

Hot, Cold Or Lukewarm - 14th February 2021

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] Beyond your note everyone, happy Valentine's Day to you if that's your thing.

Indeed this is Saint Valentine's Day, the patron saint, so I gather, of lovers, epileptics and beekeepers. Who knew? Quite the mixed patronage there and a fine factoid to file away until we're back doing pub quizzes once again.

My name's Matt, the Vicarious and Johns, and it's good to be with you once again for our latest Sunday session. How you doing this week? It's half term for some and many thanks to all the school teachers and staff for their sterling work so far this year.

A no doubt welcome week of respite if that is you, as it hopefully is for pupils and parents from home learning too. We're on a cusp of Lent as well, a period of preparation before Easter which is traditionally a time of fasting or giving something up in order to give our faith renewed focus. Although frankly this whole lockdown life of bubbles and social restrictions feels like one long Lenten season so maybe this year it'd be an idea to take something up rather than put something down.

[1 : 27] I'll leave you to work out what that might mean for you. But either way, the good news is that as we continue to shuffle forward through life, however hesitantly that might be, we're assured of God's company and God's care along the way.

Indeed God, we want to thank you for your consistency with us, that no matter what mood swings or ups and downs we go through, you are our constant.

Thank you that you never get flustered, you never panic and instead you're there to be a calming influence on us. At the same time though, you're also there to chivvy us along when we need it too, to motivate us for good and set us going again when we stumble.

So help us to relate to you in the way you know we need to. And may this time, today, be part of that process of growth, we pray.

I want to pray as well this week for those who are craving some form of encouragement. Indeed, would you give us the awareness to be the people they need, sharing with them a right word, an offer of help, a gesture of kindness, a generous gift.

[2 : 51] Give us the empathy, the imagination, the commitment to be the people that others are blessed by. And may that blessing be resourced by and sourced from you, since you are and always will be the well on whom we draw.

Thank you God. Amen. Well now, if you've kept up with these Sunday sessions of late, you might have picked up on a little running theme which has been flowing through them recently, that of water.

So a few weeks back now, we explored the significance, for example, of the Pool of Siloam in Jerusalem and the time Jesus invited all who are thirsty to come to him and drink.

We looked at the resort of Caesarea Philippi, this water park retreat where Jesus took his disciples to ask them, who do you say I am? And then last week, when we focused on John the Baptist, we saw how John used the water of the River Jordan in preference to the more ceremonial mikvah baths in order to enable people to embrace a new, baptised, outward-focused way of life with God. And indeed, these recent weeks aside, throughout this past year that we've been together here on YouTube, water has risen up every now and again as a key element in some of the stories we've looked at in Jesus' life.

[4 : 29] So we've seen, for example, Jesus turn water into wine, a symbol of the richness of the full life he'd come to offer. We've seen Jesus meet a layman by another pool, this time the pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem, a place renowned at the time for its healing properties, but where instead Jesus heals the man with just a word.

We've seen the importance of Jesus' tears at the death of his friend Lazarus, and how the release of water in our eyes can be a key way for us to work our way through the cycle of stress we may be on.

We've also seen a way in which Jesus knew the importance of being beside quiet waters, choosing, for example, to spend a lot of his time on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, and using that setting to restore his relationship with Peter, his fisherman friend who had denied him on the night before Jesus was crucified.

And so over this past year, in all sorts of ways and in all sorts of stories, we've seen water play a key part in illustrating some of the truths of Jesus' life and his message to us.

Now, what's interesting though is that Jesus' use of water-related imagery is not simply restricted to just the gospel accounts of his life. Since aside from Jesus' words in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, we also hear from Jesus in the final book of the Bible, that of Revelation.

[6 : 06] It's a book which outlines the details of a series of visions which the author, a guy called John, has. In these visions, John is told to write down and pass on what he sees to seven churches, seven churches which the early followers of Jesus had established in different towns and cities in the land which we know today as Turkey.

Now, early on in his visions, John has a number of letters dictated to him by Jesus, each of which is addressed to one of the seven churches John's told to relate things back to.

Each letter is different and although directed to the churches at a time, their content is also well worth our consideration today.

Indeed, one such letter is actually the final one of these seven letters, the one addressed to the church in a city called Laodicea. Now, Laodicea is located here, situated in modern-day Turkey, and you can visit the ancient ruins of the city today.

It's an archaeological work in progress, but as you can see, it was obviously a very affluent, developed city in its time, you know, with a stadium, baths, temples, a gymnasium, theatres and so on, all mightily impressive stuff.

