatever winsome wisdom we can welcome for our world.

And yes, if you've been with us for any length of time, you'll have realised I do like a little alliteration. I'm nothing if not cheap and cheerful with my rhetoric, I know. Just a heads up, Lottie's taken a well-deserved breather this week, so there's no new Sunday Stars session today, but there is an extensive back catalogue to dip into if you've got younger ones with you. For us here though, well it feels a big week is coming up with the promise of a provisional plan for a way out of this lockdown life being shared with us. And yet the Prime Minister's words this week of the need for caution is surely the right tone to take.

Our hearts go out to the many who are still suffering and sadly dying due to this virus, for those working so hard to treat and care for them. And we're also aware of those who are living with long Covid and all that that brings with it. If you're anything like me, all of this does feel quite a slog at times. And yet in the midst of the mud, there are little signs of hope and new life emerging here and there. In fact, with the temperature slowly rising, I'm spotting the occasional daffodil beginning to poke its head up towards the sky. I appreciate in the grand scheme of things this may seem a somewhat trivial thing to note, but I'll take what I can get at the moment. And yet more profoundly perhaps, the picture of a daffodil bulb now releasing all of that stored up energy into new growth. Well it may well be a picture we can take encouragement from.

Although it may feel like we've been pretty dormant, underground almost, for the duration of this long winter. Nothing in God's garden is forgotten or neglected. Rather, potential is carefully nurtured and new growth will, in time, break through. And so God, would you help us to get the balance right in these current days between realism and optimism, between looking around and looking ahead. Yes, it's right we acknowledge that life is hard at the moment. But in the midst of this difficulty, there remains hope because of your care and concern for us. Indeed, it seems a lot of us may well be feeling conflicted in the emotions we're carrying. Juggling these feelings of relief perhaps that the vaccination program is working and we're anticipating brighter days ahead, whilst also being acutely aware of the ongoing financial and health issues for many, along with the strain that frontline workers are still under at the coalface of caring for others. These are complicated times, so keep us being sensitive, please, to the concerns of those around us. Gentle on ourselves and one another, but also keep us hopeful, please, in that just as spring follows winter, so too you will be helping us to bloom in new ways once again. Be with us today, we ask, that we'd recognise your voice speaking into our lives in our time together now. Indeed, shape our lives through the presence of your Spirit with us and in us today we pray. Amen.

[3 : 56] All right, well I figured this week it'd be good to continue in the vein of last week and take a look at another of the letters which a guy called John had dictated to him by Jesus in a vision he received.

A vision which gives its name to the book in the Bible there contained in the book called Revelation. Now there's a bit of debate as to the identity of the John who had these visions, although the most likely candidate is that it's John who was one of the twelve disciples of Jesus. He was probably just a teenager when Jesus called him from his fishing nets to follow him, and that gives enough time for John to still be alive and around when he has these visions some, what, 50, 60 years later? Indeed, we know John received his revelation while he was a prisoner on the island of Patmos, a kind of Roman Alcatraz of its day. It's a Greek holiday destination these days, but one which is located just off the coast of modern day Turkey. And as we saw last week, the letters John receives in his revelation from Jesus were addressed to seven different churches from seven different cities

in Turkey. We looked at the letter to the church in lukewarm Laodicea last time, but this week we're going to turn our attention to the letter to the church in the city of Ephesus.

Now, Ephesus was a major cosmopolitan city of trade and commerce, one which at its peak was reckoned to have had a population of some quarter of a million people, you know, hefty numbers for some 2,000 years ago. These days, well, the only real crowds are those of tourists, as it's a dream destination if you're keen to unleash your inner archaeological geek and who hasn't got one of those bursting out from inside of us. Indeed, I've fed my hunger for all things historical a few years ago now, and there really is so much to see in Ephesus, not least this double-decker frontage of the ancient library.

And although this particular building was built a generation or two after New Testament times, the fact it housed some 12,000 different scrolls gives an indication of just what a prestigious city it was with a real culture of study and learning. In terms of sheer scale, though, the 25,000-seater theatre is something to behold, and it's this very theatre which is mentioned in the book of Acts when the Apostle Paul's teaching provoked the crowd inside to riot in protest.

