

If you don't know me my name is Mathew Hessian. I am a member here with my wife Julie and Sophia – who are both in Sunday school. Julie is teaching. Just to be clear!

We have been to many different churches as we have lived in many different places over the last 22 years since leaving here in 1996.

Therefore Roly assumed I was aptly qualified to talk about a Welcoming Church.

We have seen it all..... The 'jump all over them when walk in the door' welcome to the 'ignore them for 6 weeks and if they come on the 7th we might say hello' welcome.

We have had the invite home for lunch type welcome and the put your hand up and tell us why you are here and where you have come from in the middle of service welcome.

We have put our names on welcome cards and filled out visitors' books and surveys and every now and then given false phone numbers so they don't track us down during week, sort of welcomes... Don't get me wrong, we are not church hoppers and we have quickly settled down into a new home church in every place we have lived in that time.

When I think about that, I wonder why we chose to stay in the churches we did.

Was it the worship? The flowers, the type of coffee served, or the length of the sermon?

Or was it because they had a large community time in the middle of service or because they didn't?

So – after all of those experiences and differences and that is only scratching the surface I guess – when I think about what made us actually feel welcome in those places...

It was the people, the genuineness of their faith - it was obvious in the life of the church. We stayed in places where Jesus was worshipped and his word was preached.

This morning therefore, I want to look at some of the things the Bible has to say about being a welcoming church. Let's start at the very beginning – of the church at least.

Acts 2 42: 'All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, Fellowship and to sharing meals, this included the Lords supper and to Prayer'

Acts 4:32: 'They were united in one heart, they shared everything and The Apostles testified powerfully to the resurrection of Jesus and God's blessing was upon them.....'

We will look at those words a bit more closely now...

Acts 2 42: 'all the believers devoted themselves:

There was a commitment, not an 'only when there is nothing else on commitment but a true devotion.'

Devotion; It is about – Loyalty, Fervour, Solemn Commitment; It's almost an all-consuming sort of commitment to something; Dedication.

It is not flippant. It is not part time. It is not always convenient.

I know what I devote my time and effort to and I am not yet convinced it is always in the areas that may be it could be....

I know I am devoted to work, I know when the football season is on I am devoted to that.....

There is a loyalty a real commitment to those.

Can I say the same about the rest of my life?

What do you devote yourself to – your time, passion, resources.

The Bible says the early believers were devoted to:

To the apostles teaching,

This obviously became what we now have in The Bible it is the same teaching we have to study with and to bury in our hearts. They were studying the word.

They wanted it written on their hearts so that it could not be taken away.

The apostles had been with Jesus and those early believers were devoted to the things they taught.

1 Peter 2:2 says 'Like Newborn babies, you must crave PURE spiritual milk so that you will grow into a full experience of salvation. CRY OUT for this nourishment, now that you have had a taste of the Lords kindness.'

John 8:31 says 'if you remain faithful to my teachings you truly are my disciples'

Do you ever wonder if without that early devotion and faithfulness how much of those words have been passed down through the years and the good news shared with us today.

They were also devoted to Fellowship and to sharing meals, including the Lord's Supper.....'

All of these believers - they committed themselves to the word and then they committed themselves to Fellowship....

It was meaningful.... Sharing meals was important in those days – we have heard that many times. These new believers did this with each other from the outset.

It was radical – I can only imagine the different types of people –we know at least of tax collectors, and fishermen and rich men and no doubt women and children; again that would be controversial.

People from all over the region - all different countries and tongues....

Yet in spite of the differences the Bible says they devoted themselves to meeting together.

Not only did they meet together for the Lord's Supper. They were welcoming him into their gatherings by remembering him as they were commanded to. Being out of fellowship is not easy and it is not easy to stay devoted to the teaching without other believers around you! These things go together.

For three years we thought that we could manage without a church and that our own reading of the Bible and prayer would sustain us.

That is not the case.

Without the support, encouragement and faithfulness of other Christians it is a very hard road to follow.

