

WHEN LOVE HURTS

→ How many of you have ever watched or caught a glimpse of the television programme “Supernanny”? If you have seen it you will either be the kind of person who is mildly entertained by the antics of the children and sit there being eternally grateful that they aren’t your children or grandchildren! Or you’ll be absolutely appalled at the behaviour of the children and at the parents that have allowed things to escalate to such a scale that they need Supernanny’s help at all!

.....So often the parents are a mixed up bundle of longing to display love to their children but yet getting deeply frustrated and angry with them when they don’t respond in ways that they expect or hope for. So often, the behaviour of the children is seen to have come about as a result of a lack of discipline being displayed or boundaries being set by the parents. The parents, in their overwhelming desire to make their children feel loved and treasured, have expressed that love in foolish and sometimes destructive ways.

.....In their efforts to make their children happy and feel loved, the parents have forgotten one vital element of that love – discipline. And the result of that is that the children learn that if they shout loud enough and throw a tantrum, then Mum or Dad will back down, give in, make allowances and eventually dance to the child’s tune!

→ If we turn back to the Old Testament we can find several episodes of this kind of behaviour that Supernanny may well have been interested in, but perhaps one of the worst scenarios features King David and his sons. You may recall that in the Psalms David wrote that “one generation will commend your works to another” but he didn’t seem to master that in his own family. He failed to get a handle on what it meant to be a father and he constantly failed to discipline his sons.

.....You can read about the consequences of that in 2 Samuel. One son rapes his sister, two sons die trying to throw their father off his throne and gain power for themselves and even the son that might have been considered the best of the bunch became an idolater. David learned the hard way that love of your children is not all about indulging the desires and longings, but it also needs to include an element of rebuke and discipline.

.....Now, whether you agree with the Supernanny way of parenting or not, is neither here nor there, but I guess most of us will have realised by now that discipline is an essential part of the loving care and nurture that we provide to the young people growing up amongst us, but it’s also part of the loving care and nurture that we are called to offer one another and of the loving care and nurture that we receive from God. How do we know that? Because Jesus says so!

→ The passage that we’ve just heard from Revelation 3 is the last of the seven letters to the churches which you will read during your Essential Jesus programme this week and for many people perhaps, the words of verse 19 are rather shocking. Earlier in the passage, Jesus had expressed his utter disgust towards the people in this church in Laodicea, suggesting that their behaviour was so nauseous that he was on the verge of spitting them out of his mouth. And yet, here in verse

19, he is affirming his love for them! Evidence surely that discipline and love go hand in hand!

.....Surely it is exactly because Jesus loves his people that he refuses to tolerate the lukewarm indifference that he has seen in the church in Laodicea when it comes to spiritual matters. In other words the harsh words in this letter together with the good advice that they turn away from this kind of behaviour are all motivated by the love that Jesus has for his church.

.....And of course, this church isn't the only church that he has harsh words for. Of the seven letters we find in Revelation, there are five that contain hard words for those churches to hear. Only two receive any complimentary comments from Jesus and at least we know that Jesus speaks these difficult words to the churches then and to the church today out of his own experience. Jesus is the Son of God, but he lived an earthly life enjoying his heavenly Father's loving parenting, but that meant being a displaced refugee whilst he was a toddler, before enduring temptation, suffering and agony as an adult, before being tortured and murdered by his enemies. That's perhaps not what we would have expected to happen to someone that the Father described as "my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." There's a clue there for all of us that following Jesus and living God's way is not necessarily going to be an easy ride!

.....Although it may sound good, the concept of pain-free Christianity is a contradiction in terms! There is no escaping the fact that sometimes "love hurts!" And by that I don't mean that it hurts because we may love someone who fails to love us back, although of course, that is often true. I'm talking about God's love towards us. Sometimes, because God is love, we will hurt.

.....Think for a minute about some words of Solomon that we find in Proverbs 3! He says, "When the Lord corrects you, my son, pay close attention and take it as a warning. The Lord corrects those he loves, as a father corrects a son of whom he is proud." It's those words that Jesus is alluding to when he speaks to the church in Laodicea and again Jesus speaks out of his own experience. The writer of Hebrews explains God's parenting practice very simply when he writes, "But even though he was God's Son, he learnt through his sufferings to be obedient." The writer there wants us to understand that, if discipline was necessary for Jesus, it will certainly be necessary for us too. So, he goes on in Hebrews 5 to encourage us to welcome God's discipline, and even to see it as a mark of true love.

