

REVELATION CHAPTER THREE & VERSES 1-6

Last week we looked at the Letter to Thyatira in the Book of Revelation & today we are looking at the Letter to the city of Sardis.

Last week Andrew Proudfoot told us how Thyatira was considered relatively unimportant & the Roman garrison there was just to hold up any would be attackers until the important city of Pergamum could rally its defences. It wasn't considered important enough to be defended for its own sake.

Sardis however had an impressive history than Thyatira, and had been one of the most important cities in the ancient world. At one time it had been the capital of the Lydian empire which covered most of what is now west Turkey. It is thought that coins were minted for the first time in Sardis.

So wealthy was Sardis in ancient times that one of its kings, King Croesus became a byword for unimaginable wealth. For 2500 years or more 'as rich as Croesus' was a description of those who, like Roman Abramovich today, are super rich.

Super rich, however, doesn't mean super intelligent, and King Croesus, and his soldiers conspired to lose a battle & an empire with laughable ease. It is worth spending a few moments looking at this story.

In the 6th century BC Persia was the new super power in the known world & was growing rapidly in all directions including towards Lydia & the home of King Croesus. He decided to turn to the oracle at Delphi & the oracle at Amphiaraus to inquire whether he should go ahead & attack the Persians & warn them off. An oracle was a prophet by the way. The oracle, a bit like modern day newspaper horoscopes, was a little ambiguous & answered that if Croesus attacked the Persians then he would destroy an empire. Little did Croesus know that the empire he would destroy would be his own.

Putting his trust & faith in these oracles Croesus decided to attack the Persians which he did, but there was no clear winner from the resulting battle. Now history shows that Croesus retreated to Sardis, but it is the reason for the retreat that is laughable. It is thought that Croesus retreated because it was the norm for armies to disband for the winter in those days and Croesus intended to do so. However no-one thought to check what the Persians were doing and they had no intention of disbanding and instead pursued the Lydian's under King Croesus to Sardis & besieged it.

Now the Lydian's thought Sardis to be impregnable. It had a fortress which had huge natural defences around most sides, cliffs that no-one could climb. There was however a way down these cliffs, a way obvious only to those who knew that it was there. So when one of the

defending soldiers lost his helmet over the parapet he descended this narrow & dangerous route to retrieve it & not incur the wrath of his superiors. However the ever watchful Persians saw this man descending what had previously looked an unscaleable wall & proceeded to attack Sardis up this route where there were few defenders. Sardis fell.

With Sardis's history of arrogance manifested by its lack of watchfulness you would have thought that the Sardis church would have been more on guard against similar errors, but human nature being what it is meant that they weren't.

Now a little more about Sardis that explains the words that Christ uses in this letter.

Sardis was devoted to the worship of the mother goddess Cybele. In the 1960's Andrew Tate wrote in his book 'The seven churches of Revelation' about this worship. He writes

'Her worship was of the most debasing character and orgies like those of Dionysos were practised at the festivals held in her honour. Sins of the foulest and darkest impurity were committed on those occasions, and when we think of a small community of Christians rescued from such abominable idolatry, living in the midst of scenes of the grossest depravity, with early association, and companionships, and connections, all exerting a force in the direction of heathenism, it may be wondered that the few members of the church in Sardis were not drawn away altogether, and swallowed up in the great vortex.'

Strong words, and words that show the situation the Sardis church lived under. The interesting thing to note though is that in the midst of what we would call depravity the worshippers of Cybele wore white garments. They were not allowed to approach the temple with dirty soiled clothes. Perhaps the words in verse 4-5 of this evening's passage start to take on a little more meaning. We shall return to them a little later.

So the background to this evening's passage was a city with a historic past. A city, whose worship of its deity was detestable to say the least. In this city was a small band of believers who had found the courage to stand up to what was going on around them, but they too were far from what is expected from a church of God even an imperfect one.

The condemnation of the church in Sardis is one of the worst in the seven churches. Not because they worshipped other gods, not because they allowed false teaching, and not because they joined in with the gross sexual acts of the Cybele temple. The condemnation is as follows

'I know your deeds; you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead.'

I hope that these words will never be said truthfully about Therfield Chapel.

