

Jesus Christ Among His Churches II — Morning Service

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. Great to be with you this morning. And as I was talking to the kids, I was thinking about this book, Revelation. And I wonder if, as this sermon series is beginning, if you've been reading this book, and I wonder what you think of it so far, if it's the first time you've been reading it. I wonder if you're in a Bible study at St. John's, and perhaps you've been reading Revelation with the Bible in one hand, and a really big fat tome in the other hand trying to interpret it or something. You know, a fat commentary, or maybe your laptop open. Be careful of that one. Don't do Google image searches on Revelation.

Well, it's a difficult book, isn't it, to understand? And I'm very excited to welcome our visitors from Trinity Western, but this is not an easy part of the Bible. to step into. So let me just begin by saying that Revelation is not calling us to an academic study. It's calling us to, when it boils down, it's calling us to two things, which you've already heard. Worship and witness. First, worship. Because all of Revelation is about worship. Remember in chapter 1, how John was worshipping on the Lord's day, when he received a vision from Jesus Christ, and he falls down in worship before this divine Lord. And then he's given a vision of the eternal what? Worship that's taking place around the throne room of heaven. And if that's not enough, then he's given this unveiled truth, this vision of truth about the world from the perspective of the king of history who's conquered, who's won the victory and is now ruling in heaven. And I'm talking about Jesus. Revelation is really birthed out of worship. It shows us true worship, and then it calls us to deeper worship. Worthy are you, our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power. And then we're going to hear from the second witness. Because already in chapter 1, we've seen and heard about John, who's in prison on Patmos. Why? On account or because of the word of God and the testimony, the witness of Jesus Christ. And even before John's witness, we hear that the very first and the greatest witness to the truth in Revelation is Jesus Christ himself, who witnesses and testifies to his heavenly father and reveals this vision to us. And as this book unfolds, you guessed it seven times, we'll hear about the testimony of Jesus Christ and how it's God's plan that his church, even you and I, would be a witness to the gospel. So the people of Vancouver and all nations will hear the good news of new life, new life available in Christ. So worship and witness. These are two of the big themes in Revelation. And they also happen to be central to what Jesus has to say to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3. So it would be very helpful if you had your Bible open to Revelation 2, beginning at verse 1. We're going to have a closer look at these two churches, Ephesus and Smyrna.

And there's going to be some hard yards coming up, I'm going to warn you. So to try to help you along the way, I'm going to summarize what Jesus is saying to each of these churches in one sentence. And I'm going to repeat it a couple of times through the sermon. So hang on to that one sentence summary and we're going to build off of that, okay? So what is Jesus saying to Ephesus? [3 : 48] He says, the best worship, the most orthodox, the most theologically accurate, even the best liturgy and music will never please me if it doesn't send you out as a witness to the world.

And to Smyrna, Jesus says, your suffering is a glorious witness to the world. And I will show you how my victory has transformed even suffering into a redemptive act of worship.

Let's dive in, beginning with Ephesus, verses 1 to 7. And you see that in verse 2, Jesus speaks directly to these people that are being persecuted.

And he says, I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, found them to be false.

I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my namesake and you have not grown weary. And then he has a further commendation for them in verse 6. Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

[5 : 03] Those are the commendations to this church in Ephesus. The words of encouragement, what they're doing right. Because, you know, it wasn't easy to live in Ephesus.

Ephesus was a little bit like Vancouver. It was a port town. And unlike Vancouver, life there centered around the worship around the Temple of Artemis, which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

And so it was a tourism town. And people would come from far and wide to visit the Temple to Artemis. And you can imagine, therefore, that the public life was very much a display, right? That it revolved around the worship of the emperor and the worship of Diana or Artemis. And therefore, to be a Christian publicly in Ephesus was not easy. It meant being on the outside of public activity.

And it meant being a social outcast, especially from the upper class pagan society. But interestingly, in these verses I just read, it's not the persecution from the outside that's particularly the problem in Ephesus, is it?

[6 : 14] It's the persecution that's happening within the church. That's inside the church. And you heard how this persecution is coming from two groups.