[6 : 50] We'll come back to the reasons for that riot in a bit, but alongside the theatre, there are huge main streets, flanked by remains of shops and various shrines, while some of the houses which have been discovered reveal some quality plasterwork and mosaics which would tick all of the boxes for upwardly mobile families looking for their forever home. And yet the most impressive building in Ephesus, and one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, was the temple of the goddess Artemis.

Now, what's left of this huge temple is pretty underwhelming to say the least, one single column no less. But in its heyday, it was immense. Indeed, about 50 miles south of Ephesus is a town called Didim, where there are remains of a temple which was similar in scale to the one in Ephesus. That's little old me in the middle there posing like the tourist I was, but you get the idea of the size of these 70 foot high columns. And overall, there were 120 of them which would have supported this huge temple structure. If we go back to Ephesus though, as we said, a very similar temple there was built in honour of Artemis, the ancient goddess of fertility. And here's a statue of her from the time. Now, scholars argue whether the cluster of shapes in her middle are meant to represent eggs or breasts, grapes, or some even reckon balls, testicles as they were part of the sacrificial rituals associated with Artemis' worship. Well, I think I'll leave you to debate that one over lunch or via WhatsApp, but whatever they are, it's all to do with fertility. So it was Artemis who you prayed to, for your crops to grow, for food to eat, and to make sure you were able to have lots of children. She was basically the sex god. And there's even hints that one of the ways people worshipped Artemis was to have sex in her temple complex with one of the many temple prostitutes.

Indeed, on one of the 2,000 year old pavements in Ephesus, you can see blatant ancient directions to a brothel carved into stone. That's my foot next to a carved footprint, which is next to a picture of a prostitute, the loose hair being a classic ancient giveaway to signify someone who worked in that profession. But taking the big picture of Ephesus overall, what does all this history tell us?

Well, I think for me it reveals that Ephesus was a city which loved learning with its library, it loved high-class living, it loved grand theatrical entertainment, it evidently loved promiscuous sex, and perhaps above all, it loved Artemis, or at least the locals loved the income which came in from worshippers buying shrines and statues of her from their market stalls. Indeed, that was the reason for the riot as recorded in the book of Acts, because the apostle Paul was apparently persuading so many people in Ephesus to follow Jesus instead of Artemis, that sales of Artemis-related trinkets had slumped to such a degree that local retailers wanted to do away with Paul.

[10 : 37] Well, although Paul eventually moved on from Ephesus, he left behind him a thriving, growing, active church. A real community whose love for Jesus and the way they put it into practice evidently drew more and more people to join them in following Jesus. I mean, I guess we could say, in a city which loved learning, they taught people about the story of God's involvement with the world from creation right through to coming in person as Jesus. In a city which loved high-class living, they instead modelled a way of generosity and sharing. In a city which loved theatrical entertainment and watching masked actors in plays, they instead lived in ways which rejected hypocrisy by not pretending to be something they weren't. In a city which loved promiscuous sex, they instead championed the idea of lifelong, committed, loving relationships. In a city which declared their love for Artemis and yet were in constant fear of her, causing their crops to fail and so on, they instead followed the true God, the one who blesses the world, not out of coercion but out of

love. And in a city which was famous for and loved its temple, this early church in Ephesus simply met in each other's homes, as they knew the Spirit of God lived in them and couldn't be contained within the columns of a building.

This fellowship of believers, this early church in Ephesus, was obviously going great guns, growing in faith and in number, living out a way of love.

Now, fast forward though, some 30 or so years after Paul leaves the church in Ephesus to it, and we reach the time of John receiving this vision from Jesus, with instructions on what he wants to communicate to the church in Ephesus. It's a letter, it's a message which can be found in Revelation chapter 2. And after commending the believers in Ephesus for perseverance and endurance in their faith, no small achievement if the attitude of the rioters was anything to go by, Jesus then moves on to make a point of highlighting a concern he has for them. He says this, Yet I hold this against you. You have forsaken your first love.

Remember the height from which you've fallen. Repent and do the things you did at first. Now, it's a curious phrase this, you have forsaken your first love. What might Jesus have meant by it?