What does the Lord mean by these words? Well for a church to be alive is to mean that the Holy Spirit be working in all that the church does. The members will be growing in the faith, and witnessing to those around them. The gospel will be gossiped in all the workplaces &

markets around. Outreach events will be put on and non believers invited & prayed for. God's word will be central to the teaching of an 'alive' church & members will want to read it, & study it & absorb it. Prayer also will be central as a relationship with Christ will be real, and obvious to the members, who will spontaneously talk with the Lord.

Does this describe you or me or this chapel? If so then 'phew' this letter is not addressed to us, at least not yet. But before we sit smugly in our fortress like King Croesus let us consider what is not an 'alive' church.

A church that is not alive is one where the Holy Spirit is not working, and this generally is where He is not allowed to work. This might seem odd to think of God not being allowed to work as He is all powerful, but He chooses to only work where He is wanted, and doesn't force Himself on anyone.

So a dead church is generally where the Holy Spirit has not been allowed to work, and eventually He leaves. Strangely though, that church may seem to continue to function normally. Church services will continue, hymns sung, and prayers made. Church events may continue to take as place & even prosper. On the outside that church may have a reputation for been alive, but it is dead internally.

A dead church will not have members growing in the faith, but stagnating or even going backwards. Witnessing will rarely take place as that is difficult to do & costly in terms of peer pressure, and maybe even career prospects, although the members will probably get on well with all their workmates. However the gossip in the office or factory floor will rarely be about Christ, and some will never even tell their workmates that they are believers.

Although the bible will be read at church services it will not be treated as God's word. It will not be the centre of the teaching or if it does have a place it will be on the periphery or having large chunks never preached on. Having a membership that is strong on bible knowledge will not be a priority.

Prayers may be said at church services, but will be considered boring. Spending time with the Lord in prayer will be a difficult thing to do & rarely done without being at church.

Now I realise that neither scenario is a comprehensive description of a live or dead church. Most of you would probably be able to add other things, but I hope I get the general gist across. A live church is a warm inviting place where people work because of their love for the Lord, and their wish to follow His guidance. A dead church is cold and formal where people work because of duty. A live church is full of Gods love, a dead church is not.

Now we don't know the exact nature of the church at Sardis's faults. However all is not lost, and this letter is designed to; as verse 2 put it make the members 'wake up.' Their church is going nowhere, and is in danger of completely dieing. Busy they make have been, but busy and being alive are two different things.

So what is the answer for this busy, near dead church. Well the answer, as always, is centred on Christ, and more particularly on aspects of who Christ is. Two aspects of Christ's ministry are given in verse 1

'These are the words of Him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.'

The seven spirits of God, which can be translated as the sevenfold Spirit of God is obviously a referral to the Holy Spirit. In several places in the bible the number seven is used as a symbolic number representing God or perfection or completeness. So the perfect Spirit of God may be a better translation into the modern vernacular.

As we have already seen it is the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of an individual or a church which designates whether either is alive spiritually. To bring this to the fore reinforces the belief that Sardis was a church where the Holy Spirit was not allowed to work.

Who is the Holy Spirit? Well scripture is clear that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Godhead. He is God Himself, the Spirit of the living God. He has many functions in the life of individuals and corporately the church.

It is the Spirit's function to convict a person of their sin, and enable the spiritual conversion that has to take place in their lives in order for them to come to God. It is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit that enables a believer to grow or mature as a Christian, and also to provide guidance for their lives. It is the presence of the Holy Spirit in the life of a church that guides a church in the direction that the Lord wants it to go. Without the Holy Spirit's input that church would be no more than a club for the religious minded.

But our relationship with God is just that, it is a relationship. The Holy Spirit plays His part, but we are also expected to play our part in the relationship. How long would a marriage last if one side alone had to do all the input whilst the other side just took.

We have a responsibility to walk by the Spirit. We have the unimaginable gift of God Himself in our lives, and He wants us to grow, to mature, and to be fulfilled in all we do. We have the responsibility to walk by faith in the power of the Holy Spirit.

I am not saying that a 'live' church will always get it right, and neither am I saying that 'live' Christians will never sin because it will happen. But these regular setbacks will not stop the work of the Holy Spirit as Christ has already died for all the sins we will commit.

So what had happened to the church in Sardis with regard to the Holy Spirit? Well clearly they had ceased to listen to His small voice. Because of this His work had been quenched at Sardis. This ought to be a wakeup call for all believers in all ages. The importance of the work of the Holy Spirit cannot be over emphasised.