→ So, these words that Jesus has for the church in Laodicea are not just for them but for all the churches that we hear about in the book of Revelation and for us as a church and as individuals today. Jesus is simply taking the consistent teaching of the Old Testament, of the gospels and of the letters and restating it here. OK, he is doing that in a rather stark and urgent manner but that is all that he is doing!

.....I don't know how you feel when you hear these words or when you watch an episode of Supernanny! Maybe the very success of the show is down to the fact that deep down all of us know that what Jo Frost has to say and more importantly, what Jesus has to say is absolutely true. We need discipline. Parents who love their

children do not just set them free and the God who loves us will not just set us free either.

.....These verses may have something to say about parenting but in the context of the Essential Jesus theme that we're looking at here, they have something to say to the church. This is all about what the early Church was like and what Jesus thought of that, and his view of church certainly won't have changed over the years. We know that Christ loves the church but if that love for us is not just expressed in compassion, care, mercy, grace and forgiveness, but also in rebuke, confrontation, challenge and discipline, then that has huge things to say to those of us that are leaders in the church and I don't just mean the clergy but those of us that find ourselves leading a home group or the prayer team or the Young Church leaders or the band or a group of pastoral visitors. In whatever context we are leaders in the church, this is a word for us.

.....Jesus once said, "I am the good shepherd!" And shepherds in the time of Jesus always carried a crook which were basically long sticks that the shepherds used for reminding sheep that they themselves are not the shepherd and sometimes the sheep need hooking back out of harm's way. So, for those of us who are leaders in the church, whether you're leading a group of four or five or of hundreds, sometimes we need to pick up the crook and out of our love for the sheep, use it for their good. It's what Jesus is advocating in these words to the church at Laodicea – words that are for every church because he loves the church.

→ But, perhaps the main message that Jesus is seeking to convey to the church as a whole and to all of us as individuals through these words is that we must expect and rejoice when his discipline comes our way because it's a sign of his love and his concern for us. It is because we are God's children, dear and precious to him that he will use some of the more difficult things that happen in our lives to pull us up short and reflect on our behaviour.

.....The plan that Christ has for us, his church is huge and the plan that he has for each of our lives is big too and whenever we are on the edge of some new thing in our lives, there is usually a lot to learn. There is training to be undertaken. There's not usually an easy option. And God's love certainly doesn't always provide us with a quick fix or an easy way out. It isn't the lack of God's love that sometimes means that we are left feeling as if we are struggling and failing. It's because of God's love that we find ourselves in that place only to come out the other side of it all the more ready and prepared for the things God has in mind for us.

.....In his book "Rediscovering Holiness" J I Packer says "If there are never any difficult situations that demand self-denial and discipline, if there are never any sustained pressures to cope with, if there are never any long-term strategies where the child must stick with an educational process, or an apprenticeship, or the practice of a skill for many years in order to advance, there will never be any maturity of character."

.....Our children may beg to differ with that view, but if we cater to their every demand they will grow up soft and spoiled because everything will have been made too easy for them. Our Heavenly Father, on the other hand, will never allow that to

happen in the lives of his children. God's love may sometimes be painful, but it is always profitable. God doesn't expect us to grit our teeth and deny that some of the things we experience are horrible and distressing. He knows the discomfort we feel in our bodies and our minds and our spirits. But he also knows that sometimes there is just no other, or perhaps no better way of encouraging holiness and Christ-likeness in us.

→ What might Jesus be saying to us as a church right now? What discipline is he trying to carry out amongst us that we are resisting? Or what about your own personal life? What's going on there? Is Jesus seeking to deal with some situation or habit or behaviour that really shouldn't be there right now but you're holding on for dear life? Remember that the discipline that comes from God's hand is borne out of his love for us.

.....It was a hard lesson for the Laodiceans to learn and whether or not they or the other churches that we can read about in Revelation ever really grasped that truth and did what Jesus asked remains a mystery and doesn't really matter now. The only remaining and relevant question for us today is whether we are willing to embrace the discipline of our loving Lord Jesus and run to him rather than away from him, so that we might be changed and really become the individual people and the church that he knows we can be. He loves us in our current state and he loves us enough to encourage us through his discipline of us, to change.