

Jesus Christ Among His Churches I - Morning Service

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[0 : 00] Well, I add my welcome to Dan's, and if you're with us for the first week, this last week of term, we began a series in the book of Revelation, and it'd be helpful if you turned up that first chapter on page 1028, the least boring book in the Bible, most exciting book, book of Revelation.

And as Caleb read it, in chapter 1, verses 9 to 20, the second half of chapter 1, it acts as a kind of a doorway into the rest of Revelation.

It's a massive vision of Jesus. Remember last week we looked at the first couple of words of the book, the revelation of Jesus Christ? Well, here it goes. And from now on, from verse 9, Jesus is at the centre of the book of Revelation.

Can't understand it without him, like he's at the centre of the Bible, like he ought to be at the centre of our faith. What we really need, what God desires, is a fresh vision of Jesus.

And his centrality. But we're going to look at two passages, both passages that were read. The vision of Jesus in chapter 1, and then we're going to go to the end of chapter 3, and look at the seventh letter to the seventh church in Laodicea.

[1 : 13] And I'll explain why in just a minute. The vision, here in chapter 1, is given for a reason. It's not just a good way to open a book, give us a vision of Jesus.

But if you look down in verse 11 and verse 19, Jesus says to John, write what you see in a book. And send it to the seven churches. Again, write down.

And then in chapter 2, we immediately begin seven letters to seven churches. Chapters 2 to 3. These are like heavenly letters written by Jesus Christ to actual churches.

But because there are seven of them, which is the complete number, and because each one finishes by saying, let him who has ears to hear what the Spirit says to the churches, then they are for all Christians and all churches throughout time.

Each year we have an annual general meeting, and there's a report that we produce. But I wonder what report Jesus would produce on St. John's. Well, we'll see.

[2 : 15] And then when we come to chapter 4, if you just flick over, I looked and behold a door standing open in heaven. And from chapter 4 onwards, we're allowed into heaven and to see how God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

The reason I wanted to look at two passages this morning, and not just the vision of Jesus, is because the vision of Jesus at the end of chapter 1 is not given in isolation. It's not there to just stand on its own, separate from the churches.

He does not stand on his own, but he appears and reveals himself standing in the midst of the seven lampstands, the seven churches. And that's why if you want to find the real Jesus Christ, you go to a living church.

And if you look back at chapter 1, in verses 9 and 10, you can see that John was neither wanting nor expecting this to happen. It's around the year 96 AD.

He's on the island of Patmos. It's a prison island where you send criminals to work in the rock mines. John's sent there as an old man, and he describes himself in verse 9.

[3 : 20] Let me read it. I, John, your brother and partner in the tribulation and the kingdom and the patient endurance that are in Jesus, was on the island called Patmos on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Now, the reason for this is there was an ancient Roman good citizen values test, and that is whether you could declare at public events that Caesar was Lord.

Most Romans in those days were polytheists. They believed in many gods, and they were practical people, and they had no trouble adding Caesar into the list of the collection of gods. Christians couldn't.

They believed there was only one true Lord. It was Jesus Christ, risen from the dead. Do you know what the primary accusation against Christians was for the first couple of hundred years? It was that they were atheists.

They were described as atheists because they didn't have any image of God, any icons or statues of their God, and they wouldn't even worship Caesar, so they had to be atheists.

[4 : 28] Many Christians were killed for being atheists. You know, they were also accused of practicing incest because they called each other brothers and sisters, and also of cannibalism because they celebrated the Lord's Supper.

And when Domitian became emperor in about 92 AD, he had tens of thousands of Christians executed. We don't know why, but John somehow has been exiled, not executed, and he continues to worship God on that island, and in verse 10 he hears a loud voice behind him like a trumpet.

Important to know, this is not a subjective, internal, mystical experience. It's a loud voice behind him, and in verse 12 he turns to see the voice.

So there are two main points to this sermon. One is the main point of verses of chapter 1, 12 to 20, and the other is the main point of the church to Laodicea.

