

EPHESUS, YOU'VE GOT MAIL

A CHURCH IN A CHANGING WORLD.

Revelation 1:4-20; 2:1-7

Today we start a new series based on the seven letters to the churches in Asia Minor. Each letter, though similar in style, is unique in content and speaks to a range of church experiences. Our aim as we look at these seven letters is not to find the one we think fits closest to our situation and thereby ignore the other six. Each of these letters has something to say to us as a fellowship and they will, no doubt, have much to say to us as individuals, if only we allow them to speak.

A few general points before we look at the first of the seven. These letters, though penned by John, are set down as the very words of Jesus. John, the disciple who had a special place in Jesus' heart, was one of the few apostles not to die a martyr. When he wrote Revelation, he was an old man living in exile on the island of Patmos. Tradition has it that John had lived in the area of the seven churches for many years and so knew the area well.

For those who worry about reading other people's mail and think that what is written here is for the original recipients alone, I would ask you to note that each letter ends with the words like 'whoever has ears to hear, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches'. Though written to specific situations, all these letters are intended for all the churches. So, stop whatever it is you are doing and pay attention.

Ephesus was the go-ahead city of the region. It was the Cardiff of Asia Minor. Not actually the capital but a great place to be. It was wealthy, expanding and important for religious, cultural, commercial and political reasons. What we know of Ephesus suggests it was a place that was changing rapidly. Its importance brought people from all over the known world (and beyond). With these new people came new ideas.

Ephesus also was a centre of religious practice. Greatest of these was the worship of Diana, but it was also a cathedral city for many other religions. And among all the other religions was a small group of Christians.

These Christians faced many challenges. They were a minority. They were marginalized, that is, no-one took much notice of them most of the time. When they did speak out, as in Acts 19, they faced opposition and persecution. Their situation was not so different from ours and it will serve us well to remember that what is happening in the church today is not the first time we have been in this situation. One of the biggest problems, and its one the church in Ephesus did not have, is that we have a history of power. When you become a Christian there is a chance you become part of a large, influential body, but recent years have seen numbers and influence decline. Many have said we need to return to a New Testament model of church – well, welcome to the world of the first Christians.

And how did those first Christians live out the life and witness? This short letter tells us a number of things. First, they were theologically sound – founder member of EA Asia Minor. What is more they were actively sound, testing preachers and leaders alike. Second, they were steadfast under pressure. They faced hardship and persecution, holding onto the truth in the face of countless trials. Some

were big and cost lives, others were small and just underlined the fact that they were not really part of that society. For example, the great temples of Ephesus had withstood numerous invaders and changes of government. Because of their stability these temples had acquired a secondary function – they operated as banks. But how is a Christian business man to run his business and remain true to his Christian principles when banking becomes a religious activity? The Ephesians found a way.

But there was a problem. In spite of the doctrinal purity and the steadfastness they had abandoned love as their guiding, driving principle.

The way the accusation of 2:4 is written leaves no room for manoeuvre. The crisis in Ephesus is total. Because of the loss of this love, for all their sound doctrine and firm stand, they were in a theological and ethical crisis. How could this have happened? Had the Ephesians, so well taught and so active in Christian living, grown out of the need for grace? Perhaps they felt they had progressed beyond such basics and moved on to a deeper theological understanding. Many others, both churches and individuals have done this since. Take the young man or woman, marvellously converted and on fire for Jesus. As years pass that initial enthusiasm becomes solid commitment to the church and leadership qualities develop. Later still we find that person in church leadership, maybe in the ministry, but it's no longer love that guides and empowers, it is the need to perform, to achieve. The doctrine has not changed, nor has the outward commitment to the church, but inwardly the love has died, and the battle is lost. Without that first love all the doctrinal purity, all the activity on behalf of the poor and the disposed, all the standing up for what is right, means nothing – it is a clanging cymbal, an empty gesture. You see our pursuit of Biblical truth, of righteous living, is only secondary. Our prime purpose is to love – to love the LORD our God with all our mind, all our heart, all our soul, and to love our neighbours as ourselves. By this, not our doctrine or our ethical statements, will we be known as Jesus' disciples – that we love one another.

But this letter is not just an accusation of failure. It holds out the very real possibility of change. It involves repentance, that is a recognition that past and present attitudes and actions are not what they should be, a genuine sense that these things are not right and a turning away, determined to do what we know is right. 2:7 tells us that God honours that sort of repentance. There is no suggestion here that we are only acceptable to God if we get it right, only that our hearts are set in the right direction. God will forgive our failures, but how are we to know that forgiveness if we fail to recognise the wrong and turn from it?

Jesus calls to the Christians in Ephesus, as he does to those in Knucklas and Knighton, to return to the core value of their faith. What better way to start the New Year?

Amen

Sunday evening, 12 January 2020

Knucklas Baptist Church