

Sermon
Therfield Chapel
Revelation 2: 8-11
Letter to the church at Smyrna
Title: The Poor Rich Church¹
15th June 2008

It's really hard for me to imagine what it would have been like to have been a Christian living in Smyrna at the end of the first century

But I did try

Almost certainly I would have no proper job and would be very very poor; just finding enough to eat each day for my family would be a titanic struggle

Quite possibly I would have lost most or all of my possessions confiscated by the authorities.

My home may have been burnt by the local mobs who hunted down and terrorised the local Christian community – any hope that I could call the police and demand their assistance would be laughable

My two sons would be dressed in rags; almost certainly they would be perpetually hungry and scared as we moved them from house to house to escape discovery by the haters of The Way (as Christians were often called then)

What money I could get would have to be earned selling simple things like fruit or vegetables at the local market or by the roadside. I might get help from other Christians if they had anything to spare

Fear would be my constant companion: fear as I experienced public humiliation, disgrace, slander, harassment and even physical assault on the street

Fear that I would be caught by the mob and beaten to death – or worse that my wife and baby and toddler would be

Fear that my family and I would be awoken in the early hours to the sound of the front door being broken down and the town authorities storming in to drag us away to be offered to the lions in the amphitheatre

Fear of watching those I love being ripped apart by the lions; fear that they would be dipped in melted wax and set on fire to illumine the local garden parties

Such possibilities were the price tag of being a Christian in Smyrna

¹ I got this title from John MacArthur

It's hard to imagine, but if we try we shall understand these verses better

This letter from the Lord Jesus was a letter to a persecuted church in about AD 95

He wrote to encourage them; to urge them not to give up; to remind them of their reward

And unlike the other six letters, there is not a single note of rebuke in this one; there was no call to repentance – just to exist was an achievement for these people!

So what did he say to them?

Let's start in verse 9:

⁹I know your afflictions and your poverty

I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan

Don't miss those two repeated words: "I know"

When we suffer or experience difficulties we're tempted to feel like no one understands what we're going through – that we're on our own

An old African-American spiritual hymn captures this with the refrain: "Nobody knows da trouble I seen".²

But Jesus says: "I know your afflictions and poverty; I know the slander that you're being subjected to"

I know, I understand

Have you ever been in difficult and painful circumstances and you've gone to a friend and poured your heart out to them?

And they've listened sympathetically to your pains and struggles and at the end they've said something like: "I don't really know what to say to you; I don't have any neat answers. But I know what you're going through – I've been there; I've been in your shoes too"

And you find that enormous consolation and comfort

You're not alone; someone has trodden the same path as you

In the end no one can really know what we're going through unless they've suffered in the same way

² Thomas C Pinckney

You can't learn about suffering from reading a textbook about it

And the Lord Jesus wants them to know that he knows their plight – for that negro spiritual song wisely continues, “Nobody knows but Jesus.

And this risen Jesus is among the church - he's walking among the lampstands – and he sees all that they are going through

But it's more than that – more than just seeing their plight, he's knows what they're going through because he's been there standing in their shoes

In fact the Greek word used for know is not the usual; it's different

It really means, "I know by experience," rather than "I know by observation"

These people were experiencing affliction we're told

The word for affliction used here means heavy pressure, being crushed under a great weight

They were under great pressure to go along with the decree of the time and assent that “Caesar was Lord”

In a city famed for devotion to Rome they were being accused of gross political disloyalty – they were hated for being different – and history teaches us that we don't like people different to us

All they had to do was mutter those three words “Caesar is Lord” and all the pressure would be over

But they wouldn't, and they were feeling the heat

Pressure is probably a very appropriate term for how they were feeling – their situation would have been one of enormous stress and strain and Jesus says to them: “I know all about that”

And then he says: “I know your poverty”

There are two words in Greek for poverty – the one used here means absolute poverty – total destitution

They had nothing; we know from the letter to the Hebrews that it was a common experience for believers to have their property and possessions confiscated³;

And almost certainly the Christians in Smyrna were excluded from the normal economic arena and so would have found it very difficult to earn a living even in what we know was a rich city

They were very poor – even destitute and Jesus says “I know all about that”

Then: “I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not”

We know from historical records that there was a large Jewish population in Smyrna and that they had serious clout in the city

It seems that they were at the forefront of stirring up hatred against the Christians and accusing them of things that were simply untrue

It’s interesting to note that the only group who were excluded from the edict that all were to confess Caesar as Lord were in fact the Jews

And for the first few decades after the resurrection of Jesus, the Romans simply considered Christianity to be a sect of Judaism which also gave them an exclusion from the edict

However, by this time it seems that the Jews – in their hatred of Christians - were pressing the Roman authorities and saying, “These guys aren’t Jews – they practise a different religion! There should be no exception for them! Let them suffer!”⁴