So two points for those of you who might be interested in taking notes. And the first point is this. Chapter 1, verses 9 to 20, the main point of those verses is the fearsomeness of Christ.

[5 : 38] No, no, no, I came to church for an inspiring sermon. The vision of Jesus is not intended to frighten us, but it is fearsome. And if you look at verse 13, John turns and he sees one like a son of man.

This is a human figure from the Old Testament book of Daniel. And God gives to this human figure eternal glory and dominion and authority to judge the living and the dead in Daniel chapter 7.

And all nations and peoples and languages will serve him, and his kingdom shall never pass away. And then we're told seven things about the son of man.

His hair is white as snow, which is a collection of wisdom and purity and power. You know, in Bible terms, grey hair means power.

I think you'd be glad to hear this. It's not a sign of weakness and a bad demographic. It's wisdom and ability to do stuff. Praise God for grey hair. I say that now.

[6 : 47] Second, he has eyes like flames of fire. He sees everything. He sees behind the masks. So every letter to the seven churches begins with these two words, I know.

And then he speaks about their circumstances. He's got feet of burnished bronze. They're strong. They're fire-tested. They're rock-like. For those who feel like their feet are slipping, Jesus is the one to hold to.

He's got a voice like many waters, roars like many waters, drowning out everything around about. In his right hand, he holds seven stars, which we're later told are the angels, the seven angels of the seven churches, which Dan will explain to you after the service.

From his mouth comes a sharp two-edged sword, which is the word of God that cuts both ways. And the final description is that he has a face, which is like the sun shining at full strength.

Now, here's the point. You've probably heard this passage before. This is not a warm, cuddly vision. It's intimidating. It's fearsome.

[7 : 48] And it reminds us of the infinite distance between the holy God and us as human beings. And it draws the line between us and God, and it puts Jesus on the God side.

And so John's reaction is the exactly right reaction. In verse 17, we read, when I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. And I don't think John included that because we're meant to think he's a bit of a wuss.

I think the impact of the vision threatens his very life. Do you know, when God commissioned his prophets in the Old Testament, this was often the reaction.

Remember when God came to Isaiah in the temple? Remember what Isaiah's reaction was? He says, woe is me. I am undone. I'm a man of unclean lips. I live amongst a people of unclean lips.

Do you remember two years ago, we looked at the book of Ezekiel. And when God revealed himself to Ezekiel, Ezekiel sat on the canal, speechless for seven days, utterly overwhelmed.

[8 : 54] When God appeared to Daniel in vision, we read that Daniel was alarmed, deeply anxious. His colour changed. And he says in chapter 8, I was overcome and I lay sick for some days.

Didn't go to work. I was appalled. John is just brought up close to the face of the risen Jesus Christ and his response, I think, is completely involuntary.

When you see Jesus, you don't choose to clap your hands or bend your knee. John falls on his feet as dead. Let me say this. Though the vision of Christ is fearsome, it's not intended to inspire fear, but it's intended to inspire faith.

And I say that for three reasons. And just look back at the passage. Three reasons. First, what Jesus does. Look at what he does to John lying prone on the ground.

Turn back again to verse 17. I fell at his feet as though dead, but, but, he laid his right hand on me. The same right hand which had held the seven stars, which means you can't read apocalyptic literature too literalistically.

[10 : 10] And then he says, fear not. Do not be afraid. Literally stop being afraid. I am the first and the last. And the living one.

I died and behold, I am alive forevermore. I have the keys of death and Hades. I have not come to kill you. I've come to give life. You see what Jesus does?

John falls at his feet as though dead and Jesus lays his hand on him. He says, don't be afraid. All this glory and all this majesty and all this power is for you.

And it's for your sake. I died. I have eternal life before. I have eternal life now. I died. I, I, I experienced human death for you.

And I now hold the keys of death and Hades for you. Do not be afraid. That's the first reason I don't, I think it's meant to inspire faith. The second is what Jesus' face looks like.