They were devoted to Prayer

Roly spoke about Prayer last week. We saw how devoted the Acts church was – when they prayed and what they prayed for. When we prayer we are saying to God 'not me Lord but you' 'not my understanding but yours' we are giving our selves over to him when we pray earnestly. We are inviting him into our gathering, our circumstance our hearts. We may find it difficult to get to prayer gatherings, we may find it inconvenient but when we gather to pray together God says :

'....I will be there among you'

When we gather Christ is made welcome among us.

In Acts 4 Paul goes on to tell us 'They were united in one heart, they shared everything.....

They came as individuals to the fellowship.

And despite their very different backgrounds when they came together in those days there was unity of the heart.

This is beyond our human ability to achieve. We try and we try and we put all sorts of things in place and we try seminars and we try picnics and we try working bees and fairs and cake stalls and shared lunches – and soup Sundays – and those are all valuable parts of our community.

But how do we become more united... in a way that the early church is said to have been?

What can we do to get more united?

All being like Christ would be a great start;

An old American Pastor from early 1900's said:

'If I have 100 pianos and I want to tune them all and I go around and tune them to each other – I will have a mess.

If I take one tuning fork and tune them all to that one fork they will all then be tuned to each other.'

The same thing is true in the church when we are all surrendered to being like Christ being devoted to Christ – there will be total Unity.

There are all sorts of different pianos - Grand Pianos and Upright Pianos and Digital Pianos and Baby Grand Piano's. When they are all tuned to the same fork they don't lose their distinctiveness. A Grand doesn't become a Baby just because they are tuned the same. Neither would we want them to; and that is exactly the same with Christians – we don't become all the same just because we are all tuned the same way – to Jesus. But do have unity.

There is more – 'The apostles testified powerfully'.

Notice what it says here about the preaching.

It was taught powerfully – That means the Holy Spirit was there. We know from earlier events.....

The word was preached with the Holy Spirit's leading, prompting and inspiration. And it seems that it was hitting home to those who were hearing it.

It was finding fertile ground and new believers had a welcoming fellowship for them to be nurtured in – that seems to be without doubt.

Let's read again the way Paul concludes this passage

And if you are not filled with a just a little bit of envy when you listen to this then – I would be surprised....

This is what he says....

They worshipped together at the Temple each day

They met in homes for the Lord's Supper

And they shared their meals with great joy and generosity –

All the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of all the people.

And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved.

Do you remember the day you were saved?

The day when you became a part of God's Church?

I remember the day I surrendered to my life to Christ – I remember standing at the front of a group of people at a Camp in Waihola Jacqui, now Tetlow, then Reynolds, had her arms around me as she prayed for me as I welcomed Jesus in. I can still remember that wonderful and overwhelming sense of coming from darkness to light and a timid but certain knowledge of being born into something significant and to something meaningful and to something eternal.

In those early days I am not sure I saw the darker days to come. The days when my faith would be tested, when I started to question the need for God and need for Jesus in my life the times when I was anything but devoted to him and to his people!

The unabandoned hope and joy of those early days believing in Christ seem so long ago and so hard to hold on to.....

Can we just pause, is that okay? Close your eyes for 30 seconds and recall the day you welcomed Jesus in to your life. If you can sit here this morning and confidently say that you have retained the devotion, the joy and the passion of those early days believing then we praise God for you.

There will be others of us sitting here this morning who wish that we could say the same thing – but alas have let other things get between us and God; we have devoted time and effort to our own idols and relied on our own understanding and while we have not turned from God and we retain our belief it is very much a whiter shade of pale....

One of my favourite songs by a group called Switchfoot has these words:

'A steering wheel don't mean you can drive and a warm body doesn't mean you're alive.

I feel like I travel but I never arrive – I want to thrive not just survive'

How often do we realize that as Christians and as God's Church we have the single greatest hope and reason for thriving and living life in all its fullness.....

I want to tell you another short story:

In my office on Wednesday the staff had got together to purchase a Powerball ticket. There were the usual jokes that they would not be in the office on Thursday as they fully expected that all of their dreams would come true when the balls with their numbers on them dropped!

Of course it was bravado and only the faintest of hope.....They duly turned up on Thursday morning and I bought them morning tea in an effort to comfort their dashed hopes and dreams!

