**22nd August 2021**

**A gathering prayer**

Welcoming God,
we come to you with open hearts
and with open hands.
We come with our faith and hope,
and with our doubts and fears.
Send your Holy Spirit to work among us,
filling us and changing us
to become more like Jesus. **Amen**.

**A prayer of adoration**

Loving God, giver of life;
Lord Jesus, friend and Saviour;
Holy Spirit, living water –
we worship and adore you.
We come today,
not having or expecting all the answers
but knowing that you are the way. **Amen.**

**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

When we turn away from you, O God,
and go our own way:
**forgive us, and turn us back to you.**
When the way ahead is not clear,
when everything feels too much
and we turn our backs on you:
**forgive us, and turn us back to you.**
When we make wrong decisions
and our actions hurt others:
**forgive us, and turn us back to you.**
When we want to give up because it’s too hard:
**forgive us, and turn us back to you.**
When we cannot see beyond ourselves and act selfishly:
**forgive us, and turn us back to you.**
When we do not put you and others first:
**forgive us, and turn us back to you.**
Turn us back to you, O God.
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

Despite going our own way and not following you,
despite our doubts and fears of your presence,
you are there gently leading us,
reaching out your arms of healing and forgiveness.
Thank you, eternal God.
**Amen.**

**Revelation 3.14-22**

Every now and again it’s nice to have a bath. Especially after having gone for a long walk. Its nice to lie in a hot bath and relax those muscles. The problem is that sometimes you get distracted. The phone goes. You get caught up n a book. And you forget you ran a bath an hour ago. Now it is lukewarm. Lukewarm baths are neither here nor there.

As we continue our look at the letters to the churches in the Book of Revelation, asking the question they ask: ‘what is the Spirit saying to the church?’ we come to the final letter to the church at Laodicea. It is the only letter where the risen Christ has nothing good to say about the church. Instead, he criticizes them for being Lukewarm:

*I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other!****16****So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth 3.15-16*

Lukewarm/apathetic?

This week saw the fall of Kabul and the chaotic scenes of people fleeing the Taliban, clinging on to airplanes as they attempted to take off from Kabul airport, parents throwing their babies over the airport walls desperate for them to be safe.

President Joe Biden commenting on the withdrawal of US troops which has precipitated the takeover by Taliban fighters said If anything, the developments of the past week reinforce that ending US military involvement in Afghanistan now was the right decision,".

"American troops cannot and should not be fighting in a war and dying in a war that Afghan forces are not willing to fight for themselves."

He said they had poured trillions of dollars into the Afghan state, training their armed forces, and bankrolling their politicians but at the point when they expected them to make a stand the politicians fled, and the troops gave up and didn’t resist.

His comments and interpretation of events have of course been challenged and criticized. We may never know the truth of those claims. Even now brave women are standing up to Taliban fighters and protesting for their rights and people are starting to show their defiance by parading the Afghan flag. Events will unfold and we can only pray that if the people of Afghanistan don’t want the Taliban to take control of their country they will stand up and resist and not be lukewarm or apathetic.

The reason why the people of Laodicea are lukewarm, or apathetic, is revealed in the following verses:

*You say, “I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.” But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind, and naked.****18****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.*

Laodicea was a rich and prosperous place. It stood at the junction of important trade routes running into what is now central turkey from the coast. It was the banking centre of the whole region and as we know today, wherever the money is, the money is. They were so affluent that when an earthquake struck the region in AD17 help was offered centrally from Rome for the recovery and whilst other towns gladly accepted assistance., Laodicea reckoned it could manage Ok without outside help. We’re fine and comfortable they said!

The town boasted a fine medical school; people would come from far distances to train to be doctors. In particular the school specialized in ophthalmology, the healing of eyes. Laodicea was a good place to get hold of a particularly popular Phrygian eye powder.

There was more. The local farmers had developed a breed of sheep whose wool was of the finest quality which generated a fashion. Clothes from Laodicea were highly sought after.