Well, forsaken means abandoned, forgotten, turned your back on and so on. But first love? Well, it's a phrase which may refer to their feelings towards Jesus himself, in that the church in Ephesus had maybe lost their love for Jesus. The love they had for him when they first encountered his story, his good news, his grace, his spirit. It could be referring to that initial sense of excitement these believers had when they first realised that God wasn't with them in the form of some temple dwelling statue, but had come as Jesus and was now with them by his spirit to live in them.

[14 : 33] And so maybe Jesus is calling this church in Ephesus to get those butterflies back, you know, that early sense of wonder and passion for him. You know, it could be, could be that. And that profoundly emotional connection with God through Jesus certainly has a place in faith.

Yes, there's a risk it all becomes a bit, you know, Jesus is my boyfriend kind of stuff and worship songs that we sing can descend into some kind of spiritual snog with God. But elsewhere in Revelation, Jesus does describe the church as his bride.

So there's certainly this idea of us having a deep, intimate union with Jesus. We might be hesitant to embrace that kind of imagery and language. And I understand that, if so.

I mean, it's not exactly my go-to way of talking about how we might relate to Jesus. But this idea of rekindling that sense of first love could be a love for Jesus in this way.

And yet, if we look at how this first love phrase is then described in the letter, I think it's more than just an emotional connection with Jesus.

[15 : 52] I mean, let's look again at the context of this particular phrase. So these Ephesians have forsaken, abandoned their first love.

It was a love which scaled the heights. A high standard was set by this love. But because their standards have fallen, Jesus says there's now a need to repent, to turn around, to return to a better way of living.

And then, here's the crunch. Repent, yeah, and do the things you did at first. What is their first love? Well, I'd say it's primarily about their practice. The way their love for Jesus was expressed, not just through their emotions, but through their actions.

You've lost your way, says Jesus. You've stopped living out your love. Turn around and get back to that. Do the things you did at first.

[17 : 11] What might these things have been? Well, as we've seen, it must have been actions which distinguished them from the rest of the city because people were drawn to join them in order to live a different, better, freer, more fulfilling way of life.

That's the way of Jesus. That's the way of love. Indeed, New Testament scholar Tom Wright says this about what this first love for the church in Ephesus was all about.

Love, in the early Christian sense, is something you do. Giving hospitality and practical help to those in need. That was the chief mark of the early church.

Love of this kind, reflecting God's own self-giving love for them, was both the best expression of and the best advertisement for faith in this God.

Now, it seems to me that this is key in helping us to understand and live out a way of love, of first love, true love, if you like.

[18 : 25] Indeed, we could say that love is therefore a verb. It's primarily a doing word in that love needs an object, you know, someone or some way to express or put into practice the love we feel.

You see, I can tell my wife or my kids that I love them until I'm blue in the face. But if I don't demonstrate that love in action, you know, if instead I'm lazy and self-absorbed and quick to criticise and so on, then my claim to love them will be empty.

And for my children in particular, well, it will give them a pretty warped understanding of what love actually looks like in practice. Equally, if I claim to love Jesus, but I gossip or I'm stingy or impatient, or my way of doing church makes people feel excluded, then I bring my claim into disrepute and, worse still, again, I'll give people a pretty warped understanding of what loving Jesus actually looks like in practice.

Instead, what does love look like in practice? Well, trying to define what love is has kept poets and songwriters busy for generations.

So we're told love is strange, love is a battlefield, love is all around, love is the drug, love is in the air, love is like a butterfly, and so on.

[20 : 02] And yet I'd suggest that by far the best attempt to define what love is can actually be found in the Bible, a famous poem written by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthians, his letter to the Jesus followers who lived in the city of Corinth.

It's the passage which says this, Love is patient, love is kind, it does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud.

It is not rude, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth.

It always protects, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails. Now, it's a popular choice to have read in marriage services, and when I marry a couple, I'll sometimes put the bride and groom's names into the passage in order to make it something they can apply to their newly married life together.

But wider than weddings, this little exercise of putting ourselves into Bible passages, well, I think it can generally be a helpful way of enabling us to picture what it means to put a particular teaching into practice in our lives.

[21 : 31] So, for example, let's read that passage again, but make it about people like us. And so we might say this, Well, Ron, Ron is patient, whilst Helen is kind.

Claire does not envy, and Brian doesn't boast. Ruth? Ruth is not proud. Emma is not rude.

