

## **July 15<sup>th</sup> 2012: Lukewarm in Laodicea : Rev 3:14-22**

This morning we come at last to the seventh letter, and it is to the church at Laodicea. A church that Paul mentions in his letter to the Colossians as one that he prayed and struggled for and yet had never visited. Rev 3:14 says:

***<sup>14</sup> "To the angel of the church in Laodicea write: These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God's creation.***

Straight away Jesus uses a term about Himself—the Amen—that God used about Himself in the book of Isaiah. By using this term Jesus is saying—I am the absolutely trustworthy One, and my words are true. So don't bother arguing with me about the things I will tell you for they are totally correct.

Then in verse 15 Jesus lets rip, and what He has to say about that church is not very pleasant.

***<sup>15</sup> I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! <sup>16</sup> So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.***

Now one of the most obvious things about all these letters is the intimate knowledge that the risen Lord has of the churches, and also of the cities in which they were situated. Time and again Jesus refers to matters that one had to be a local to fully understand, and that is nowhere more evident than in this letter to the church at Laodicea. The terms he uses in verse 15-18, like cold, hot, lukewarm were understood from the background that the recipient lived in.

This background for the Christians in Laodicea, was a city that was extremely wealthy and very proud of its self sufficiency. It had been totally devastated by an earthquake in AD61 to the extent that the Roman Empire offered resources to help re-build it. But the Laodiciceans had refused such aid on the basis that they could afford to rebuild their own city, thank you very much, and had done so with great ease. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote, with some sense of awe:

***"Laodicea arose from the ruins by the strength of her own resources, and with no help from us."***

This great wealth had been acquired by the city through certain ventures they that they were also quite arrogant about. As well as the fact that they were a well located trading centre for that region, they had developed sheep that produced a soft, glossy black wool that was made into garments that were greatly demanded elsewhere. They also had this amazing medical school that produced medicines that people would cross continents in order to purchase, and the two most famous were an ointment for the ears and an eye-salve.

The City of Laodicea did however have one natural weakness that it had overcome over the years, and that was a lack of a water supply. No cool springs of water in Laodicea. But there was in Colossae, just 11 miles west; cold refreshing water. And also in Denizli, just 6 miles south, and it was from here that the cold water was piped to Laodicea through a system of stone pipes, about 3 feet across and hollowed through the middle. A huge venture that was worth it so that they could have cold water to drink in their city.

Without that water they only had the water that flowed off the 300 foot high cliff that was opposite Laodicea. This water came from the extremely hot springs that flowed out of the ground near the city of Hierapolis some six miles South. Useful for its healing properties when hot, it was just lukewarm when it flowed over the cliff edge—full of minerals it was tepid and horrible to the taste.

Now turning to the letter itself we can see how Jesus used these background facts to get His point across, and He has two very strong points to make.

**The first is about their deeds.** In five of the letters Jesus begins by saying, "I know your deeds". Jesus sees as of first importance, what His churches(7) are doing in His Name, and He lists those deeds as perseverance, hard work, love, faith, service and so on. He delights to see His people working together for His sake for such is the fruit of His presence within them, and He is judgmental of them when they are not.

*In one of the many stories told of Alexander the Great, a soldier is brought before him for discipline because he has not been doing his share of the duties demanded of the men. When asked by the General for his name, he proudly declared that it was Alexander, like the General's. This caused the General to roar at the man, then change your attitude or change your name.*

And Jesus does the same in these letters. When He discovers those who bear His name not revealing the characteristics of His life in them by what they do, He is not prepared to forget it. Instead He challenges believers to repent of their inactivity before He comes and disciplines them.

And that is exactly what we see Him doing in this letter to Laodicea. V15-16

***<sup>15</sup> I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! <sup>16</sup> So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth.***

Immediately we recognize the words:- cold, hot, lukewarm, and the original readers would have done so even more. This powerful Jesus who, as the Amen, was Almighty God, was here telling them that in His eyes they were lukewarm. And straightaway they would have thought of that lukewarm undrinkable water pouring over the cliff outside their city. Thought back maybe to the times when they had bent down to take a drink only to retch in response at the horrible taste. Thought of the water that was useless by the time it got to them, and realized that was how Jesus saw them.

