

NEW YEAR
31 December 2008

God's prophet Jeremiah told a vision about two baskets of figs. One basket was good, very good, and the other was just plain rotten, absolute rubbish. Which would you want to be?

If God was talking about me I know which one I'd want to be, the good basket of figs.

The only problem was that the good basket of figs was the people destined to go into exile. The LORD promises to be with these people; "My eye will watch over them for their good and I will bring them back to this land... I will give them a heart to know me, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart." (Jer. 24:6,7) But the ones who stay will be lost; "I will make them abhorrent and an offence to all the kingdoms of the earth, a reproach and a byword, a curse and an object of ridicule..." (Jer. 24:9)

This almost seems upside down for those in Jerusalem have the temple and are in the promised land, but it will be those who go into exile who will be blessed by God. Jeremiah is soon threatened with death because the people don't like what he is saying. It doesn't fit with what they want to hear; after all the temple is their guarantee of God's presence. They don't have to do anything else, do they?

Here we stand at the end of the year, ready to launch into a new year, this is a time to ask where are we; with the good figs or with the rotten ones. The Children of Israel judged things wrong and ended up having to go into exile before they would listen to the LORD and follow his will.

I know at school I didn't want to fail any subjects, but in year twelve I used the weeks of study playing cards. I got good at playing cards but there were no questions about cards in any of my exams. The second time round I left the cards till after the exams. Just not wanting to fail doesn't mean I won't. Just not wanting to be in the rotten figs doesn't mean I am good one.

Now don't go on a guilt trip, I'm just reminding us that it is good to have a realistic understanding of where we are and not to just drift along assuming everything is fine. This is a good time of year to stop and reflect on where we are and where we are going in this New Year.

As we stop and reflect the important question is; what measure can we use to reflect where we are? The Israelites figured because they had the temple everything was fine, but it wasn't. What was God after – empty ritual or a loving relationship? What was God after – outward trappings or a heart that was devoted to finding life in possessions, in being profitable and looking good? The Israelites stopped listening to the LORD and only accepted what made them feel good about themselves. What measure can we use to get an accurate reflection of where we are at?

Jesus in Revelation speaks to his church. To Ephesus Jesus says; "But I have this complaint against you. You don't love me or each other as you did at first! Look how far you have fallen from your first love! Turn back to me again and work as you did at first. If you don't I will come and remove your lampstand from its place among the churches." (Rev. 2:4,5)

Don't take this as me saying you don't love God as you should – I don't know where you're at. But this is Jesus' speaking to his church. This is the standard to measure my health, our health by. How is my love; my love for Jesus and for his brothers and sisters? Have I become cynical this year? Have I let hurts and failures make me hard-hearted, or have I taken these hurts to Jesus seeking his forgiveness and openly talked with those I have hassles with rather than harbouring resentment. Holding onto resentment, anger, bitterness, disappointment, will not grow the love Jesus wants to birth in my life and in his community.

I remember watching the presentation from our District Synod where the presenter role played a conflict with his son and how at first they were driven apart, but when he applied Jesus' way of confession their relationship began to be healed. What a precious gift we have in the words of confession and absolution for building and keeping healthy loving relationships as Jesus intends. I want to examine and refresh myself in the coming year in understanding and living Jesus wonderful gift of

forgiveness through confession and absolution. Not as something I ritually perform Sunday morning but living it into all my relationships, trusting Jesus and his way of doing things with all my relationships.

Here Jesus also condemns the Nicolaitans. It is believed that this was a group who went down the line of building a church hierarchy which lorded it over others. They used the law to control those they saw as under them. That's not a gospel driven life, where Jesus is at the centre calling the shots growing his people to reflecting him and his love. Who am I seeking to control rather than help grow in their relationship with Jesus trusting him with their development. I'm not called to control my children but to grow them up into Christ-like maturity. Jesus is the king, he's the one in control, thank God it's not me.

Jesus was happy with the church at Smyrna for they had remained faithful to him, to the point of death they were prepared to do what he called them to. Even to the point of not making a profit.

Unfortunately some in the church at Pergamum had sold their soul to make a profit. They ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality. They did what everyone else was doing to make a good comfortable life.

To the church at Sardis Jesus said; "You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up!" (Rev. 3:1,2) Have I been living on my reputation, on past achievements, letting things slip. I know the bible stories, but when was the last time I read them, inviting the Holy Spirit to speak to me and shape me through the word. Am I living from what I studied last year or is it fresh each day? Thank God that Jesus doesn't call us to live with a 2000yr old dead person, but with one who is alive and well today, seeking to be actively involved in our lives. Jesus doesn't rest on his reputation. He's as active today as he was when he roamed Israel.

To the church at Laodicea Jesus said; "I know your deed, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth." (Rev 3:15,16) It strikes me that Jesus isn't after a half-hearted relationship but one where we give ourselves 100%, holding nothing back,

not even our back pocket, or what we mindlessly watch on the TV. Jesus has come to passionately love us, love me, so that I can live with the same passion for other people. The question isn't what am I passionate about, but who. Who are you passionate about, enough to sacrifice your own needs that they might benefit according their needs?

These are Jesus concluding words to his church; "Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent. 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 them, and they with me." (Rev. 3:19,20)

Let us pray:

Jesus we hear you calling. Show us each where we need to repent. Show us how to keep our lives focused on you and your will. Warm our hearts and souls so that we live passionately this year, not taking you for granted, or worse leaving you on the sidelines, only inviting you in to fix up our mess. Jesus come in and mould me to reflect you more and more this year, doing your will with joy in my heart, so that in all I do and say I love your brothers and sisters as you do, giving you a good reputation among everyone I live and associate with. Jesus come in, my Lord and King, and do with me as you will. Amen.