Our numbers have already come up. It came up the day Jesus saved us and promised us eternal life.

The hope we have is not based on what might happen. The hope we have is based on the certainty and promise that Jesus is coming again. So that we can take as many others with us at that time our challenge as a church and as individuals is to devote ourselves as the first church devoted themselves.

2 Corinthians – ‘On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.’ The children downstairs are learning about God’s Promises to send a Messiah. We are a church because we are following that Messiah and Our Hope is in that Messiah returning.

Through the rest of the early life of the church there were some who retained this devotion and there were those who did not.

In Hebrews 10:25 Paul writes ‘Consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some...’

We are going to look 50 years or so ahead at 7 Churches in Revelation but let’s dip in on the Thessalonians some 20 years on from the time of Acts 2:

This Church had picked up and run with the message Paul came to them with some years earlier.

He had had his time cut short as a result of a bit of ‘civil unrest’ he moved on and before he could get back to visit he writes to them.

1st Thessalonians says ‘**Dear Brothers, we can’t help but thank God for you, because your faith is flourishing and your love for one another is growing.....**’

He praises them because he has heard of their reputation throughout Greece. They have stayed away from Idols and remained faithful through times of persecution. They have resisted false teachers and stayed true to the teachings of Christ. They have grown in love for each other and are becoming well known for that.

To this day there is still a thriving Christian Church in Thessalonica. They are a good model.

Are you starting to see some themes coming through from the scripture here?

REVELATION CHURCHES

How did it finish up?

Fortunately for us Jesus revealed his thoughts of how the Churches were doing to John in Revelation.

He wrote 7 letters to 7 Churches of the day and in doing that he revealed a glimpse of what judgement day may look like.....

There are all sorts of theories on who the churches are and who they represent and whether they are foretelling of movements, or eras of the church. Whether they are really for individual churches or in fact for individual people....

These were all real thriving churches that existed in real towns during the time Paul was travelling and preaching.

Today only 2 of them remain, the others never made it this far. It is not just the churches that don’t exist – neither do the towns.....

These are the words of Jesus as spoken to John and concerning 7 churches of that time yet this is a message for today every bit as much as it was for then.

There is much in here for us to take note of and to learn from:

Each letter contains:

Commendations – the things that are good,

Criticism – the stuff that is not good,

Instructions: the stuff to fix and promises of blessings for those Churches who overcome those things.

Firstly there are 2 that do not receive criticism.

The Church at **Smyrna**, was praised for its graceful perseverance of the suffering that it was enduring at the hands of many Jews in the city and because they had resisted anything that was not the true teachings of the word of Christ.

They were commended for their faithfulness encouraged to stay faithful...

Smyrna exists as a town today.....

Philadelphia was commended because they were holding on to Jesus teachings and remaining faithful – again in the face of persecution. They had continued to meet together to do good works and to preach the word.

Philadelphia still exists in Turkey today – although by a different name!

Then there were a further 4 that Jesus was able to commend before finding fault and criticizing:

The Church at Ephesus was commended for rejecting evil and persevering, for hard work and for having patience – sounds good so far

Then Jesus said **'I have this complaint – you do not love me like you did at first. If you do not repent I will remove your lampstand'**

They did not love him like they did at first. They had been tempted to other things and away from the Devotion and love they once had.....

Ephesus no longer exists.

The church at Pergamum was commended for keeping the faith in Christ. They even refused to deny Christ when one of the early Christians was martyred in their city - another good thing.

But still Jesus says to the church at Pergamos – **'You tolerate idols and immorality and heresy. He instructs them to repent.'**

He was no longer the focus of their devotion.

Pergamum - no longer exist nor is there any settlement on this site today.

The Church at Thyatira – was also commended for keeping the faith. They had great love for each other and their patience had grown. They were also commended for the service they did.

But they had taken their eye off of Jesus, off of devotion.

They were being led astray by a woman – a Jezebel. No doubt it was the men who had been taken in and they had found their way to idolatry and sexual immorality and away from the perfect nature and teaching of the Lord God.

Jesus instructed those who had remained firm and resisted this; to continue to 'hold tight' and to stay true to the devotion they had set off with. For those who had already followed her it was too late it seems....