[7 : 35] And yet, despite this obvious wealth, it seems that the church in Laodicea, you know, the local Jesus followers, weren't exactly living out their faith with flying colours.

You see, in the letter Jesus dictates to John in his vision, Jesus is pretty critical of them, in that despite their wealth, they don't seem to be much of a force for good in their town.

For example, here's some of what Jesus says to the church in Laodicea. You say, I am rich, I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.

But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful and poor. It forms part of a pretty full-on critique from Jesus, an indication that Jesus is far from impressed when those who have much seem to be reticent to use it to generously help others.

And yet, in this letter, Jesus also says something to the church in Laodicea which might seem to be quite surprising, which is this. And so here we've got Jesus, as on so many other occasions, using the imagery of water to make a point.

[9 : 16] But what is his point? I mean, he seems to be saying, look, either be hot, go for it with me and get stuck into following my ways, or be cold, don't bother at all, don't even try.

But whatever you choose, please don't be lukewarm. Either be for me or against me, but don't be half-hearted. As I say, that seems to be what Jesus is saying, and maybe that's it.

And yet, if we're honest, this doesn't seem to make much sense, because surely it's better to be flawed, but at least trying to follow Jesus some other time, than be deliberately against him all of the time.

Jesus really is saying he'd rather we didn't bother than do things half-heartedly. Well, we might as well pack up now, because none of us can claim to be fired up for Jesus at every minute.

None of us are hot to drop the whole time. And so I don't think Jesus is actually using hot and cold water as polar opposites here, as we might initially assume.

[10 : 27] And I say that because if we know a little bit more about the water situation in Laodicea and the surrounding area at the time of Jesus, his meaning in this letter begins to become a lot clearer.

You see, Laodicea was located very near to two other cities, one called Heropolis and one called Colossae. Now, Heropolis, about six miles north of Laodicea, is the home of some ancient hot springs which bring with them wonderful restorative health benefits due to their high mineral

content.

Water which is great for skin conditions, arthritis, aches and pains and so on. And yet because of this high mineral content, and calcium in particular, when these springs bring their water to the surface, over time, a mountainside of white calcium deposits have built up to create this incredible cascading scenery.

It looks like snow. We've seen enough of that this week. But it's actually rock hard calcification over which the hot spring waters continue to flow to this day.

So, little pools are created which you can paddle in, and not so far from them there's even a special hot swimming pool which dates from Roman times.

[11 : 57] A real health spa of a pool which we're told the Queen of Egypt, Cleopatra herself, loved to bathe in. Because as well as being healthy, it was also reckoned to give anyone who bathed in it everlasting beauty.

Now, I've had the privilege of taking a dip in this pool in Hierapolis myself. And whilst it may well have worked for Cleopatra's beauty, I've got to say, it did naff all for my appearance, I can tell you. But it was still a lovely soak nevertheless, and you come out feeling so relaxed and restored. You know, your legs almost go a jelly as you step out.

So, Hierapolis was a place known for its hot, healthy, mineral-rich water. However, another ancient city local to Laodicea was Colossae.

In contrast to Hierapolis, Colossae was renowned not for hot, but cold water. Pure streams of fresh water which flowed down from the top of Mount Cadmus, the snow-capped mountain which Colossae was located at the foot of.

[13 : 14] Colossae's cold water was therefore perfect for drinking. You know, it's the Evian or Peckham Spring of its day. So, Hierapolis had hot water, Colossae had cold water.

What did Laodicea have? Well, unfortunately, it didn't have an easy water supply of its own, which meant it needed to use an aqueduct or two to draw water from miles away.

And that was the issue for them, since by the time the water reached Laodicea, travelling through these pipes, you know, the remains of which are still in place around Laodicea today, the water they received was tepid.

It was lukewarm. It wasn't restorative like the hot springs of Hierapolis, but neither was it refreshing like the cold water of Colossae.

In fact, Laodicea's was the kind of water you'd simply want to spit out. And that's the context behind Jesus's words to the church at Laodicea.

[14 : 23] If you recall, he says, In other words, says Jesus, I wish you were either hot like Hierapolis, you know, a place where people find restoration for their health, a place where they can relax and find holistic healing.

Or, I wish you were cold like Colossae, you know, a place where the purity of the fresh, mountain-streamed water brings refreshment and renewal to people.

Instead, you're just like your water, lukewarm Laodicea. Not really good for anything because, as a church, as a community, you're offering neither restoration nor refreshment to those you live alongside.

And for that reason, well, no one, including me, says Jesus, wants to swallow what you're offering. These are stark words from Jesus.