Possibly they overlap. We're not exactly sure. The Nicolaitans, which is some sort of liberal heresy that wants to, you know, it's really hard to live in Ephesus. So let's just incorporate some of the aspects of the Ephesian culture and the worship of, you know, the sexual immorality that went along with the temple.

And, you know, it's going to be a lot easier if we just compromise a little bit. So the Nicolaitans. And then these false apostles that were within the church as well. So we heard that that the church has not been, that the church doesn't bear with those who are evil.

They have tested those who call themselves apostles. And found them to be false. So they are to be commended for this. And we're going to explore just a little bit more around this commendation. And then we're going to follow the structure as it unfolds in this first seven verses. So Jesus first commends them for their worship. And then he's going to rebuke them for their witness. Thirdly, he gives them three commands, which are to fix the problem, the problem of their witness.

[7 : 39] And finally, he's going to make a promise to them, to encourage them. If you're studying all seven of the letters, the structure is similar in all of them. So it's helpful to know what the structure is.

So we have a church here that's to be commended for its faithfulness in its worship. That it's discerning. And it's testing. It hasn't jumped to conclusions.

But it has identified those who are teaching false gospel. And it's rooted them out. And it's sent them outside of the church. It's pushed them out. Which is good. And I think if you've been around St. John's for a while, it's hard not to see a similarity here with some of our history and our story. How, as Anglicans, we've been part of a denomination that has seen false teachers rise up within the church. And we've had to be discerning and testing.

And reject those who would reject God's word. And would reject its authority in our lives. And so St. John's, if you don't know the history, has been among many Anglican churches that have been tested.

[8 : 51] And been persecuted. And stood up for the truth of the gospel. And it's been costly for us. And for many of our Anglican brothers and sisters. And Jesus commends the Ephesian church.

He loves them. In the midst of this trial. But he also has a rebuke for them. And if we see a commonality with the encouragement.

The commendation. Let us also listen to this word of rebuke. In verse 4. Look with me at verse 4. But I have this against you. You have abandoned the love you had at first.

Now what does this mean? What's this love referring to? Well often it's described as referring to their first love for Christ. Or their love for one another. But I think that if they truly have forgotten their love for Christ.

And their love for one another. The commendations don't make any sense. So I want to offer an alternative. That comes out of the context of the text.

[9 : 54] It's an alternative around witness. Which we've already talked about. Because although the Ephesians were always on guard. To maintain the best worship. Within the church. Doctrinally pure. Always centered on Christ. They have abandoned. And turned away. From the equally important call. To be witnesses to their faith. Outside the church.

Worship and witness belong together. And I said the context is what helps us to see. How their first love is this witness that they've abandoned.

Their zeal for witness. I say that because if you look at verse 5 with me. Jesus has these three commands. Remember. Repent. And redo. We'll come to those in a moment.

But it's the second half of that verse. He says this. If not. If you don't repent. I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place. Unless you repent.

[10 : 53] So. What's a lamp's job to do? You heard me talking to the kids about it. The job of a lamp is to be a witness. Jesus. And so the church's job is to point a light towards Jesus Christ. And so the best way to make sense of this first love.

Is in light of this. The threat of this consequence. Which says that if the Ephesian church does not repent. And return to the love it formerly had. The zeal it had for witnessing. To the cross of Christ. Jesus is going to come. And he's going to take away their status as a church. Because if they're not a lamp stand. Then they're not a church. A church that doesn't witness. Is not a healthy church. And it's not pleasing to the Lord Jesus. Well thank the Lord that Jesus has a plan to fix this church. These three R's that you just heard me read. Remember. Repent.

And redo. Let's look at those very briefly. First remember. The Bible's full of a call. Full of verses that call us back to remembering. Because we're a forgetful people. And I want to illustrate this point.

[11 : 55] With a little story from Acts 19. Because. The church is already about 40 years old. When Jesus speaks these words. And. And. It was planted by.

Priscilla and Aquila and others. And Paul came. And he spent almost three years there. And. Paul. When he first arrived. What did he do? He preached day by day. For. For almost three years.

And it says this. In chapter 19 of Acts. That. That the name of the Lord Jesus. Was extolled. Which means it was amplified. Or magnified. It was witnessed to. Isn't that beautiful?

And. It had such a great impact. On the city. On the culture. That. That people who had formerly been. Worshipping Artemis. Came. And they burned their pagan books.