But it didn’t have its own water supply and needed it to be piped in from a few miles away. The water came from hot springs and by the time it got to the city it was lukewarm! It made the drinker nauseous, and it had to be stored until it went cold. In other words lukewarmness made it ineffective. It was water but you couldn’t drink it. This church was Christian, but in name only. Pretty ineffective.

Money, clothes, eye salve. Three things picked up in the criticism meted out to them.

Laodicea could boast it was so rich and had amassed wealth it had need of nothing. It didn’t need God.

Laodicea was so proud of the garments it produced that it never realized that it was naked in the sight of God.

Laodicea was so conscious of its medical skill in the care of eyes that it never realized that in the sight of God it was spiritually blind. The words of the risen Christ arise directly from the prosperity and the skill in which Laodicea took so much pride, and which had in the minds of its citizens and even of tis church, eliminated the need for God.

It doesn’t take much imagination to make comparisons with our own society, does it? The aim of most people’s lives is to be comfortable. To have a steady income, to have a home, to get on in life to be self-sufficient. There is nothing wrong in that, there is a lot of good things about that – no one wants to be dependent on another or needing help. But it is the pride and self-sufficiency that goes with it that is the spiritual problem. I’m Ok - sod everyone else. I’m Ok I don’t need God.

I know that at the height of the pandemic when there where many deaths and real fear of catching Covid there was a little bit of interest in reaching out to God for help and salvation. In extreme danger, when there is no one else to turn to – lets try prayer… Remarkably, the scriptures say that even though we live lives without reference to God, when we turn to God, God will hear us (Acts 28.26-27).

In science we place our trust. The development of the vaccination has been a game changer of which we are all grateful. Some will say we don’t need God because science gives us the answers. Well honest scientists will say we don’t have all the answers. Christian scientists will say that we are grateful for God’s gifts to us in understanding more how the universe works so we can tackle the issues of our day with those God given insights and gifts.

I read an article about Emily Smith, an epidemiologist, and the wife of a Baptist Pastor in Dallas in the States. [[1]](#endnote-1) There is only a 45% take up of the vaccine among white evangelical Christians in the States. The more politicized the pandemic became, the more misinformation and disinformation Smith had to fight. She had to start debunking anti-science sentiments: people calling the virus a hoax, saying that masking was a sign of fear and not of faith, that the vaccine was a “mark of the beast” or that it would ruin our immune systems.

She says, ‘The mark of the beast, from a Christian faith perspective, is something in Revelation. It is supposed to be a mark in the end times. And the Christian space has heard theories on what the mark of the beast is for decades and decades and decades. … The latest one is a conspiracy theory about the vaccines or masks being mark of the beast. And it is just a warped way of viewing something that’s actually lifesaving as a mark towards something that is anti-Christian or anti-faith.”

Smith said the key in getting the right information to this group may lie in not only the message, but the messenger. And as the wife of a minister, as well as a Christian, and a scientist herself, she hopes that she might be more trusted among this group. She said faith and science can be informed, and that trying to get people to recognize how they can both work with each other during the pandemic has helped. That it has helped people trust what she is saying and where she is coming from. We can trust in science as something that is a gift from God – a way of God’s healing.

Going back to Laodicea, the criticism that they were self sufficient and therefore apathetic, indifferent about their faith in God was aimed at the church.

This was a church that was going through the motions. Their faith wasn’t on fire. All they were interested in was their own comfort. Jesus was shut out of the room.

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 that person, and they with me.*

It a well-known verse. Holman Hunt did a famous painting, The Light of the World’ based on this verse that hangs in St Paul’s Cathedral in London. Jesus is depicted standing outside a house with a lantern in his hand, whilst the other hand knocks on the door. There is only one handle on the door, and it is on the inside. In other words, you have to open the door to let Jesus in.

Holman Hunt deliberately painted the door of the human heart with no handle on the outside, so the door can only be opened from within. It is a picture of a seeking God. The God who loves us before we love God. The knocking Christ, the searching Christ.

St Bernard way back in the 12th century used to say to his monks that however early they were awake and rose for prayer in their chapel, even on a cold mid-winter morning, or in the dead of night, they would always find God awake before them, waiting for them – indeed it was God who had awakened them to seek God’s face. The God who takes the initiative – who is knocking, who is seeking. How is God knocking on your life?