And this call of Jesus to the church at Laodicea is for them to be a place of restoration, to be hot, or to be a place of refreshment, to be cold.

[15 : 47] Jesus doesn't mind which. Indeed, he'd probably want them to offer both options to people. But as it stands, they're not providing either. And it seems to me that this is a lesson we would do well to take on board too, especially in these current times, both for us as individuals, for our church life, or indeed for us as a wider community.

I mean, if we take the hot side of things first, what might it mean to be a people who are known for their restorative effect?

What might it look like for us to be a community which gives people, you know, metaphorically, the chance to soak, if you like, in a hot pool in order to ease their aches and pains away?

Well, for a start, I think it's worth underlining that the act of restoration is primarily about bringing something back to what it once was, to be as good as new.

It's not about reinventing something. Rather, it's about helping something or someone to repair whatever's been lost in their lives.

[17 : 04] Perhaps for us, that might mean repairing what's been lost during the course of the past 12 months or so, in particular. And so with this in mind, I'd say a key part of restoring what once was, whether for individuals or for a community, it probably needs to begin by providing opportunities for people to be listened to, for someone else to soak up their words, their worries, their anxieties.

It's that sponge-like service we offer that helps to absorb someone else's pain through our expressions of empathy and care.

It's about offering a listening, empathetic ear, where we enter into someone else's experience in order to help them make sense of it. Well, that to me is an example of restoration and renewal, of restorative love in practice.

Equally, as well as offering a listening ear, I'd say restoration comes from providing people with a relaxing environment, a place of hospitality, of provision, a place where they're served.

Now, hospitality's a tricky virtue to offer in our current climate, I know, but going forward, as and when we can begin to gather together again in person, whether that's in homes, pubs, or one day in our church building, I'm aware that we're going to need to give people space to relax and relearn what it means to be in wider company again.

[18 : 47] As a church, I think we're going to need to provide copious cups of tea and hopefully a few beers and pepperoni pizzas as well to encourage and enable folks to simply sit and dwell, to abide once again with each other, to feel comfortable sharing and praying together.

We're going to need to provide childcare where needed, in the knowledge that some children may not have been held before by anyone other than their parents.

But we're also going to need to provide space for our young people to interact and maybe relearn the art of friendship, restoring relationships in a way which leads to their renewal.

Of course, direct engagement with God is crucial, whether that's worship, prayer, teaching and so on. But if, as we've said on numerous occasions, if a key need people have felt through lockdown is this lack of social interaction, then a central part of our gathered, Jesus-inspired life going forward will be the need to help people feel restored and relaxed in their relationships.

To offer our building and to nurture community life in a way which resembles the holistic healing of soaking in a hot mineral bath.

[20 : 15] You know, to be able to feel like ourselves again. Now, my hunch is, this is going to take longer and be more complicated than perhaps we're prepared to admit.

But the good news is that if we as individuals commit to asking God to help us play our part in nurturing that kind of relaxed, restorative environment, then as we give out, so we ourselves will also receive because our example, in the way we treat other people, can help to create a contagious culture of mutual flourishing.

Indeed, at its best, church life, community life, is like this body of interacting parts. It becomes a place where it's a given that we listen to one another, that we empathise and seek to cater for the needs of one another.

And this means that as we serve someone, someone else will at the same time be seeking to serve us. And this flow, this stream of mutual serving, becomes like a continuous hot spring which brings restoration to all who experience it.

That's a picture, if you like, of what it means to be a hot place, a hot people, a hot church even, who know and live out God's restorative, relational love.

[21 : 50] Alongside this though, what might it mean to be a cold church, a cold community, in a positive way?

You know, one which in effect brings the refreshment of a cold drink of water on a warm day to one another. Well, as I've been reflecting on this, I do think this is the harder of the two qualities to picture because whilst restoring what once was is primarily about trying to repair that which we've lost, refreshment on the other hand, by its very nature, means bringing something new to the table. And so whilst a hot bath restores us to feel ourselves again, a cold drink invigorates us to tackle something with fresh energy, fresh imagination, fresh ideas.

And so knowing what that looks like for our common life together, going forward, is, I think, quite tough to imagine at the moment because we're living with such uncertainty where 2021 remains

very much up in the air in terms of what we'll be able to meaningfully do together.

And yet, having said that, I think there probably are some broad strokes which we'd do well to consider, not least the importance of not simply slipping back into business as usual.

[23 : 20] We've alluded to this before, but if we don't allow this pandemic to change and shape us in at least some long-lasting positive ways, then the pandemic will win.