And. And the. The silversmiths. Were going out of business. The ones who made the idols for the temple. This is what they say. They get together. You can imagine their guild. Right? And they're. They're stressed out. Because they're. They're.

[12 : 50] They're in the red. And this is what they say. You see in here. That not only in Ephesus. But all over Asia. Paul has persuaded. And turned away. A great many people. Saying.

That. Our gods. Are made by the. By. By hands. Are not gods. Made by hands. Are not gods. There's a danger. Not only that this trade of ours. May come into disrepute. But also that the temple.

Of the great goddess Artemis. May be counted as nothing. That she may even be. Deposed from her magnificence. All. She whom all Asia. And the world. Worship. Isn't that great?

The. The gospel. Has so radically transformed. Ephesus. That. That the city. The. The. The idol making. Guild. Is going bankrupt.

Now just think for a moment. In Vancouver. If. If our bold witness. Produced the kind of fruit. That Paul's ministry. Was producing. That brought about a transformation. Where. I'll let your imagination. Run wild here.

[13 : 46] An industry. An entire. Industry. Financial. Fitness. You know. Fashion. Something that's really displeasing.

To the Lord. In those areas. I don't want to. If you're in those industries. I don't want to put you out of a job. But imagine. That. That. Christians come together. And they say. We reject that. We're not spending our money on that anymore.

And the entire industry. Goes bankrupt. That's a witness. Well. After remembering. Jesus calls them to repent.

And just. Just very quickly. When the Bible talks about repentance. It's always talking about a change of mind. But also a change in direction. You can't take those two apart. Jesus is calling them to. To a change of heart.

A change of mind. But also. To walk in a new way. And finally. Redo. He's calling them to return to the works they did at first. Which. Obviously. They can't be the works that they were doing so well. [14:40] That he's commending them for in verse 2 and 3. Right? So. It has to be something else. Well. Here. These are the works of witnessing. That I was just. Attesting to from Acts 19. Remember. Those. Those times. When Paul and others.

You used to be so zealous. For. As witnesses. Return to that zeal. So. After offering this. These words of solution. Jesus closes with a promise for them. And he says this. To the one. Who conquers. I will grant to eat. Of the tree of life. Which is in the paradise of God. That's verse 7. It's a beautiful promise. You know. The tree of life. Was in the garden of Eden. And. When. And. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God. They were prevented from eating of it. And. And actually. This is great. There's more to this image though. Than just. Taking it from Genesis. Because the word. That we get as tree. Is not the word. That's usually a tree. It's a word. That means literally wood.

[15:37] The wood of life. And. Do you want to know what that word is used. Elsewhere in the New Testament. To refer to. Not a tree. Well. Sort of a tree. It's the wood of the cross.

So listen to this. From 1 Peter chapter 2. Jesus himself. Bore our sins. In his body. On the tree. On the wood. That same word. That we might die to sin. And live to righteousness. By his wounds. You have been healed. So Jesus promised. To Ephesus. And to us. Is the promise. To share in the benefits. Of his atonement. To eat. Of the tree of life. To eat of. The victory. That Jesus won on the cross. To experience. The eternal reconciliation. With God. And the restored relationship. That's represented. By living with him. In the paradise of God. And isn't it beautiful. That it's the cross of Christ. That Jesus promises here. Because it's in the cross.

[16:31] That we actually see. Worship and witness. Come together. Remember Jesus said. In John's gospel. When I'm lifted up. On the cross. I will draw all people. To myself.

And perhaps you know this hymn. Lift high the cross. The love of Christ. Proclaim. Till all the world. Adores his sacred name. So to summarize.

Jesus commends the worship. In Ephesus. He commends them for their worship. He rebukes them though. For their witness. He calls them to return. To the zeal they had at first. He commands three things.

To fix the problem. Which are a good word to us. To remember. To repent. And to redo. And he makes a promise. That they will eat. From the tree.

Of life. So to sum it all up. Jesus says to Ephesus. The best worship. The most orthodox. The most theologically accurate. Even the best liturgy and music.

[17:29] Will never please me. If it doesn't send you out. As a witness to the world. Okay. How are we doing so far? We're going to have a.

