

## SERMON: 5 February 2017 - Rev Dr Brenda Robson

### BEING LUKEWARM!

#### (Revelation 3: 14 – 22)

Jesus said a lot of comforting, uplifting, positive, encouraging things. We have our favourite verses that make us feel good. But Jesus also said some challenging and scary things, there are verses we don't like to dwell on for too long -

Matthew 25: 31–40 - Jesus talks about separating the sheep from the goats. The sheep will be blessed by the Father and inherit the kingdom. The goats will go away to eternal punishment but the righteous to eternal life.

Luke 16: 19–31 – The story of the rich man and Lazarus. The poor man Lazarus died and went to heaven but the rich man who had not shared his wealth went to hell and there was no way out.

Matthew 7: 15–23 – Jesus warns about false prophets, people who call on his name and appear to be followers but are not; in the end Jesus will say to them “I never knew you, away from me, you evil doers!”

This is another one of these passages – (Revelation 3:16) **I know your deeds, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish you were either one or the other! So because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am going to spit you out of my mouth.**

Jesus gave this message to John on the island of Patmos, in a vision, in order to save the church at Laodicea from lukewarm-ness and possible destruction. Jesus gave the warning because he loved the church and it is still a relevant vision for the church today.

Something can be lukewarm because it once was hot and it has cooled down.

Or it was cold and is warming up but is not yet hot.

There is a continuum from cold to hot; where are you today on this thermometer?

It is an excellent picture of our faith journey! Do you feel that your faith was once hot, you were on fire for Jesus, you were passionate and wanted to share the good news with anyone you met? You couldn't get enough time to read your Bible, you prayed faithfully, you were clothed with Jesus Christ. And now you're not quite so on fire, a bit lukewarm.

Or have you been warming up slowly, not yet totally committed, still on the fence.

Lukewarm is not a particularly positive term in any context.

If we come home on a cold day, we don't appreciate a bowl of lukewarm soup.

Lukewarm tea and coffee is not inviting.

Lukewarm chicken can be positively dangerous!

The definition of lukewarm when applied to people is also unattractive -

Dictionaries give lots of words that mean lukewarm – think of these words in relation to your faith and Christian journey because this is what Jesus meant when he talked to John about the lukewarm church at Laodicea – the church was -

**indifferent, cool, half-hearted, apathetic, unenthusiastic, tepid, uninterested, unconcerned, offhand, lackadaisical, impassive, dispassionate, emotionless, passionless, non-committal, unresponsive, unmoved.**

A group has been putting together our Parish Profile. This is a document, several pages long, which describes our church, our vision and what we would like our new minister to be and do. It was finalised by the Kirk Session last week and will appear on our website soon.

The Parish Profile outlines the vision of this church for mission and then it says –

**To work towards our vision, strengthen our witness for Jesus Christ and increase our service to the community we live in, we are seeking a minister who will work under God's direction to lead, guide and motivate us using:**

- ***Team leadership***
- ***Pastoral Care***
- ***Faithful Prayer***
- ***Faithful Preaching of the Word of God***
- ***Recognition, development and use of the gifts of the people***
- ***Community outreach***

**And then it says - We pray that our new Minister will have qualities to help us to develop the opportunities that are present in this parish and the attributes of the Minister that we seek to lead us forward are included with our Vision on page 3 of the Profile.**

How would we feel about an application from a minister who comes across as lukewarm, half-hearted, passionless, uncommitted and any of the other words we have just heard? I suspect we would reject such an application.

But we must be aware that our prospective minister will want to know the temperature of the congregation. It is a two-way process. A new minister will not be drawn to a lukewarm congregation. If the congregation is seen to be lukewarm, half-

hearted, passionless, uncommitted, an enthusiastic minister will not be impressed.

You might have seen the visual aid that is often used by churches to indicate how a fund-raising project is going – a huge thermometer with a scale from zero up to £10,000 or whatever sum needs to be reached. People pass it every Sunday coming into church. It tells them how much more effort needs to go into reaching the goal.

What if that thermometer in the foyer measured the spiritual health of the congregation from zero to 100%, from cold to hot with lukewarm somewhere in the middle? That would make it a lot easier for a prospective minister to consider if he or she wanted to serve here in this place!

Jesus is criticizing those in the church who are half-hearted about him. They do not have the passion and desire and warmth of a true lover of Christ nor are they outright unbelievers who have rejected Jesus altogether. They are half way between. Christ has a moderate influence on their lives but they don't get over-excited about what God is doing. They might say grace at meals and take a few minutes morning and night to pray but they do not burn with desire for more of God. They do not spend quality time with him.

They don't hear the knock of Jesus at the door because they aren't listening and so they are not willing to fling wide the gate and let Jesus into the innermost parts of their being. They keep him just outside the door, acknowledging he is there but limiting his influence.

