

SERMON: 13 October 2019 – Rev Alistair Cowper
“Meeting Brokenness and Lostness with Love”
(Revelation 1:17-2:7)

[SLIDE] Kintsugi - Japanese art form putting together broken pieces with gold lacquer

This week and next week we are looking at the messages to the 7 new churches recorded in Revelation 2 and 3.

Already in their infancy we can see that these 7 churches have things worthy of commendation and also things they need to change. But the common message to each of the churches is that God can overcome all weakness, brokenness and lostness, and stimulate faith and hunger for God and God’s ways.

[SLIDE - MAP]

The context for the message is a vision of Christ that John has whilst worshipping in the Spirit on the Lord’s day. Hearing a loud voice, John is instructed to write down messages for the churches.

John had this amazing vision of Jesus the Christ, the Alpha and the Omega, moving freely among 7 lamp stands with 7 stars in his hand, his eyes like blazing fire, his voice like the sound of rushing waters, his face like the sun shining in all its brilliance (1:13-16).

No wonder the only place John could be was to fall down like a dead man, waiting to be lifted up and sent out, to write what he’d seen and what would take place.

John is inspired, in the Spirit, to write to the churches in Asia and share with them the vision of Christ.

The church in Ephesus is commended for their hard work and patient endurance, for not tolerating evil or false teaching. But they have somehow lost their first love, their love for God.

The church in Smyrna is commended for their suffering for their faith and encouraged to stand firm in the face of more suffering to come.

The church in Pergamum is commended for remaining loyal to Christ but are tolerating false teaching, probably the sort of thing that denied the divinity of Jesus.

The church in Thyatira is commended for their love, faith, service and endurance but again were falling prey to idolatry and false prophets leading them astray.

Each of the churches is shown how important it is to listen well to the Spirit of God. And as they do they will discover eternal life, life in all its fullness.

Even today, there is still the one who holds the 7 stars in his hand and walks among the 7 golden lamp stands. He knows all things. He knows our deeds. He knows our hard work. He knows our perseverance. He knows our hardships. He knows our struggles. And he knows our weaknesses. He knows our failures. He knows our sins.

And yet he stills holds us. And he still walks among his church.

[SLIDE] For he has freed us from our sins by his own blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father - to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen (1:5-7).

[SLIDE]

But I want to think a bit more about the problem that the church at Ephesus was confronted with, that of losing their first love. Because this is a crucial issue. For without love we can't do very much. Where love is absent then there is an emptiness and often worse than that, there might be war, hatred, deceit and the like.

I came across a book this week which I just had to buy. It was quoted by someone I admire who was writing about her struggle to live life to the full.

The book is called *All About Love: New Visions* and is by a writer with the great name of bell hooks. Bell is a black American poet and cultural critic. She has come up with the notion that contemporary culture's main problem is one of lovelessness.

Much of the reason for the state of affairs is because of dominant culture too often becoming one of power and domination, by which she means, male domination.

A quick look at most nations and cultures around the globe definitely confirms that. Look at how Turkey (the home of the 7 churches we're thinking about today) is behaving this week, or America, or Russia, or Saudi Arabia, or Iran, or Brazil, or, dare I say it, how Britain behaves.

Our news on Friday reported about a human trafficking gang imprisoned for trafficking Slovakian women into Scotland, including a case where a Slovakian woman was sold as a slave on busy shopping street in Glasgow for £10,000.

And then there was the heart breaking story of Nazanin Zaghary-Ratcliffe whose 5 year old daughter has now had to let her return to the UK without her, an event she described as the most heart breaking thing any parent could ever do.

There's no lack of love on her part but there's a lovelessness in the way she's been treated; a pawn in an international dispute between loveless men.

Love would release her, not keep her imprisoned. May we pray that love wins.

Bell hooks claims that modern people are confused about the practice of love in everyday life. Love is seen as the stuff of fantasy not reality.

That said, she rightly claims that everyone wants to know more about love, to know what it means to love and what we can do in our everyday lives to love and be loved.

[SLIDE] "Everywhere we learn that love is important, and yet we are bombarded by its failure. In the realm of the political, among the religious, in our families, and in our romantic lives, we see little indication that love informs decisions, strengthened our understanding of community, or keeps us together. This bleak picture in no way alters the nature of our longing. We still hope that love will prevail. We still believe in love's promise."

"Only love can heal the wounds of the past. However, the intensity of our woundedness often leads to a closing of the heart, making it impossible for us to give or receive the love that is given to us. To open our hearts more fully to love's power and grace we must dare to acknowledge how little we know of love in both theory and practice."

The introduction to her book claims that *All About Love* is a manual which helps people return to love and discover a hopeful, joyous vision of love's transformative power. I'm looking forward to reading the rest of the book.

She's definitely onto something in highlighting the state of lovelessness. That was the church's problem at Ephesus in the first century and it's likely been a recurring challenge ever since.

[SLIDE] But its a challenge that is well met by the love of God poured out, in and through Christ. Brokenness and lostness are symptoms of that lovelessness and they are cured by God's unfailing love, given to us through the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Christ. Christ is our light, our life and our love. Our loveless world needs this love as much today as ever before.

We need to be people equipped to go into the world with love in our hearts. People like Pollyanna, in the film of that name. Pollyanna knew God's love and she lived it out among the people she lived among, spreading gladness and joy where she could. I remember the scene when she even confronted the local minister, who was a kind of dour character, with the question, "do you like being a minister?"

The minister was quite offended but at least he was willing to listen on and her love and joy infected him and the very next week he was preaching love and talking about looking for the good in people and finding it.

Because love teases out love. Love begets love. Love never fails. Love is patient and kind. Love is not jealous or boastful or proud or rude. It does not demand its own way. It is not irritable, and it keeps no record of being wronged.

Love never gives up, never loses faith, is always hopeful, and endures through every circumstance.

As Bishop Michael Curry said recently, the way of Jesus is the way of love and the way of love can change the world.

May we pray,
Loving God,
may we move the message of love and grace
into the world.

May we write it if necessary, but live it fully,
in whatever way we can.

May we bring to the surface of our lives, the talents and gifts we are,
to reshape the relationships we have,
that proclaim your greater message
of love for all.

May we dig deep within us,
to find the living word,
that shaped us when we were first imagined,
and set it free, through our living,
as your message of recreation.

May we not shy away

from the message that challenges, and provokes,
and disturbs the world,
but find ourselves
in the midst of the fray,
as we explore,
and adventure,
into the fullness of life
for the whole world.

And may we be the living message, of all the saints before us,
of a love that does not let us go, and lives in us through all things, where no
power or fear,
no height or depth,
will ever separate us from you.
This is your message, alive in us,
written if necessary, but lived fully,
in your name.
So be it. Amen.