So Christ tells the believers of Sardis that He their Saviour holds the Holy Spirit. He is there and longing to work in their lives and bring them closer to God. But the Holy Spirit is not the only thing that Christ holds; the other thing is the seven stars – v1.

Now chapter 1 v 20 tells us what the seven stars in John revelation.

‘The mystery of the seven stars that you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lamp stands is this. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lamp stands are the seven churches.’

So the seven stars are the angels of the seven churches. Literal angels with wings etc is not what is meant here. The word angel means messenger and most think that this refers to those who hold the responsibility for the spiritual leadership within the seven churches. It is their job to bring a message from the Lord when they preach. In this chapel it is the Pastor & the other Elders.

So there must have been something lacking in the message that the leadership of the Sardis church was bringing to the church or a lacking in receptiveness of the congregation. The message, the word of God was not getting through for whatever reason.

I said a little earlier that the importance of the work of the Holy Spirit cannot be over emphasised, but that is not the only thing that is vital for a ‘live’ church. The other thing is good solid teaching. It is the responsibility of the Elders to bring that good teaching to the congregation, and the responsibility of the congregation to look for & act on Gods word in that message.

I realise that people argue about what exactly constitutes good teaching, but certain things cannot be wrong. The first is that the personal beliefs and views of the preacher are irrelevant unless they can be used to back up the message given him by the Lord for the congregation.

The second is that we have been given the whole bible to teach from so it would be short changing the people if we only preached from the New Testament. All the bible is good for teaching said Paul to Timothy, and all the bible includes the difficult to understand bits, and the ones full of sacrifices like Leviticus.

Thirdly a superficial reading of the bible may be of help, but nothing gets to the meat of the matter better than studying each passage in context so that you get as close as you can to the meaning that the author had in his mind when he wrote that passage.

Fourthly we must always have in mind personal application. There is no point in coming to church if we are not prepared to let what the Lord has to say to us take effect. And I do not mean some vague feeling coming over us, but what we have actually learnt from the passage before us.

So the clue to the solution of the problem of the dieing church in Sardis had to do with letting the Holy Spirit do his work, and them not doing things in their strength. And also in having good teaching brought to the congregation by the leadership, and acted upon by the members.

This of course has application for ourselves. We must stop doing things in our strength, but instead look for the Lords will and letting the Holy Spirit work in our lives. This will be immeasurably helped by solid teaching from the whole bible.

So the Lord says to the Sardis church –

‘I know your deeds’

If there is one thing that our society likes and that is its privacy. Privacy is not wrong of course, & I like mine, but privacy can be used to cover up what we don’t want others to know about.

This statement is a timely reminder that what we can hide from other people we cannot hide from God. It is one of the things that He has to do for us before we can turn to Him. If God didn’t convict us of our sins then none of us would have become Christians as we would see no point.

The problem of course for the Sardis church was not that they didn’t do good deeds, as they had a good reputation as a ‘live’ church. Their problem was that they were spiritually dead.

The whole concept of spiritual life or death is difficult to understand. Is the happy clappy church alive, and is the quiet sedate hymn sandwich church dead, or is it the other way round or neither.

The problem is that we get confused between spiritual life and action. Just because lots of things are going on doesn’t mean that the church is alive spiritually. Anyone can put on an event. There are whole careers that can be made in event organising. But how much prayer goes on behind a secular event – very little or none? However a Christian outreach event should be bathed in prayer from beginning to end. Why? Because a “live’ church is concerned for those around them who have not turned to the Lord. Their God given love for unbelievers means that they can bear the thought of what will happen to those who die still not knowing Jesus.

Now just in case I haven’t made it clear I believe that the church in Sardis was filled with Christians. This wasn’t a church where the secular had been allowed in and had taken over. It was a church that had lost its way, one that had started to trust in its own strength, in its own vision.

A church is in danger as soon as its starts to worship its own history or past, its reputation or name. It is in danger when it starts to be more concerned with form than with function or

life. It is in danger when it becomes more concerned with numbers than with spiritual quality of life & is in danger when it becomes more concerned with management than with ministry.

So the church in Sardis is commanded in verse 2 to

‘Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.’

God see’s churches such as this one as asleep. They may be very active with reputations of being alive, but that is not how Christ sees them. He see’s them as slumbering, as being dead to the world. They are as much use as a chocolate teapot or a bucket full of holes.