In fact history records that when the Bishop of Smyrna – Polycarp – was burned at the stake for his faith in AD 155, it was the Jews who broke the Sabbath rules to carry the wood for the fire – they were so keen to see him die

So here the Christians were being falsely accused of politically disloyalty

But there was other slander as well

In taking the Lord’s Supper and saying, “This is my body and my blood”, they were falsely accused of being cannibals

And in calling the Lord’s Supper The *Agape* (the Love Feast), they were wrongly accused of gathering for great sexual orgies

They were also falsely accused of being atheists because they had no statue or images of their God

There was lots of slander going around to ‘dish out’ at the Christian community

And Jesus says: “I know all about that”

⁴ Thomas C Pinckney

He knew because he'd stood where they were standing

He too had felt great pressure – he too was once greatly tempted to take an easier path than he knew he had to – in the Garden of Gethsemane before he went to the cross, don't he say, "Father if you are willing, take this cup from me?"⁵

Didn't the prophet Isaiah predict that he would be "Despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with grief"?⁶

He knew all about suffering; he'd died one of the most cruel deaths ever invented

And he knew all about poverty: he was born into a poor family who could only afford to bring a pigeon to the temple rather than a lamb; he once told his disciples that he had nowhere to lay his head; when he died the only material possessions he left behind for people to fight over were his clothes

He knew about being poor

And he knew all about slander as well

The legitimacy of his birth was constantly questioned; there were times when even his family thought him crazy; he was betrayed by one of his closest men; he was tried by a prejudiced jury and died on charges that he wasn't even guilty of

So when Jesus says, "I know", it wasn't a theoretical knowledge of their plight – it was knowledge born out of experience and empathy

He could say: "I too have been persecuted, poor, slandered, and in the end I too was slaughtered for doing the right thing in a wrong world"

But before we say, "O what a poor little church", notice what Jesus says to them (verse 9) "You are rich"

For these Christians it must have been tempting to think that it was the local Jews and Pagans of the city who were rich – but Jesus wanted to change their thinking like he does ours

Obviously they weren't rich materially, but they were rich because they had Christ who in verse 8 describes himself as, "The First and the Last"

As we thought about two week's ago, for them, having Jesus as their First and Last wasn't some nice theoretical theology discussed by secure people on a pleasant Sunday evening in a quaint English village

⁵ Luke 22:39

⁶ Isaiah 53: 3

No, it was a reality that they were having to trust their lives with⁷

He was reminding them that he had the first word on history and he would have the final say

That He wasn't some poor befuddled, well-intentioned deity who was bustling about trying to keep things in order; doing the best he could but occasionally losing control and shaking his head says, "Oh no, oh no, I never intended for that to happen"

In other words a god worthy of our pity rather than our worship

No, they were being reminded that he was the Lord God Almighty – and when you're going through persecution, you need to hear that

That every human being who has ever been born – from Caesar down to the lowliest slave in the Empire - will in the final instance answer to him for their lives and actions

This Lord Jesus was all they had; they had nothing else

I think that's this is a bit hard for us to understand

So let's do a little accounting to help us

When we construct a balance sheet for our lives, we put Christ in one column marked assets and then in the other we put lots of other things: our house, car, employment, steady income, free health care if we get sick, welfare payments if we get unemployed and so on

But when we do the balance sheet for these Christians in Smyrna we put Christ in one column and the other column we leave blank because we've nothing to put in it

But that was enough for them to be called rich – for their wealth was tied to Christ

It's a sobering question to ask: if we lost all our money and possessions how rich would we be?

Maybe – and I know it's complicated – but maybe that's why Christians are by and large so ineffective in the West at influencing our society – maybe we just offer Christ a slot alongside all our other riches

David Watson wrote in the 1980s: "It is common place today to speak of the battle of the eighties to be between Islam, Marxism and Third World Christianity. Western Christianity is on the whole too flabby to do anything about it"⁸

⁷ Rupert Higgins, sermon preached at All Souls Church.

⁸ Forward to A Celebration of Discipline.

The true wealth of a human being is his riches in Christ

The Christians in Smyrna were tempted to say: “We’ve got the Jews against us! We’ve got the Roman Empire against us! We’ve even got Satan against us! Oh no! This is terrible!”⁹

But Jesus says, “Yes, but what matters is that I am with you – for in the end I am the only one that counts”

And as a result Jesus tells them (verse 10): “Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”

In other words, they needn’t ultimately be afraid because nothing their opponents could do to them could take away their true wealth which lay beyond this world

Notice Jesus didn’t rescue them – he didn’t tell them to flee - he called them to be ready for anything that might come

And although they were to suffer and die for their faith, their Lord wasn’t asking them to do anything he hadn’t done; he had died ahead of them and God raised him to life eternal

In one sense this was the logical outcome for the follower of the Lord Jesus

The old Moravian Christians in 18th Century Germany (who knew all about persecution) had a badge or emblem which simply depicted an ox with a plough on one side and an altar on the other. The motto in Latin underneath read: ‘Ready for Either’. The plough or the altar; service or martyrdom”¹⁰ Ready for either.