How sad for any church to be viewed like that by Jesus. To be a body of believers that was useless, and had become something that people avoided because the taste made them vomit, rather than be drawn to, because they showed forth Christ in what they did, said, and the way they acted.

Jesus looked at the church at Laodicea and said, "I wish you were either cold or hot". Now cold here doesn't mean corpse like or completely inactive. Jesus would never wish a believer to be like that. Neither does hot mean highly enthusiastic and super charged all the time, for no church could sustain that for long.

When Jesus said cold, those people would have thought of the cold water rushing through those stone pipes into town. Water that refreshed and gave life. So Jesus wanted them to be known as a people who refreshed others in His name and shared with them the life found in Him.

When Jesus said hot, they would have thought of those hot springs that were used to renew aching bodies and to heal many ailments. So Jesus wanted them to be renowned for works in His name that would renew the weary hearts of those around them and heal the aching souls. And if the description alone was not enough for them to change their ways, Jesus then

tells them in no uncertain way, that if they refused to turn their lives around He would vomit them from His presence.

The hot and cold deeds Jesus referred to are the type of deeds that I believe the Lord sees us pursuing as a fellowship here, and it's so important that we keep them up. That we never get a name for being lukewarm—useless and to be avoided. But it is also important that everyone is involved in the ministries we do for Jesus. That the deeds are not left just to a few. We all claim His name and we must all be Christ-like in what we do for Him.

**The Second Point is about their Sufficiency;** About their arrogance. 17-18

***<sup>17</sup> You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.***

As the people listened they recognized the material motto of their city. "We are rich, they had said to the Romans. We don't need anyone's help". And sadly they would have realized that Jesus was telling them that spiritually they were suggesting the same thing to Him.

Here was a church that had deluded themselves. They believed that they were doing fine and maybe by the standards of the

secular world they were. They were no doubt a wealthy church with the support of very important people. By the terms Jesus used it seems that they had become very materialistic. Rather like the church of England in the time of John Wesley that had become so comfortable with its wealth, its gorgeous ceremonies, its power and prestige, but despised the mass of working class people outside its walls as unworthy of the Gospel as they interpreted it. So John preached God's love in the churchyards until they hounded him from such places in contempt.

You are wretched, pitiful, blind, naked said Jesus. How shocking to hear such words from Jesus Himself!

But thankfully Jesus does not stop with such words of condemnation. He has no wish to abandon those He loves. They belong to Him. He has washed them in His blood. And in words that they could understand He says:

***18 I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.***

He uses their background as an illustration of what they now need to do. For they were Christians but were still very much Laodiceans who were proud of their wealth; of the wonderful black clothes their city sold and the eye and ear ointments they produced. It would seem that their priority in life was still putting these things first and living for Jesus last.

It's easily done in our society too. (I was watching a DVD called Machine Gun Preacher...)

Jesus, it seems, likens himself here to a merchant who visits the city to sell his wares and competes with other salesmen. **"I advise you," he says, "to forsake your former suppliers and come trade with me."**

Buy my gold. It's the characteristic of Christ that we gain through our suffering as we persevere for Him. It's a currency that those in pain yearn to see in us. Mother Teresa was a millionaire in that type of currency.

Receive from me says Jesus, the robes of righteousness. Of living for me and putting my needs ahead of your own. Your living for yourself may give you a glossy black robe one day, but it will leave you naked before my Father in heaven.

And take my ointment for your eyes so that you begin to see people as I see them, and the ointment of my word for your ears so that you become attuned to the inner voice of the Lord constantly saying to you, "this is the way, walk in it."

These words were to the Christians at Laodicea, but they are words that we do well to hear too. For they contain a request from Jesus to our hearts.

Come shop at my store He says. Don't give the best of what you have and who you are to the world and its evil prince, for what you receive will fade and perish. And you don't belong to the world but to me. So come to me

***"Come, all you who are thirsty,  
come to the waters;  
and you who have no money,  
come, buy and eat!  
Come, buy wine and milk***

***without money and without cost.  
2 Why spend money on what is not bread,  
and your labor on what does not satisfy?  
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,  
and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.  
3 Give ear and come to me;  
hear me, that your soul may live. (Isaiah 55:1-3)***