[11 : 13] Now, if you've read anything of the Bible, you know that nobody can look on the face of God and live. Even in the Old Testament, the heavenly beings who fly and look at God, they don't look at God.

They cover their faces. That's what their wings are for. They cannot look on the face of God. Only in Jesus Christ can we see the face of God. Remember Jesus, when he was with the disciples, in John's hearing, he said, if you've seen me, you've seen the father.

And John says, his face was shining literally in its own power, at full strength. Now, you can't prove this, but most conservative scholars think this was written by John the apostle.

And if it was written by John the apostle, as John looks at this face that is like the sun, you can't look at the sun, but he looks at the face. It's a face he knows. It's the Jesus he was with.

It's the same person who turned water into wine, crucified and risen. That's why the tenderness of fear not comes from the face of God, which shines in Jesus.

[12 : 24] Since Jesus died and is alive, we can now gaze on the face of God in Jesus Christ. And the third reason I think this is meant to inspire faith as well is because of what Jesus is wearing.

Right before the sevenfold description in verse 13, we're told of his clothing. Verse 13, In the midst of the lampstands was one like a son of man, clothed with a long robe and a gold sash around his chest.

These are the clothes of a priest. In the Old Testament, a key part of the priest's role was tending the lampstands in the tabernacle or in the temple, refilling it with oil, correcting the wick, trimming it.

It's exactly what Jesus is about to do in chapters 2 and 3 in the letters to the seven churches. And the way he tends the lampstands is by correcting and commending and warning to make the churches more fit to be lampstands.

We'll look at this in the next few weeks. Because we read in verse 20 that the lampstands are the churches. But in the Old Testament, the golden lampstand is in the inner temple and it stood for the presence of God, the light of God's presence.

[13 : 36] So that these seven small churches cast around Asia Minor, which received these letters, under terrible economic pressure, under physical oppression, Jesus, in Jesus' mind, they are to shine the light of God's presence in Asia Minor by their faithfulness and witness, just as we're supposed to do here in Vancouver.

But all the power and all the presence of this risen Christ walks among the lampstands. Daryl Johnson has written a great book on the book of Revelation, says this, that he walks among the lampstands, not above looking down, not outside looking in, but in the middle, right in the middle, he's moving amongst us right now.

Now we're going to spend the next three weeks looking at six of the churches, two a week, and on the whole, I've got to say, they're a pretty unimpressive lot. It's a bit of relief really, isn't it?

They're a combination of shabby and stunning faithfulness, struggling with compromise and half-heartedness, and the usual temptations. And this number seven is the complete number.

However, before I leave this first point, the main point is this, how amazing that this risen Christ, this sovereign son of man, would have anything to do with human churches.

[14 : 56] I mean, how can one with eyes of fire look at us, let alone stay with us? But that's exactly where Jesus is in the midst of the lampstands. Everything about Jesus in this vision, all his fearsomeness is for the sake of his churches.

And what that means is that Jesus is utterly central to the life of every Christian church. John Stott's written a wonderful little book on the seven churches. He called it, What Christ Thinks of the Church.

It's a great title. And as we go through the seven letters, what's also important is the reverse, what the churches think of Jesus. Because a church rises and falls, depending on how central Jesus is to that church, whether we're hearing and following and actively loving and becoming more like him.

So that's the main point of the vision, the fearsomeness of Christ. And I want to then turn to the end of chapter three, to my second main point. And this is much briefer. Fellowship with the risen Christ. So if you turn over to page 1030.

I love that sound. It's great. Chapter three, 14 to 24. Now, why does he, why does Jesus walk among the lampstands?

[16:13] I mean, why does he bother? Why does he give all this warning and encouragement? And the answer in the church of Laodicea is for the sake of fellowship.

He wants fellowship with us. It's the shape of the book of Revelation. We start in Patmos. We end with the heavenly city and God coming down to dwell with his people.

He wants face to face fellowship with his people. This is the last of the seven letters to the seven churches, and it receives the strongest condemnation. It's very familiar, and it was just read for us.