We have a responsibility in how we respond. We can answer. We can open the door. We can let Christ in. Or we can refuse. Pretend we haven’t heard or mistook the knocking for something else – whatever excuse we can come up with.

It is an amazing offer – to come in and eat with you. The word for eat *deipenin* in Greek refers to the main meal of the day. The meal is which you sit for a long time, catch up with the day, linger long and enjoy company and fellowship. The promise is of an intimate friendship, a sharing of interests and meeting of minds an openness of heart.

The Laodiceans were keeping Christ outside. They were going through the motions. They were half hearted in their Christian faith, but they kept Christ at arm’s length, with a door in between them. They were comfortable, satisfied, they didn’t want to run the risk of being disturbed, having their comfort unsettled, of having to do anything too costly or unsettling. Perhaps this is what they feared if they got too close to Jesus.

What about you? Too comfortable. A bit apathetic? Indifferent to all this church and Jesus’ stuff? They say the problem of modern evangelism is not hostility to Christianity but indifference. People feeling that the Christian faith has no relevance to their lives. Indifference is the hardest of all barriers to break down. They say it can only be broken down by the actual demonstration of a life in which the power of Christ is making that life strong and a positive difference. Where the grace of Christ is making that life beautiful and attractive.

But many are fearful of what may happen if you opened that door and let Jesus in?

We British are naturally suspicious of people who are a bit too zealous for any cause. The Taliban are fired up – they ae their cause but are perceived as unreasonable extremists. Bette to be a little lukewarm; neither hot nor cold?

It is understandable that during this pandemic people have protected themselves, sought their own comfort and security. Yet there has been great public spirit and generosity, certainly in the early stages of the pandemic last year. What about now? Specifically, are we open to the Lord’s knocking on our hearts?

Do we have an open heart to the cause of the gospel, wanting people to hear the good news about Jesus? Wanting our young people to come to faith? Are we touched by the Lord’s compassion and heart for the poor and disadvantaged – are we stirred by the Spirit to seek out initiatives that will bring comfort and relief to others, hospitality and help to those in need? Have we an open heart to those who will be refuges from Afghanistan, a concern for our neighbours, whether they are fleeing from terror or had their lives destroyed by an earthquake in Haiti.

When you let Jesus into your room he’s going to be sharing these concerns with you. It’s a restless caring compassionate heart, that burns with love and justice and doesn’t care too much about being comfortable. It’s quite a ride. It’s quite a life, quite an adventure having Jesus in the same room. But its not easy. Sometimes you would like to close the door on him.

At the start of this letter, Christ is described as the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. It echoes Colossians 1.15-20 in a letter that was designed to be forwarded to Laodicea (as Col 4.16 indicates). Jesus is the one through whom god’s world came to eb, and also the one in whose resurrection the new creation has been launched. That cosmic plan of life, real life puts the Laodicean lukewarmness into even more embarrassing perspective. Here is Jesus, the Lord of the universe and here you are, smug and self-satisfied, but in fact poor, naked blind – small and shrivelled.

Those who share the room with him, those who open the door to Christ and who are thereby strengthened t conquer and be victorious, as Jesus was victorious through his death and resurrection will have the most extraordinary privilege. It is already mind-blowing to think of Jesus sharing the throne of God but now it appears that those who are victorious are going to share Jesus’ throne as well. They will share this strange sovereign rule over the world, the rule to which he came not by force of arms and fear of death, like the Taliban, but by the power of suffering love.

The seven letters are ended. Let anyone with an ear to listen, today, as much as it was in john’s day, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.



**Prayers of intercession**

Lord, who shall we turn to but you:
**for you have the words of eternal life.**

Lord God, help us to choose this day who we would serve. Give us the courage and the faith to keep serving you and not be swayed by the things in the world around that might call us away from you: our desire to be the most important, how easily led we can be by unhealthy influences, friends who might challenge us to behave in ways that don’t honour you. We pray that the choices we make each day will reflect who you are. We know when we are likely to be most tested and we bring those situations before you now, asking for your grace to keep us focussed on you.

