

Sermon 28th July 2019

Revelation 3.7-13

John 3.14-17

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

Introduction

- In the novel *Girlfriend in a Coma*, Douglas Coupland tells the story of Karen, who in 1979 falls into a coma
- While she lies in the hospital, life goes on. Her teenage friends grow up, get married, get divorced, do drugs etc., etc.
- In her vegetative state, Karen misses the fall of the Berlin Wall, the AIDS crisis, and the rise of the ubiquitous personal computer
- Seventeen years after collapsing, Karen suddenly awakes from her dreamless sleep
- Her sudden reawakening is a huge story. Karen initially resists the media hype but eventually agrees to an interview with a local TV interviewer named Gloria
- The big question is, just how is Karen finding the new world she has awakened to?
- "What's the biggest change in the world you've noticed so far, Karen? What strikes you as the deepest change?" asked Gloria
- Karen said, "You know what it is, Gloria? It's how confident everybody comes across these days. Everybody looks like they're raring to go all the time. People look confident when they're buying chewing gum or walking the dog"
- "You like that then?" added Gloria

- "There's more. You take the same confident-looking people and ask them a few key questions, and suddenly you realize that they're despairing about the world—that the confidence is a mask"
- "What kind of questions?" asked Gloria
- "What do you think life will be like in 10 years? Are you straining to find some kind of meaning? Does growing old frighten you?"
- "We're a culture searching for meaning" replied Karen

Background

- *"Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches"*
- For seven Sundays, we are looking at the seven letters to the seven churches in the Book of Revelation
- So far, we have looked at the letters to the churches in Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira and Sardis
- And this Sunday, we reach our penultimate Church as we look at the prophetic message to the Church in Philadelphia
- The city of Philadelphia was a new city compared to the others previously mentioned, as it had only been established relatively recently in approximately 140 BC
- The city was positioned at the junction of the sub-regions of Mysia, Lydia and Phrygia in the region of Anatolia, modern-day Turkey
- It was strategically situated on a high plateau between these key sub-regions and an imperial, Roman road ran through the city

- This imperial outpost had been established by King Attalus II with the intention of disseminating Greco-Asiatic culture...
- ...and establishing the Hellenistic way of life; and by 19 AD and certainly by the time of letter the Lydia language had been supplanted by ancient Greek
- The city had become wealthy, largely from its winemaking industry as to the northeast of the city there was a vast vine-growing area
- Naturally, Dionysus, the god of winemaking, revelry and theatre was the patron god of the city, but there were many other temples dedicated to other gods in the city
- The city was also a fortress city, positioned as it was as “the gateway to the East” with suitable defences and military presence
- However, the sub-region was volcanic, which was good for fertile earth and vine-growing but bad for earthquakes
- In 17 AD a devastating earthquake destroyed Philadelphia, and ten other cities including Sardis
- Consequently, many then lived outside of the city in rural areas and those in the city would quickly leave at the merest tremor

Commendation

- Unlike the Church in Sardis, which we looked at last Sunday, the Church in Philadelphia receives the opposite prophetic message from the Lord Jesus
- Instead of a phoney commendation and lengthy complaint, that is to say, no commendation and all complaining...

- ...the prophetic message to the Church in Philadelphia is all commendation and no complaint
- Like the Church in Smyrna there is no fault to be found in the Church of Philadelphia and the Christians there
- Instead, the complaint is identical to that of Smyrna and against those *“who say that they are Jews and are not”* and the *“synagogue of Satan”*
- Evidently, like the situation in Smyrna, the Jews in the city had now disassociated themselves from the Christians...
- ...and this had led to the persecution of the Christians as they no longer came under the exemption of Jews of not having to participate in Imperial worship
- The doors to the synagogues were now shut to Christians, they were excluded
- However, the Title with which the Lord Jesus introduces Himself sets the tone
- *“These are the words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens”*
- It is the Lord Jesus who holds the keys, and only He has the authority to open and shut doors – to open and shut events, situations and opportunities
- *“I know your works. Look, I have set before you an open door, which no one is able to shut. I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and have not denied my name”*
- The Lord Jesus sees what has been happening and is going to act. He will provide the opening, the opportunity, the reward

Complaint

- But equally, the Lord Jesus sees what those outside the church do and again He will act
- *“I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but are lying—I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and they will learn that I have loved you”*
- If there is a complaint in this letter, then it is not about those inside the church, but those outside of the church
- The Christians in Philadelphia are commended, encouraged for their endurance, their persistence in keeping to Jesus’ teachings and remaining faithful to His name, His Lordship
- And there is a parallel for the Church today, in what ways do we shut others out of the Church family?
- Do we deliberately or unconsciously exclude, or shut out others to our “synagogue”, our assembly?
- Are we, like those first century Jews, happy in our seemingly “holy huddle” and unconsciously shutting the door to others?
- We all, myself included, need to hear this prophetic message from the Lord Jesus

Promise

- However, the “key” to the prophetic message from the Lord Jesus to the Church in Philadelphia comes in His promise
- As I have said before, the common structure of the Lord Jesus’ prophetic messages to the seven churches in the Book of

Revelation is Title, Commendation, Complaint and finally Promise

- And here the Lord Jesus gives a wonderful promise to the Philadelphian Christians
- *“If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it. I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name”*
- In the ancient city of Philadelphia, many of the public and municipal buildings would be built in the Greco-Asiatic style with many pillars – giving the appearance of solidity and security
- The pillars themselves would often bear the names of senior or significant public figures or countrymen
- But remember, in 17 AD a terrifying earthquake had shattered this self-assurance and sense of security
- Most ancient Philadelphians lived in fear of the next tremor, the next unexpected, the next unpredictable, the next uncontrollable earthquake
- If you had asked a few “key” questions of the people of this seemingly confident-looking and prosperous city...
- ...I wonder what answers you would have got, and would they be that different from those in our Western society now who wear a mask of confidence and self-assurance?
- For the Christians of the Church in Philadelphia this was not the case, however

- They had their Rock; they were built on a solid Foundation and there would be no need for them to flee the temple of their God at the occurrence of a minor tremor or even major earthquake
- And again, the same should be true for Christians today, the Christians of Coniston and Torver Church should have that same reassurance, that same true security
- Is that how you think and feel? When the minor tremors or major earthquakes of life come, do you run to God or away from Him?

Conclusion

- In our opening story, everybody was expecting the newly-awoken Karen to be uncertain of herself and bewildered
- Instead, the new world that Karen found was uncertain of itself, bewildered, and lacking confidence in itself to the point of despair
- The Church in Philadelphia was not like this, they lived in an earthquake zone and had recently experienced a devastating one, but they were secure
- Though they had faced natural disaster and man-made opposition they had stood tall and strong
- Whenever you are faced with human opposition to your faith, or the natural problems of life that face everyone...
- ...what will you do? What will we do as a church? Run for cover or patiently endure while remaining faithful?
- *“Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches”*
- Thanks be to God. **Amen**