The church in Laodicea is wealthy and smug and self-assured, and it's grown lukewarm in its faith toward Jesus. Just push the pause button.

What a stunning contrast with the apostle John who fell down dead. So here is a church that's got used to Jesus. They're no longer overwhelmed by his glory and ready with obedience.

[17:13] They now take Jesus for granted. They're still orthodox. They still believe all the right things, but there's no fire. There's no reality. They've lost sight of who Jesus really is, and as that happens, they become blinded to their own spiritual need.

It's a very famous letter, and it is brutally, brutally honest. Look at verse 14, please. I'm sorry. Let's go from verse 15.

I know your works, he says. You are neither hot, cold, nor hot. Would that you either cold or hot. Because you're lukewarm and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.

So spiritual lukewarmness makes Jesus sick to the stomach because it's a church, a Christian church, which is pretending, doesn't have a first-hand fellowship with Christ.

They profess Christ, but there's no reality behind it. And it's a self-deception which is very, very dangerous. And I take it hot means, well, the word literally means boiling hot.

[18:23] It's on fire for Jesus Christ, burning with love for him. And cold is the opposite. The word means freezing. It's having no faith at all. And the astonishing thing here in this letter is that Jesus prefers open rejection to lukewarm hypocrisy.

Jesus would rather be mocked than be managed. At least if you mock him, you show you're taking him seriously. I think this is a wake-up call for Anglicans.

We always, we have trouble with this. Anglicans, we love the middle of the road. We love moderation in all things. You know, anything too emotional, too spontaneous, we write it off as extremism.

And I have, in the last 20 years, I have read so many documents penned by Anglicans around the world which say absolutely nothing. You know, a little bit of this and a little bit of that, and they avoid addressing the real issues.

Now, you can have zeal without love and without wisdom. Just as you can have wisdom without zeal or love.

[19 : 37] And one of our problems is is that we reduce spiritual heat to certain behaviours. We think, you know, spiritual hotness means singing in a particular way or doing evangelism in a particular way or being overly demonstrative with lots of huggings and that sort of thing.

But, which I'm not against. Don't get me wrong. But it's interesting here, Jesus doesn't specify the behaviours he's talking about. I think it's a primarily attitudinal thing.

There's no heat in your fellowship with Christ. So he pulls across the layer, verse 17. He says, where did it come from? You say, I'm rich. I have prospered.

I need nothing. Not realising that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich. In white garments you may clothe yourselves and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen.

And salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see. Now, Laodicea was the wealthiest of the seven cities. It was a fashion centre.

[20 : 44] They had black sheep that produced black wool that was the envy of Asia Minor. They had a widely known medical school that's special in ophthalmology and it was a centre of banking in the industry.

And one of the reasons why they've grown lukewarm is because they've just become like the city. The attitude of the city has bled into the church.

I have prospered, they say. I need nothing. They did not feel their desperate need of Christ or his spirit. They didn't have to push to meet the budget. They didn't need change.

They didn't need mission. They were comfortable and they were complacent. It's very searching, isn't it? I mean, it's possible to be a member of the church and thoroughly orthodox and completely blind to your own spiritual need to be smug and self-satisfied.

And when a whole church becomes lukewarm, it's contagious. And I wonder what Jesus would say about St. John's. Would he say we're hot or we're cold or we're lukewarm?

[21 : 48] We need to pray and work for heat and zeal amongst ourselves with each other. Jesus counsels them to buy what they need from me. He says, buy it from me because the ability to see our blindness and our hypocrisy comes from Christ.

It doesn't come from ourselves. And I think it's very strong, isn't it? I mean, it's very... The problem for us is it's just too easy to lampoon and be critical of spirituality of other people and other churches.

And it's a great sign of smugness to be critical of other Christians. That's not why Jesus is doing it. And so I want to finish with two things that Jesus does.