As we commit the week ahead to you, go before us Lord and illuminate our path that we can see clearly the way we should go.

Lord, who shall we turn to but you:
**for you have the words of eternal life.**

We pray for Christians under severe pressure to turn away from you: whether that be through persecution, resistance, undermining of authority, tough workplaces or for any other reasons known only to you. Lord, we ask you to uphold all those who will really struggle to serve you today. Help them to know your strength and power to keep their eyes firmly fixed on you.

Lord, who shall we turn to but you:
**for you have the words of eternal life.**

Father, we pray for those who are in any form of pain or distress today. Some will be calling out to you for help, others may not even know you are there, but all need our prayers and your comfort. Be especially close to those who are fearful, we pray. We name aloud or in our hearts any we know who may be facing operations, difficult diagnoses, anxiety and depression, loneliness or death. We pray for all those who care for them, asking that you will bring a healing touch, a listening ear, a timely word, or just a friendly silence. We pray for the recently bereaved that your comfort will be very close to them. Lord, we know that sometimes when we are suffering we feel you very close and, at other times, for no explicable reason, you seem so far away. Give us the assurance that, whatever our circumstances, you are there and you do care.

Lord, who shall we turn to but you:
**for you have the words of eternal life.**

Pray for Afghanistan

O God of mercy and of peace,

We hold before you the peoples of Afghanistan.

Be living bread to those who are hungry each day

Be healing and wholeness to those who have no access to health care amidst the ravages of pandemic

Be their true home to all who have been displaced

Be open arms of loving acceptance to those who fear because of their gender, ethnicity, religious or political views

Be peace to those engaged in armed conflict and those who live within its shadow.

Turn our hearts and minds to your ways of just and gentle peace,

Open our eyes to see you in all acts of compassionate care

Strengthen our hearts to step out in solidarity with your suffering people and

Hold us all in your unfailing love.

We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, who emptied himself of all but love in order to bring life in all its fullness.

Amen

*This prayer was written by Ramani Leathard, Christian Aid's Head of Region for South East Asia and Afghanistan.*

Lord God, we pray for the leaders of the nations today, (particularly Joe Biden). We know that, though we may find it easy to criticise, so many of them are doing a very hard job to the best of their ability. We pray for those who know you and seek daily to serve you. Give them your wisdom and support. We pray for those who are self-seeking, whose lust for power is devastating the countries they rule. Lord, give them a sign of you, jolt them into realising that there is a God who desires to help them rule justly. We pray that justice will reign in our world and we lift to you now, countries and places where we know that this is not happening. We cry out to you for the people of Afghanistan and Haiti. And we lift the grieving people of Plymouth to you.  We ask, Lord, for a new determination amongst the world leaders to put the needy at the heart of their decision making, particularly refugees.

Lord, who shall we turn to but you:
**for you have the words of eternal life.**

We thank you, Lord, for our local community. We pray for our church leaders and any decisions that have to be made as Covid restrictions continue to ease. We pray for our local shops and offices and all who work there, especially for those who are still very anxious about Covid , whether because it is affecting their business or because they would rather work from home but no longer have the option. We pray for our neighbours and our friends and for all who are enjoying holidays at this time, that they might find true rest and restoration in you. And we commit ourselves to you in all that we do this week. Help us to trust you in the hard times and not to forget you in the good times. Give us the joy of your presence in everything we do so that we remember to choose each and every day that we will serve you.

Lord, who shall we turn to but you:
**for you have the words of eternal life.**
**Thank you for never leaving us or forsaking us.
Help us to keep our eyes fixed on you. Amen.**

he Holy One of God. **Amen.**



**A sending out prayer**

Lord Jesus Christ,
to whom shall we go?
You have the words of eternal life,
and we have come to believe and know
that you are the Holy One of God.
Go with us into your world.
**Amen.**



1. https://whyy.org/segments/how-a-christian-epidemiologist-works-to-sway-white-evangelicals-on-covid-and-vaccines/ [↑](#endnote-ref-1)