Yvonne is not easily angered. And Gloria keeps no record of wrongs. Kathy doesn't delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth.

Dave always protects. Jack always hopes. Carl always perseveres. And together, while their love never fails.

You see, I'd suggest that's a way we can use Scripture to pray, by putting our names into the stories and qualities that, with God's help, we would aspire to live out.

[22 : 48] Equally, though, I think the act of defining what love looks like in practice, will help us to turn our ultimate focus back to Jesus, since Jesus himself is love.

And that means we could also read these words of Paul's in this way. Jesus is patient. Jesus is kind.

Jesus does not envy, neither does he boast. Jesus is not proud or rude. He's not easily angered. And he keeps no record of wrongs.

Jesus does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. Jesus always protects. Jesus always hopes.

Jesus always perseveres. Jesus never fails. You see, by defining what love is, I'd say we'll be more able to recognise what it looks like in our lives, but also recognise what it means for Jesus to be love.

[24 : 07] So, just then, for example, because love doesn't keep a record of wrongs, we know that Jesus doesn't keep a record of wrongs.

And that freedom from failure for us, well, that might just be a truth which you or I need to hear today. Indeed, perhaps this is how this call from Jesus to remember our first love all ties together, both for those early followers in Ephesus, but also for us today.

By following Jesus, we're choosing to live a way of love. And by choosing a way of love, we're following Jesus. Seems to me they go hand in hand.

Indeed, you can't have one without the other. Now, one final little observation, because the interesting thing is that the poem about love which we looked at in 1 Corinthians, well, it was part of

a letter written by Paul whilst he was living where?

Well, he wrote this poem about love whilst living in Ephesus. Indeed, it seems reasonable to assume that Paul was basing his knowledge of what love is on his experience of seeing the love of Jesus being put into practice by those he was living alongside.

[25 : 39] These early followers of Jesus, who at the time were living out their first love, doing the things, being patient, kind, and so on, that helped them scale such heady heights of love.

And yet, if we think about it, how good would it be if Paul were able to look around our churches, our communities today, and see you and I living out a life of love, a life of Jesus, so wholeheartedly, that he could write this same poem with us in mind.

That's our aim. Indeed, I'd say that's the aim of Jesus in dictating this letter to the church in Ephesus, that those who follow him might do the things of love.

And so, whatever this coming season brings us, let's ask for Jesus' help, that we might scale the heights of his love in the way we follow him in living out our lives.

All right. Well, it'd be good to listen to a new track, which the St John's Band have recorded for us this week. And indeed, it's so good each week to be able to enjoy the fruits of their significant gifts.

[27 : 08] I know I and so many of us are grateful for all they continue to offer us as a soundtrack for our prayers and worship. This week is no exception, and fittingly, with all that we've been exploring today, it's a song called First Love.

You are still my first love, And all I am is yours.

You are still my anchor, Forever I'm secure.

You are still my first love, And you're my guiding light, You're with me in the fire, And you lead me through the night, You have my heart, You've won my heart, Oh, how I love you, Jesus, You are my greatest joy, How I adore you,

Jesus, All my soul rejoice, You are still my first love, You are still my first love, And all I'm longing for, You'll always be the fortress, My shelter in the storm, You have my heart, You have my heart, You are my heart, You are my greatest joy, You are my greatest joy,

[30 : 09] How I adore you, How I adore you, Jesus, Oh, my soul rejoice, Oh, how I adore you, Jesus, You are my greatest joy, How I adore you, Jesus, Oh, my soul rejoice, Oh, my soul rejoice, Oh, my soul rejoice, Oh, my soul rejoice,

Oh, my soul rejoice, Ah, so good. Okay, As is our tradition, There's a little extra time session available here on YouTube, With some further thoughts and questions as a companion piece to today.

And just a reminder that all of the band's songs that they've recorded for us are available in a separate worship playlist, Again here on our YouTube channel. We'll be back though with another session next Sunday, Week 50, no less.

So, maybe have some cake and candles that are ready to celebrate that milestone together. Until then though, let's go with God's blessing.

And so, may the blessing of God the Father, God the Son, And God the Holy Spirit, The One Who Is Love.

[32 : 14] May God's blessing rest upon us, So that we might be inspired and equipped to love in the ways God has first loved us, Both now and always.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.