It is interesting to note that Christ didn’t see the church at Sardis as a total failure. Even a chocolate teapot would hold boiling water for a short while, and a bucket full of holes would enable you to carry some water a certain distance. And Christ knew that there was some spiritual life in Sardis even if it was hard to find. The pulse was weak, but still there, but for how long.

So he tells them to wake up, remember what it was that had drawn them to Christ in the first place, obey it and repent.

The implication is that they had started well, but for some reason had stopped growing, and had spiritually fallen asleep. Gone had the desire to learn from God’s word. Gone had the desire to bring others to Christ, gone had the desire to walk in the footsteps of their Lord.

The problem is that when Christians stop basing their lives on Gods word, and the urging of the Holy Spirit spiritual decline always begins. We forget just how much we need the Lord. The church does not exist without its head Christ. Without God the church is dead.

Spiritual decline was happening in the church at Sardis. They still had good habits, traditions, and actions. Those around had a good opinion of that church, but they had lost their first love as we read had the church in Ephesus.

Spiritual decline happens in stages. At the top is where you ought to be, an imperfect believer who never the less looks to the Lord for help and guidance. He studies his bible, and he looks to the Holy Spirit to help & guide him in his life.

The next stage down is the where the church at Sardis was. Going through the motions is the best way that I can describe it. Having a form of holiness, but not being holy. Being alright on the outside, doing the right things, and saying the right things, but not looking to the Lord or doing what the Lord wants.

Of course even this is better than evil, but it is not where we should be. God can use human good, and I believe that He does.

We all are born with an innate sense of right and wrong. That is why even atheists know that Mugabe's regime in Zimbabwe is evil. But not having a basis for knowing where your morality comes from, why some things are right & others are wrong, means that even this can be lost. We are seeing this in our own country at the moment. People question why? and society has no answer. But remember – Christianity does.

Most of the passage so far has been doom & gloom for the church in Sardis, but as I indicated earlier all is not lost. Whilst the church as a whole is on its last legs there were a few who had not lost their love for their Lord. Using the picture of the white garments used by the worshippers of Cybele, but in a Christian context, Christ points out that not all were soiled.

Christ indicates that walking with Him is like walking with pure white garments. The further you let yourself drift away from Him the dirtier they become. Dirt, in this context refers to accommodation to the ways of the world, the society in which you live. It makes you realise just how God views the ways of the world.

So how does this all apply to us? Well the obvious thing to do is to take a good long look into our own individual hearts & the also the state of our chapel here at Therfield. Do we show any of the signs of spiritual decline? Are we more into management than ministry? Are we more concerned with numbers than with spiritual maturity? Just how central is the word of God to us? Where is the place of prayer in this chapel? Do we look to the Holy Spirit for guidance?

But remember when you make this judgment that there is no spiritual being called Therfield Chapel. The physical chapel is only building material. When we look at the state of spiritual play here at Therfield we are actually looking at ourselves & rightly so.

We, the Elders, have a responsibility to make sure that the teaching is Godly, but all of us play a part in the spiritual life of this chapel. What all of us do, and how we do it speaks volumes for the life of Therfield Chapel or the lack of it.

Let us close our service now by singing

ORDER OF SERVICE – EVENING SERVICE 6TH JULY 2008

1) Opening song 'All my days'

2) Opening prayer

Loving Father

As we come before You this evening we pray that You will take away the cares, and the joys of our daily lives for a while. We pray for this that we might be able to concentrate on You and hear the message that You have for us this evening – amen

Read Psalm 119 v 1-8

3) Introduce TC Times

4) Offering & prayer

Loving Father

Help us not to be materialistic in our lives. Help us to learn the rightful place of 'things' in our lives. Help us never to put them before You. And now we pray that You will take these gifts as well as the monetary gifts given in other ways, and the gifts of time and other things that people have given this week, and use them all to extend Your Kingdom here on earth – amen.

5) Song Time

a) King of Kings majesty

b) Over all the earth

c) Purify my heart

d) Choice

6) Prayer Time – Julie H

7) Song 'I, the Lord of sea & sky'

8) Reading & address – PZ

9) Closing song 'Jesus, be the centre'

10) Closing prayer – PZ

Loving Father

Help us to be watchful. Help us to never fall into Spiritual decline, but if we were ever to do so please help us to see the error of our ways & use the reminder of this evenings passage to get us back to where we should be. Jesus help us to always want You at the centre of our lives – amen.