3 September 2017: Matins

The Twelfth Sunday After Trinity

Psalm 34: 1-9; Jonah 3: 1-9, Revelation 3: 14-22

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+ ‘Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. (Rev 3: 15-16)

The verse that I have taken as my text, in the translation from the King James Bible, appears on the frame of the most famous pre-Raphaelite painting in Oxford: Holman Hunt’s ‘The Light of the World’, completed in 1853, and now hanging in a side chapel at Keble College. As you can see from the image in your pew sheet, the picture shows a figure standing outside a door which has clearly not been opened for a long time, for it is overgrown with ivy and weeds, and the nails and hinges are rusted. No door handle appears visible on the outside and the man has his hand raised to knock. It is night-time and the background is lit with moonlight, but the morning star shines above the scene, heralding the dawn of a new day.

Additional illumination – and indeed the brightest light in the picture – comes from the lantern that the figure holds in his left hand, ‘the light to guide us in dark places’, as the artist described it, symbolising both the light of truth and of Christian understanding.

The figure in the image is, of course, Christ. By giving him a lantern to hold, Holman Hunt followed the metaphorical explanation of the psalms: ‘Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path. (Ps 119: 105). The morning star in the sky, Hunt suggested, should bring to mind the promise of the new life that will open up once the soul has awakened to Christ. Christ himself is the true light, as St John reminds us in his gospel: ‘the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it’ (John 1: 5) The inscription under the picture identifies its biblical source: ‘Behold I stand at the door and knock. If any man hear my voice and open the door I will come in to him and will sup with him and he with me.’
This painting illustrates powerfully the text of the letter to the church in Laodicea, the seventh of the letters dictated by the visionary St John to the angels of the churches of Asia Minor; it stands out in the sequence for having nothing positive whatever to say about the church of Laodicea. Even the church of Sardis was offered the hope that some of its number might prove worthy to follow the Lamb. No mitigation softens the message to Laodicea.

‘I know of your works’, says Christ, the Amen, the one whose word can be trusted. ‘You are neither cold nor hot, I wish you were either cold or hot, but because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth.’ Contemporary audiences would have risen immediately to the allusion here: the city of Laodicea lay about 40 miles south-east of Philadelphia, equidistant between the city of Hieropolis, which had hot thermal springs, and Colossae, where ice-cold water ran. The cold drinking water of Colossae was refreshing, and the hot water baths of Hieropolis had healing properties, but Laodicea’s water was tepid and of no benefit. So, Christ says, ‘because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth’. There’s an irony here. Elsewhere it is the word of God, the sharp, two-edged sword, that comes out of the mouth of Christ (as in the letter to Pergamum, 2: 16). The people of Laodicea, complacent in their wealth built largely on a woollen industry and a famous medical school, had lost their capacity to proclaim the word of truth; their arrogance and dangerous inertia threatened their future existence.

It has long been commonplace to equate the Church of England with that of Laodicea. The Elizabethan compromise was itself lukewarm: it created a church that was neither one thing nor the other, neither hot nor cold, an image that generations of reformers have adopted. In the Puritan rhetoric of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, England stood for Laodicea and thus, theologians argued, its people could expect a special punishment at the apocalypse. For as Revelation makes clear, at the end in the general punishment, all the churches except that of Philadelphia would be destroyed; yet Laodicea would face a double horror of being spat out from Christ’s mouth before being consumed in the general conflagration.
What makes a church hot or cold? Would we call Christ Church a hot church today? Well, perhaps Matins is not the best service at which to ask that question, especially not a Said Matins deep in the vacation. If congregational size provides an index of warmth, Matins is cold. Refreshing, revitalising, like the cool, clear waters of Colossae; marked perhaps by rationality, what our former Dean liked to call ‘sensible religion’. The Eucharist service that follows will certainly be warmer in that there will be many more people here, yet I doubt that we could honestly claim it were either hot or cold.

Is ours, therefore, a lukewarm church, reflecting a lukewarm, indifferent, even a complacent faith? We might think that what is hot in the Church of England is not here: perhaps it can be found in St Aldate’s across the road, or among the large crowds of young people at St Ebbe’s. Or we might look for heat amid the incense and solemn processions at Mary Mags and St Barnabas, or – as our Dean and new Diocesan Canon Precentor can testify – in the chapel of at least one of Oxford’s theological colleges.