So these people in Smyrna are warned by Jesus that they were about to suffer imprisonment and death for their testimony to him

But notice that they are told that they are to suffer for 10 days (middle verse 10)

This may have been a literal period of 10 days or more likely it was a figurative term signifying that they were to suffer for a certain period of time – a time that would have an end

Perhaps they were to remember that there would be an 11th day; a day when there would be no more suffering

⁹ Thomas C Pinckney

¹⁰ Roy Clements, *Introducing Jesus* p.178.

If not an 11th day here on earth, there was to be and 11th day in heaven

And so the Lord Jesus in verse 10b says: “Be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life”

Heaven was be a relief for these people – to be home at last (at the finishing line)

And a crown

Perhaps our temptation today is to look for honours in this life rather than look to be crowned in the next – we must remember that Jesus says “I will crown you later”

The Greek words used here make it clear that the crown he’s talking about here is not a king’s crown; it’s a victor’s crown – one that you might be awarded if you win a race

It’s a crown of honour and glory and dignity – the crown of triumph

Jesus will be waiting with a crown for those who are faithful unto death

And note as well who is behind their persecution: v10b “The devil will put some of you in prison”

Satan tries lots of ways to destroy the church – in our age it’s through seducing people away from Christ to serve the idols of the land – by persuading us though that we can build heaven here on earth

But in this society, Satan’s attempt to destroy the church – as it so often is – is through violent suppression

The history of the church tells us that he fails when he tries this

Almost without exception it seems that the church grows during times of persecution more than during times of ease

Two church fathers (second centuries):

Justin Martyr:

"Though beheaded, and crucified, and thrown to wild beasts, and chains, and fire, and all other kinds of torture, we do not give up our confession; but, the more such things happen, the more do others in larger numbers become faithful."

And Tertullian famously declared, "The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church."

That’s been proved in Africa and China and Eastern Europe in the 20th Century

And finally they are reminded – in verse 11 - to overcome, for those who overcome will not be hurt by the second death

The second death – that’s the one to fear – we read about that in Rev 21 – then everything that’s against God will be destroyed – it’s eternal separation from God – the opposite of eternal life – that is a fate worse than the first death

So the Christian will pass from death to life and will not be touched by the second death

But their persecutors will pass through death to another eternal death

Jesus is saying: they may kill your body but they can’t touch you

And what do you do threaten someone with who says: “I’m not afraid to die”

Perhaps one day in our country we too will need this letter and thank Jesus for writing it because we will need the encouragement that it brings

So to conclude, let me sum up three lessons:

(1) Let’s be careful how we define wealth

In a five weeks we’ll see that the church at Laodicea claimed to be rich, but God said they were wretched (Rev. 3:17).

Smyrna thinks, "We're poor," but God says, "You're rich."

How do we define wealth?

What made them rich? Doubtless it was their love, their joy, their peace, grace, fellowship. Laodicea had none of that--they were poor. Smyrna had it all--they were rich

These Christians in Smyrna had nothing the world had to offer but everything that God has to offer. And that is being rich.

And so we should note that the outward difficulties of a church or a person are not a proof of poverty or weakness¹¹

And also that it’s not always the wealthy church financially that is the rich church.

The material wealth of members does not create the true riches of the church.

How often it has been that some struggling company of believers, fighting with poverty, contending for very existence, has been the truly rich and prosperous church.

¹¹ G Campbell Morgan – most of these concluding comments are adapted from his thoughts in The Letters of Our Lord..

(2) This passage teaches us that there is great comfort that comes from Christ's identification with all his suffering saints.

Wherever the Church passes through tribulation, he stands and says, "I know, I understand."

(3) And as we think about these things, let's remember Christ's declaration to all the churches and to us as well that he holds the keys of those things that most scare and oppress us, even our last enemies of death and of hell

The keys are the symbols of authority and power

And so as we pass into the valley of the shadow of death – and we all will - Christ approaches holding these keys, and says, "Fear not," I have unlocked the problem. I have solved death; I have been into the deepest darkness and have unlocked a way out. I have not borrowed these keys. They belong to me and no one else will ever have them

And he says to those suffering Christians, and all who approach that shadow-land, "Fear not, trust me utterly; be faithful even unto death, and through the dark chambers of death I will lead you to light and eternal life – to that never ending 11th day."

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