Two things two remarkable things that he says which open this door to true fellowship. And the first is in verse 19. He says, those whom I love, I reprove and discipline so be zealous and repent.

so the truthful, even stinging words of Jesus come from love. Do you find amongst your friends that it's the best and most trusted friends that tell you the plain truth?

[23 : 06] And when they tell you those truths, it's not to hurt you but it's to heal you. And if you genuinely engage with the genuine Jesus, he will tell you the truth and it's not easy and it's sometimes quite painful but he is always speaking out of love.

And the word that's used for love here is not the usual Bible word for the grace of God which loves us irrespective of our sin. It's the brotherly, sisterly, friendship love of a person who wants to spend time with you, getting to know you.

Imagine the risen and fearsome Jesus saying this, I love you, it's why I'm saying these things. And that's why the two commands to Laodicea come as invitations.

Repent once, be zealous ongoingly. We need to repent of lukewarmness. We need to open our hearts to the face of Jesus Christ.

Where does that come from? Well I think those of you who feel you are lukewarm and you know you've got some of this attitude I need nothing, you can hear this verse, this call to repentance and zeal and even that Jesus loves you and it won't move your heart I think because the power to repent comes only from the living presence of Christ.

[24 : 25] It doesn't come naturally this way but from a real sense that Jesus Christ desires and wants fellowship with us. And that takes us to the second and to the last thing I want to deal with which is his desire for real fellowship.

And here we come to probably the most famous verse in Revelation, verse 20. Behold, look he says, I stand at the door and knock. This is the risen Jesus.

If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come into him and eat with him and he with me. This is one of the most remarkable statements particularly if we've been reading from chapter 1 the Christ who is saying it and to whom he's saying it.

You know, the risen Christ with the eyes of fire to whom all knees will bow. Yes, they will but he will not force fellowship on anyone. Fellowship just doesn't work that way.

And it's to a church who are claiming to be Christian but they've got this slack attitude and Jesus is saying, and this is just amazing, he's saying I'm outside. You've put me on the outside.

[25 : 30] He says, I'm waiting for you to turn. I am knocking and not just once, it's knocking, I'm knocking ongoingly and I'm hoping that you hear my words and please, he says, respond.

It's unbelievably tender, heart melting. You know, the first and the last and the living one who has a voice that roars of many waters, he pleads with us to open ourselves to him.

You know, Christ, the true ruler, wishes to become the true friend and true lover of our souls. He completely deserves for us to let him in but instead of pushing us, he makes promises to us.

He says, if you open the door, and he means anyone, if anyone opens the door, I will come in to him and to her and to eat with him and he with me.

And the eating here is the main meal of the day. It's not a fast food snack that you take at the counter. You know, it's the leisurely place where you enjoy each other as company. And he doesn't just eat as a guest.

[26 : 35] I've got to run now. He doesn't just come and say, listen to me, listen to me. No, this is a meal where we enter into active two-way fellowship with us.

That's his promise. And he promises to draw us into his home and his rightful place of high honour in verse 21 as well. He says, to the one who conquers I will grant him to sit with me on my throne as I conquered and sat down with my father on his throne.

Now, this is a well-deserved favourite verse of many Christians. I know, I have a number of friends who became Christians in first understanding this verse. They entered into first-hand fellowship with Jesus.

And I think I've just got to say, if there's anyone who senses that Christ is outside of them, outside your life, and that you're not enjoying fellowship with him, all you need to do is open the door and allow him in.

He'll go to every corner of the place. Because what lies behind lukewarmness is this sense of I need nothing. And what lies behind the sense of I need nothing is no real fellowship with Jesus Christ.

[27 : 43] But if you feel the signs of spiritual blindness and a spiritual blandness in your life, come to him, repent, tell him you're sorry, turn to him, buy from him the gold that he has, the white garments to cover your nakedness, an ointment to heal your eyes.

Because it's only Christ who gives us the desire, and only Christ who gives us the fellowship we crave. Only because Christ is the fearsome Christ who died and rose and now rules, who holds the keys of death and Hades, who stands and knocks and promises fellowship in this life and in the life to come.

Amen.