While I was being trained and formed for ordained ministry in the first half of this year, I experienced a wide variety of worship led by students at Ripon College, Cuddesdon, all prepared with the heat and conviction of deep religious emotion. Those of you who know me, know that I struggled with much of this: I did not always respond with grace and humility when offered pebbles or pieces of fabric to hold; I flinched when given paper and coloured crayons and invited to write notes to Jesus about my sins and weaknesses, before consigning them to a fire burning outside the chapel. I frequently failed to join in many of the worship songs and choruses that all my fellow students seemed to know and love. Yet I was not unchanged by this worship; indeed on occasions I was deeply affected, moved more than once to tears. For no one can possibly doubt my fellow trainees’ enthusiasm, fervour, and profound spiritual commitment. The safe space of a theological college provided important freedoms for them to experiment with how to articulate sentiments that they might otherwise struggle to put into words. While little of their forms of worship may translate directly into the parishes where my peers now serve as curates, our shared Cuddesdon experiences may well find expression in our future ministries in unexpected ways, bringing heat and warmth to formerly cooler congregations.
How might we relate this to Cathedral worship? Don’t worry, I am not about to suggest we start handing out pebbles or erecting a screen at the crossing to display the words of choruses. Yet we might profitably dwell on the aspects of the letter to Laodicea that ring disconcertingly in our own ears. We have our own tendency arrogantly to claim to self-sufficiency; we are often ready to place too much reliance in our own riches, to forget that true riches are found only in heaven. If we can have the ears to listen, then we can hear a message of hope here. Christ, speaking as wisdom personified, urged the angel of Laodicea to buy gold, white garments (in contrast to the black wool for which the city was famous), eye ointment with which to see truly, to view reality from a different perspective. He offered his criticisms as a sign of his love for Laodicea: ‘I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent.’ God will punish wrongdoing, but true repentance and amendment of life will bring salvation.

At the end of the letter, the metaphor changes and we return to where I began and the image of Christ standing outside the community, knocking and waiting to enter; he had apparently waited a long while, judging by the extent of the neglect and the undergrowth shown in the Holman Hunt picture. As Hunt wrote, explaining his painting, ‘The closed door was the obstinately shut mind, the weeds the cumber of daily neglect, the accumulated hindrances of sloth.’ (Pre-Raphaelitism and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, 2 vols, London, 1905, I, 350-51) The faithful of Laodicea had so diluted Christ’s message, mingling the hot with the cold, that they had created a tepid, a lukewarm faith in which they believed themselves self-sufficient without Him among them. Yet if they could just open their ears – ‘Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking – and open their hearts, he would come in and eat with them. Jesus’ words make us think of the Good Shepherd, who is also the door of the sheep, each of which hears his voice (John 10: 3). Or we might see Christ as the bridegroom in the Song of Songs, knocking on the door to be admitted.

The way to warm faith up again, to shake off its inertia and complacency and restore its fervour, is to hear the clear Eucharistic echoes in Christ’s invitation. He welcomes us to his table, where we may share a meal together, broken bread and wine outpoured. The angel wrote to the Christians of Laodicea to urge them to eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord in this life, in anticipation of that final banquet, when the Lamb will feast with his bride (Rev. 19: 7). Christ promised that, to the one who conquers, he will give a place with him on his throne.
The kingdom which will be shared by all the faithful is open to us, too, if we can hear Christ knocking and let him and his teaching not just into our individual lives, but into our church. ‘Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying.’

Let me end with words of John Milton addressed to Christ Jesus, echoing both this text and St John’s later vision of the everlasting Kingdom, where the elders pour forth their heavenly praise: (Rev 11: 15-18)

Thy kingdom is now at hand and thou standing at the dore. Come forth out of thy Royall Chambers, O Prince of all the kings of the earth, put on the visible robes of thy imperiall Majesty, take up that unlimited Scepter which thy Almighty Father hath bequeath’d thee: for now the voice of thy Bride calls thee, and all creatures sigh to bee renew’d. (‘Animadversions’, in The Works of John Milton, ed Frank A Patterson, III, 148)

May we, too, sigh to be renewed; let us open that door and so let in the Light of the World.