I was talking to a friend about these verses this week and the verses reminded her of Holy Willie's Prayer. Ken was quoting Robbie Burns last week and the bard features again this week in his poem that poked fun at the holy folk in the church, the sanctimonious on a Sunday who committed deliberate sin Monday to Saturday but were in denial. Holy Willie was not holy at all! He drank to excess, swore and cursed freely and freely had intimate relations with various women. But Willie says in his prayer –

*Yet I am here, a chosen sample,  
To shew Thy grace is great and ample:  
I'm here, a pillar o' Thy temple  
Strong as a rock,  
A guide, a ruler and example  
To a' Thy flock.*

*O Lord thou kens what zeal I bear,  
When drinkers drink, and swearers swear,  
And singin' there, and dancin' here,  
Wi' great an' sma';  
For I am keepet by the fear,  
Free frae them a'.*

There would have been Holy Willies in the church at Laodicea, believing in God and in Jesus' grace, going to church, but with no desire to lead a life with Jesus at the centre. Willie saw Jesus as his Saviour but he was not going to let Jesus be the Lord of his life!

The image of Jesus spitting the lukewarm church out of his mouth is quite startling and shocking. If the people in the church at Laodicea do not repent and become hot and more passionate in their faith, then Jesus rejects them. These verses tell us that faith that is lukewarm does not save.

At verse 15 Jesus says "I know your deeds" so we can't hide away and pretend things are different. Remember Psalm 139 –

***You have searched me, Lord, and you know me.***

***You know when I sit and when I rise;***

***you perceive my thoughts from afar.***

***You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.***

***Before a word is on my tongue, you, Lord, know it completely.***

***Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?***

***If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.***

***If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, you are there***

We often read these words to take comfort in the fact that God is always with us and we are never alone but the writer of the psalm was actually in despair because he had acted in ways that he wanted to conceal from God and at one point in this psalm he was bemoaning the fact that he could not hide anything from God!

It is exactly what Jesus is saying to the church at verse 15 – **I know your deeds!"**

Jesus says we can be complacent and lukewarm because we are satisfied with what we have and we don't want anything more. We will give a little bit of what we have to Jesus but not too much, either in time or money. We will give what we can spare, the leftovers, instead of the best of what we are and what we have.

I still remember a minister maybe 25 years ago having a rant from the pulpit because someone had said to him that morning that there was a local scheme whereby money would be paid for scrap metal and the church could consider this to raise funds. He was incensed that God would get the scraps and not the gold.

You get the sense that Jesus is equally incensed when he says "You are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked." He's not holding back here. He wants to get the attention of the lukewarm, he is not complimentary in any way.

Jesus makes the threats..... and then he provides the counselling. His tone changes.

He says **"I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so that you can**

**become rich; and white clothes to wear, so that you can cover your shameful nakedness and salve to put on your eyes so that you can see."**

Jesus wants the church to give up its spiritual poverty and become spiritually wealthy. He wants our nakedness and shame to be covered with robes of righteousness and good deeds. At the beginning of chapter 3 he says to the church at Sardis **"Yet there are a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels."**

Jesus gives the church a warning because he loves the church. He gives counsel to his people because he loves them.

But how can we buy the gold and the white clothes and medication to cure our blindness when Jesus has just told us that we are broke, skint, poor, have nothing to offer.

The answer is in verse 20. **Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me."**

We often think of this verse in relation to unbelievers who have not yet opened the door to Jesus and that is valid. But we see here that the verse was written for Christians already in the church. It was for lukewarm Christians who think they have no need of anything further from Christ. They keep him at the outer door and do not let him into the inner places of their lives. They treat him like the cold-caller who is kept on the doorstep with nothing desirable to offer.

But Christ did not die for a bride who would keep him on the doorstep. He died for a church with open wide doors, gates flung wide and he wants us to open up all the doors of our life to him.

He wants to join you in the dining room and spread a feast for you and eat and talk with you.

When we let Jesus into the innermost room of our heart then we have all the gold and all the garments and all the medicine we could need. We buy the gold from the refiner's fire when we pray and we trust in the promise **"I will come in and eat with him and he with me."**

Let us not be lukewarm and lack-lustre when a minister comes seeking a new charge.

I think there was a time when this church was "hotter" and when prayer was a more vibrant and vital activity. A time when people would gather regularly to pray in groups and would pray more for one another's needs.

Of course, there are still groups and individuals who pray but I think that we could do better. Our reading from Revelation tells us we could do better.

The parish profile tells us there are 306 people on the church roll. The Monday evening prayer meeting has about six regular attenders. We have started a prayer meeting on the last Sunday afternoon of the month to pray specifically for the church during the vacancy and I was delighted that around 15 people came to the first meeting last week. But there is room for more!

Prayer puts Jesus at the heart. And just look at the promise to those who overcome lukewarm-ness. They gain not just gold and the white clothes of righteousness and the salve so that blind eyes see, they will also be given the right to sit with Jesus on his throne.

So where are we on the spiritual thermometer? If you are burning for Jesus and are up in the hot zone, then good for you, stay there! I suspect that many of us are in the lukewarm zone, for many reasons. It is time to fan the flame and increase the temperature.

Let us re-ignite the spark, let us turn up the gas, the recipe doesn't say simmer, it says "boil!"

AMEN