The world has changed, and we need to have changed with it if we're to bring refreshment to the communities to which we belong. So for us in Chase Terrace, for example, I think that will mean really getting to grips with our role alongside the council in shaping the future of Chase Terrace Park next door to our church building, in our project which has stalled during lockdown, but which a passion for, certainly in my case, hasn't gone away and, if anything, has increased.

You know, what will it look like to refresh Chase Terrace Park in the future? What would the Vic look like if we really rewarded Ash and Nicky with our custom as a community when things open up again?

Likewise, Burnt would be a friend has developed into an ongoing project for which we're now seeking to secure significant long-term funding for. But what fresh initiatives will our community need going forward?

Thinking of our gathered church life, what midweek groups might need refreshing, whether that's house groups or little friends, YPC or drop-in.

[24 : 52] How do we release, perhaps, a new team of people into leadership of church life, working alongside some existing folks, but also bringing new ways, new approaches with them?

You know, restoring things to what once was might be sufficient or even desirable in some cases. But my hunch is that there's always room for refreshment too.

I guess the question is, how might you, how might we, play our part in bringing new ideas, new energy to our activity as a church and as a community?

Now, for some of us, it will be financial support, for others it will be their time, for others still, it might be that you're being called to move into the town, you know, physically, to really be able to get stuck in in a fresh way to our church and to community life.

I don't know. But I do know Jesus commends and calls us not simply to be hot and restore what was, but also to be cold and bring refreshment to it as well.

[26 : 08] You know, we've got an opportunity in the coming months, an opportunity like no other to rebuild. And that rebuilding needs to involve both restoration of what was, but also refreshment for what could be.

You know, it's interesting that at the end of the letter to the church in Laodicea, and really by way of rounding off his letters to all of the seven churches in Revelation, Jesus concludes with these words, Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Seems to me that that remains Jesus' charge, Jesus' challenge to us as we begin to really imagine with him what our future post-lockdown life together might look like.

Because the call from Jesus is for us to be hot and cold, not lukewarm in this life. This week is probably, you know, necessarily maybe an open-ended one.

And we'll explore all this further in the Extra Time session available alongside this one by using a little tool in that session, which for me is a helpful way to perhaps think about the way forward.

[27 : 39] But by way of giving us some space now to come before God and place our needs, our hopes, our desire to both provide and receive restoration and refreshment in the season ahead, here's a song which the St John's Band have recorded for us this week called This Is Our God.

And it's a song whose words, I think, tie in well with what we've been looking at today. Your grace is enough, it's more than I need At your word I will believe I wait for you draw near again Let your spirit make me new And I will fall at your feet I will fall at your feet And I will worship you here Your presence in me

Jesus like the way By the power of your will I am restored I am restored I am redeemed By your spirit I am free And I will fall at your feet I will fall at your feet And I will worship And I will worship you here And I will worship you here Freely you gave it all for us Surrendered your life upon the cross Great is your love It's poured out for all

This is our God Lifted on high From death to life Forever our God Is glorified Servant and King Rescued the world This is our God Your grace is enough It's more than I need At your word I will believe I'll wait for you Draw near again Let your spirit

Make me new And I will fall At your feet I will fall At your feet And I will worship You here Freely you gave it all For us Surrendered your life Upon that cross Great is the love Is poured out for all This is our God God Lifted on high From death to life Forever our God Is glorified

[32 : 11] Servant and King Rescued the world This is our God Rescued the world This is our God This is our God Freely you gave it all For us Surrendered your life Upon that cross Great is your love The is ■ Great is you for us Great your love Like you■■ Lily tele burningINS For us Good life Great is your love As pour out for all This is our God It is our God Lifted on high Servant and King Rescue the world This is our God

Lifted on high From death to life Forever our God Is glorified Servant and King Rescue the world This is our God Brilliant.

Alright, as I say, do dip into our extra time session if you'd like to, as we'll be looking at what, for me, is a helpful way of perhaps going a bit deeper with where we're at with things at the moment.

And as I said earlier, do please let's use these next few weeks to keep our ears and eyes open to what God's Spirit might be saying to us regarding the shape of our future life together.

And of course, do please share with me and others around you if you feel you're getting something from God that we'd do well to consider together. As we go into the week ahead though, let's ask for God's blessing to rest on us.

[34 : 28] And so, may the blessing of God, the one who calls us to be people who bring restoration and refreshment to the world around us.

May God's blessing rest upon and reside within us. That we may know the love, the joy and the peace of God in our lives.

Amen.