Thyatira - no longer exist nor is there any settlement on this site today.

Caversham is faithful church. We can see that from the Missionary Roll on the wall. We can see that from the families in pews – the generations of families that have carried the faith through this place. We are a faithful Church.

But Jesus expected more than faithfulness it seems....

The Church at Sardis: this one is sobering.

Jesus said to them **'I know all the things you do and that you have a reputation for being alive – but you are dead!**

Your actions do not meet the requirements of my God' he said.

'Strengthen what little remains.'

And then He calls them simply to **'wake up'!**

Sardis - no longer exists nor is there any settlement on this site today.

Which leads nicely to the Church at Laodicea?

Jesus had nothing to commend this Church for - the only one with no commendations.

The whole story of Laodicea is fascinating – They were not near a water source. They had to have water bought in by aqueduct. But because of their distance from the springs both hot and cold meant that the water had either cooled down to or warmed up to lukewarm when it arrived.....Hot and Cold water are useful – lukewarm water is useful for nothing.

So it won't surprise you when you read that the criticism of Jesus was that the church was indifferent! Merely Indifferent!

Not asleep, not actively worshipping other idols not persecuting Gods people - nor dead just indifferent. He said - **'I know all the things you do, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish that you were one or the other! But since you are like lukewarm water, neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out...'**

He goes on to highlight to them that they view themselves as self-sufficient and not needing of Jesus.

We talk about Idols of our time – Roly mentioned individualism last week and I wonder if indifference is another.

Not feeling strongly enough one way or the other to be sparked to action,

'Someone else can worry about I am too busy doing this' sort of attitude.....

..... Not standing for anything - Is there a worse combination of things and a danger to our Churches today of self-reliance, individualism and indifference. ??

Jesus makes it very clear that they should turn to him and seek what they need from him and not rely on their own resources and material wealth and understandings.

The next part of this passage is perhaps the most telling.....

But where was Jesus to be found in this Church?

He answers that question clearly in Verse 20:

'Look, I stand at the door and knock, if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in, and we will share a meal'

Jesus has been put outside of the Church.

He is not welcomed in his own church only 50 years on from the day he dies on the cross and then came back to life....

You do have to wonder what sort of fellowship there was with Jesus outside.

That is a far cry from the way it started.....

But the greatest thing of that desperately sad image that of Jesus standing outside of the Church, is this:

In Acts the believers gathered to share meals – even the Lord's Supper.

And here Jesus is now on the outside of Church saying to his people, his believers – if you hear me and open the door I will come in and we will share a meal together.....

He is still giving them a way back to him. In fact in Vs 21 he says to Laodicea **'to the one who conquers, I will grant him to sit on my throne with me'**.

No matter where we are in our life individually with God or as members of his Church.

No matter where we are as a body of his believers – the Church family at Caversham Baptist –

When we welcome Jesus in he will come in and we will fellowship together. If we fellowship in the way intended in Acts 2 – the wider community that we are a part of had better watch out!

When Jesus is present amongst a people devoted to God; to teaching to fellowship and to prayer – that is a welcoming Church.

CONCLUSION:

Let us bow our heads and close our eyes for a moment while I pray and the musicians are going to play for us as we just reflect on our own lives and what we bring in devotion to him:

PRAYER:

Lord we bow our heads and with our hearts we seek your face, help us lord to be:

Devoted to you: there is only one God and we turn away from those idols that take us from you - help us to see the idols in our life lord

Help us be devoted to your Teaching: and be believers who crave the spiritual milk like new born babies.'

Help us to be devoted to Prayer: In everything we do help us to seek your, guidance, your leading and your refinement. In all circumstances lets us seek you first and do not rely on own understandings.

Lord! Give us the heart to be Devoted to Fellowship: To meeting together to worship – with JOY. To have a God given, spirit powered, love for each other and for you. To support and encourage each other and lift each other when there is need – physical, emotional or spiritual.

That in meeting together with Joy and generosity we will find favour from all people as we work together and serve together for your glory.

We welcome you among us afresh Lord and pray these things in your powerful and glorious name.