A much longer section here. For Smyrna. What do you think? Yeah. Yeah. Secondly. And much shorter. Let's look at Smyrna. Very briefly. Because Jesus says. Your suffering.

Is a glorious witness to the world. And I will show you. How my victory. Has transformed. Even suffering. Into a redemptive act of worship. You know.

Suffering. When we're in the midst of it. Is probably the very hardest thing. To see as an act of worship. Isn't it? And. And. It was just as we were praying. The Collect for Peace.

That I noticed it. For the first time. These words from Revelation. Really. We pray together. Defend us. Your humble servants. In all assaults.

[18:27] Of our enemies. That we. Surely trusting. In your defense. May not fear the power. Of any adversaries. Through the might. Of Jesus Christ. Our Lord. Amen. Words straight from Revelation.

Chapter 2. Words of worship. In the midst of suffering. Because it wasn't easy. To be a Christian in Smyrna. Rather than.

Persecution coming from within. Jesus tells us that. There's persecution coming from. Outside the church. And it's going to lead. Very soon. To. People being thrown in prison. And even killed.

And in the midst of that. Jesus. Commends Smyrna. For its faithful witness. To the gospel. In the midst of suffering. But he also.

Wants to remind them. Of the call to see. Their suffering. As a redemptive. Act of worship. And so he gives them.

[19 : 24] A couple of commands here. And these commands. Change how we're able to endure. Or walk through our suffering. He says. Do not be afraid. Verse 10. For what you are about to suffer.

And be faithful unto death. And these are really challenging words. For us. As 21st century Christians. As. Just as 21st century people. In general. Because we're so used to the idea. That modern technology. Allows us to control. Our pain and suffering. And we believe. We're entitled to a life. That's free from pain and suffering. As a result. And so we hear these words. And we think. How am I supposed to worship. In the midst of my suffering. Okay. I see that. Jesus promises. That when I die. I'm going to heaven. That's a promise. A hope that I have in the future. But how does that transform the present? Because. All through revelation. Jesus conquering. His victory. Is in the past tense. It's already happened. And there's not a disconnect. Between. The future glory.

[20 : 25] And the present conquering. The implications of what Jesus has done in the past. Are very real to us in the present. They transform the present. And they also transform the future. Does that make sense?

Jesus is speaking to Smyrna and to us. He wants to change our tendency. To disconnect these things. He says. If you let me. I will use your suffering. And transform it.

Into a glorious witness to the gospel. And remember that witness. Is the word from which we get martyr. To be a martyr for the gospel. Jesus says.

Your faithfulness as a Christian community. Walking with your brothers and sisters. Through their sufferings. And glorifying my name to each other. And to the world around you. This is an act of worship.

That's pleasing to me. Reflects the true worship. Which is taking place in heaven. For all eternity. Which is where the martyrs right now. Are worshiping. Around the throne. So do not be afraid.

[21 : 22] And be faithful. And Jesus closes with. An image of the. The gift. The promise. Of the crown of life. The crown of life.

Which means that the second death. The final death. Will have no effect. On those who are in Christ. We will not be hurt by it. Verse 11. Those who share in Christ's sufferings now.

Share also in his victory now. And his conquering of death. As the first and the last. Who died and came to life. Transforms the way. That we worship in the midst of our suffering.

And as. And the way we witness. In the midst of our suffering. So to conclude. Revelation. What a gift to the church. It offers us the true perspective.

On our worship and witness. Amidst circumstances. In our daily lives. That can make following Jesus. Discouraging and difficult. And above all. We discover that the Lord Jesus. Loves us.

[22 : 18] And loves his church. Church. Even though we're feeble. And we fail. And he's walking among us. Here at St. John's. This morning. He's calling us back to himself. And to us.

He says. The best worship. The most orthodox. The most theologically accurate. Even the best liturgy and music. Will never please me. If it doesn't send you out. As a witness to the world. And to Smyrna.

And to us. Jesus says. Your suffering. Is a glorious witness to the world. And I will show you. How my victory. Has transformed. Even suffering. Into a redemptive act of worship.

So may our worship. Never be divorced. From our witness. And may our witness. Never stray far. From true. From true worship. With God's help. Amen.