

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

19.10.14

To the Church in Sardis – Joss Bray

Sardis is church number five out of the seven at the beginning of the book of Revelation. Jesus gave John this revelation in order to communicate with these churches in a direct and unmistakeable way. The messages are encouraging but also contain criticisms and warnings but also promises and hope. Each church is different with different attributes and difficulties.

However, Jesus ends each message with these words – “He who has an ear. Let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”

These messages are for all churches throughout all of time – we are supposed to listen and understand what God may be saying to us as the churches. They are there to build us up, to teach us, to warn us and to give us hope and a vision for the future. So – let us “have an ear” and hear what the Spirit says.

Sardis

Sardis was south of Thyatira in Turkey – the previous Church we looked at. It doesn’t exist as a city now. But on its site, archaeologists have discovered and renovated the largest synagogue found in the ancient world and a huge gymnasium amongst other things. It was renowned for its wool processing and dying and centuries before it was famous for its gold and silver refining under King Croesus - hence “as rich as Croesus”. So this was another important place for the church to be, with a lot of trade and religion going on in the city. It would be buzzing with everyday life - commerce, discussion, leisure activities, worship, industry and so on.

The message

So like the other churches, Jesus gives this message to the angel of the church in Sardis to deliver to them:

REV 3:1 "To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. ² Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have

not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.³ 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. ^{REV 3:4} Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.⁵ He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.⁶ He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Jesus introduces himself

REV 3:1 "To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

As we have seen, Jesus uses different aspects of himself to start each message. Here he mentions the "seven spirits of God" and the "seven stars". From Chapter 1 we know that the seven stars refer to the seven angels or messengers of the seven churches. The seven spirits of God are also in Chapter 1 – referring to the "seven spirits before his throne". This could be translated as "sevenfold spirit". We looked at the number seven often seeming to refer to completion or perfection in the bible.

So when Jesus chooses to emphasise seven – he is drawing their attention to completeness, to the full Monty – as it were. He reminds them that the angels are his – and the churches and that he sent his Holy Spirit as promised when he ascended into heaven. He holds everything together – he is not just an advisor or making useful suggestions – he has everything in his hands – and he perfects and completes everything. The church needed to take note!

Jesus then goes straight in with his message

REV 3:1..... I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.

There we are – this is a most direct and clear message. Jesus knows what they do and what their reputation is. They were probably renowned for being an active and lively church – things were looking good. They ticked all the "good church" boxes. It wasn't as if they were outwardly dwindling and dying – they were probably buzzing along with the rest of Sardis. Perhaps other churches would look at them and say – they are doing well – that is a lively and active church. They may well have had the reputation amongst the general population of being "alive". Perhaps they themselves rather enjoyed this and were secretly a bit proud of "their" church and how well they were doing.

However – Jesus cuts through all that. He was not interested in what reputation a church had – he knew what is going on inside it. And it was dead. We don't even know exactly what the problem was but I think it was this – they tried to be church and do churchy things without the Holy Spirit.

In Romans 8 it says -

RO 8:2 .. through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death.

And in 1 Cor 3 -

1CO 3:16 Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?

And in Galatians 5-

GAL 5:25 Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

So the Spirit of God is life for us now. He sets us free from sin and death, he lives in us, we live by the spirit and we need to keep in step with the spirit. The Holy Spirit is the life of the church. Without him the church is dead – it is subject to death and ultimately decay. It might appear to be functioning – but just like a headless chicken – it is actually dying. If the church did not have the life of the spirit, it was purposeless and headless – rushing around but ultimately pointless and dead.

This is a hard message for the church in Sardis.

Jesus gives them a wake up call

REV 3:2 Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. ³ 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.

He relents a bit and acknowledges that they are not yet totally dead. Hopefully they have woken up after hearing the first part of the message read out in their church meeting. Imagine what that must have been like! Dynamite probably. Their incomplete deeds were incomplete because they lacked the direction and power of

the Holy Spirit. The church was doing things in it's own strength – and would ultimately fail.

They needed to remember what Jesus had taught when he was with them at the end of Luke's account and the beginning of Acts–

LK 24:49 I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high."

AC 1:7 He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

Not only does the Spirit bring life - but also the very power of God to do what he wants – to demonstrate his kingdom coming.

In Ephesians 5 Paul says -

EPH 5:18 be filled with the Spirit.

They needed to repent – turn away from their godless church activities, and be filled – to be alive – to receive power. Jesus is coming back – and we don't know when – Paul writes this to the Thessalonians -

1TH 5:1 Now, brothers, about times and dates we do not need to write to you, ² for you know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ While people are saying, "Peace and safety," destruction will come on them suddenly, as labor pains on a pregnant woman, and they will not escape.

This is urgent. For the church at Sardis they had better wake up to what Jesus is saying.

Not everyone in the church had gone wrong

REV 3:4 Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.

There were people who were alive and living by the spirit – keeping in step with him and receiving their nourishment from him. They took care of their robe of righteousness from God – as in Isaiah 61-

ISA 61:10 I delight greatly in the LORD; my soul rejoices in my God. For he has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness,

They didn't allow a faulty view of church life to permanently contaminate them. They had been saved and made right before God because of what Jesus had done for them in taking the punishment for their sin on the cross. They were not going down the road to lifeless functioning and ultimately death as a church.

But the good news was this –

REV 12:11 He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.

So - as always – Jesus shows them the way out. They need to overcome this cycle of empty activity and powerless living. They can get their robes washed again – and later in Revelation it says about those who overcome -

REV 7:14 "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.

The blood of Jesus washes away all sin - all the way back to spotless and thereby qualifying the wearer for eternal life. This was the hope for the church in Sardis.

So – what does the spirit say to the Churches?

What is he saying to us?

Beware of looking good as a church by doing lots of things - but underneath it not having the life of God. We must not do things in our strength - we must rely on the Holy Spirit's power.

We mustn't even start new things without the prompting of God – we must keep in step with the Spirit. Our deeds need to be complete in the eyes of Jesus by being initiated, powered and directed by him – through his Spirit. Jesus is not here in person - remember he ascended into heaven. But he did send his Spirit to be his presence here on earth.

If we are not looking to be filled with his Spirit as a church and individually then we are on the road to disaster. Without the Holy Spirit – there is no life in the church.

How do we know he is with us? – For one thing, we will be hearing from God and we will be empowered to do risky things. We will be

expecting miracles and healings because the kingdom of God is near and the kingdom is not about words but about power.

Remember that Jesus said to wait until “the power from on high comes”. That applies to us now. That power has now come and he wants to do amazing things in and through his church

If we limit what we do to what we can understand or think is “reasonable” to achieve, then there is no room for God and his unfathomable wisdom and limitless power! Where is the demonstration of “your kingdom come” when it is more like – “we will make extensive plans that we have the resources to achieve in the timescale we believe is reasonable”. No – that way lies worldly, organisational death – and what is the point of that. We may as well just be a social club.

We also always need to remember that this is not our church - we should not be concerned with a reputation that relies on activity. It doesn't matter how many people come or how many projects we are involved in – if God is not at the centre then there is no life in it. There is no room for pride at all in church life. It is Jesus's church and he is building it.

It is his Holy Spirit that keeps us alive and functioning. More than that - we need to keep in step with him. We need the power of the spirit – and we need to be filled – again and again.