

# Sermon 30<sup>th</sup> June 2019

Revelation 2.8-11

Luke 21.7-19

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

## **Introduction**

- A couple in their nineties are both having problems remembering things
- So, during their next regular check-up, the doctor told them that they were physically okay, but they might want to start writing things down to help them remember
- Later that night, while watching TV, the old man got up from his chair. "Want anything while I'm in the kitchen?" he asked his wife
- "Will you get me a bowl of ice cream?", "Sure", he replied
- "Don't you think you should write it down so you can remember it?" the wife asked. "No, I can remember it."
- "Well, I'd like some strawberries on top, too. Maybe you should write that down, so as not to forget it?"
- Slightly irritated the husband replied, "I can remember that. You want a bowl of ice cream with strawberries."
- "I'd also like whipped cream. I'm certain you'll forget that, write it down?" the wife suggested
- Now close to losing his temper, the husband replied, "I don't need to write it down, I can remember it! Ice cream with strawberries and whipped cream – I got it, for goodness sake"

- The husband then toddled off to the kitchen. After about 20 minutes, the old man returned from the kitchen and handed his wife a plate of bacon and eggs
- She stared at the plate for a moment, and then looked up at her husband, "Where's my toast?"
- I notice a few nervous laughs out there. That joke is a little too close to home for me – leaving the room with something in mind is increasingly dangerous!

## **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
- Last Sunday we began with the Church in Ephesus, who were commended by God for their toil and patient endurance...
- ...but who the LORD God complained had fallen from their first love, their passion had gone, but if those who conquer this lethargy, this apathy, they would be rewarded with paradise
- This Sunday, it is the turn of the Church in Smyrna, which was situated where modern-day Izmir in Turkey is currently located
- Therefore, being on the coast it was a city port, and was one of the greatest cities of its day and was considered by many to be the loveliest city in Asia
- In addition, it was the centre of commerce and of the worship of Caesar for the area
- Like all rich cities though, it had its poor, and the church there was mostly made up of poor people

- As Smyrna was a city of imperial worship, this meant that everyone was expected to bow down to Caesar
- Only the Jews were allowed not to conform, so to begin with, the Christians were considered part of the Jewish community and so they too were left alone
- However, this changed when the Jews made it clear that they did not want to be associated with the Christians
- Hence, the letter's reference to *"those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan"*
- This disassociation by the Jews made the situation for the poor in the church much worse because they then suffered persecution from the city authorities

## **Commendation**

- So, turning to our letter to the Church in Smyrna, there is one thing that is immediately apparent – its brevity
- It is by far the shortest of the seven letters being only four verses long
- Part of the reason for this is that this letter contains no complaint, the format of commendation, complaint and promise is broken in this one letter
- There is nothing that the LORD God, the Lord Jesus wants to complain about to the Church in Smyrna
- As an aside, do you think that would be the case for Colton? Or for Lowick with Blawith? For Penny Bridge? For Torver? Or finally for Coniston?
- But more about complaints in the next five Sundays

- The Lord Jesus has no complaint against the Christians in Smyrna, but He certainly has a commendation
- *“I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich”*
- The Lord Jesus commends them, that even though poor in earthly terms, they are rich in his sight, they have what is precious
- What a commendation! Can you imagine when you meet the Lord Jesus that He says to you “.... you had a rich life”
- But as I said last Sunday, these letters are not just mere words but prophecy – this is a prophetic message
- So, first the Lord Jesus sees, He sees both their earthly poverty but also their afflictions because of their persecution in His name
- Nothing is missed by the Lord Jesus and He sees their affliction, He sees all their sufferings in His name
- But the Lord Jesus does not only see the sufferings in His name of the Christians in Smyrna, He also commends them for enduring those sufferings
- They are rich, not just because they are poor and believe, but that they suffer in Jesus’ name and continue to believe
- The Church of Smyrna, the Christians of Smyrna are commended, are remembered precisely because they have suffered in Jesus’ name
- And after a moment’s thought we too, should recognise this basic truth

- Dietrich Bonhoeffer is remembered why? Because as a pastor in the Church he opposed the Nazi ideology and was imprisoned and hanged
- Martin Luther King is remembered why? Because as a pastor in the Church he opposed racial discrimination and was shot and killed
- Oscar Romero is remembered why? Because as a priest in the Church he opposed social injustice and torture and was shot and killed celebrating Mass
- [REFLECTION] I want us to pause and think when we have suffered in life; when we have suffered for Jesus; how would we be remembered; and would we be commended for it
- [SHARING] I want you to share any of those thoughts with a neighbour

## **Promise**

- So, returning to our letter, the prophetic message says that the Lord Jesus sees and speaks into the present situation, the present circumstances for the Church in Smyrna
- But, and there is always a “but”, but as I have said before the prophetic is normally speaking into the present, forth-telling...
- ...but sometimes it can be fore-telling, speaking into the future, and so the prophetic message is doing so here
- *“Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction”*
- The Lord Jesus, outside of time and space, sees not only the present affliction, the present sufferings in His name, the present forbearance

- The Lord Jesus also sees what is to come and in this case forewarns the Church
- But the Lord Jesus forewarns them to precisely give them a choice and with that choice a promise – commendation, complaint, promise
- The prophetic message continues, “*Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life*”
- The choice is quite simple, be faithful to death or... don't be faithful until death
- Death is not part of the choice, as all will die, but the true choice is will you die faithful or not
- And what of the promise, “*the crown of life*”? Well, crowns would have been familiar to the people of Smyrna. The Roman emperor wore a crown as did other officials
- But who wears the crown? The leader, the conqueror, he or she who conquers
- But what is being conquered here? Well, death itself is being conquered, that is why it is a crown of life
- So, even though the forewarned persecution is coming and may even cost the Christians their lives, they will conquer death
- And why does promise carry weight? Why is it significant? Because the one who makes the promise is significant and has the true authority to do so
- Another part of the letter, and common to all the letters that I have not mentioned beforehand, is the title, the way the Lord Jesus introduces Himself to the Church

- For the Church in Ephesus, the Lord Jesus was one “*who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands*”
- So, when the Lord Jesus threatens to remove their lampstand, i.e. church, unless they repent of losing their first love, their passion...
- ...then He can do so precisely because He has that authority
- In the same way, the Lord Jesus can promise the Christians in Smyrna the crown of life because...
- ...He is the one who is “*the first and the last, who was dead and came to life*”
- As fully God, He is timeless, eternal; as fully human He has lived, died and risen again, conquering human death and the second death – separation from God
- Therefore, he has all authority to offer the crown of life

## **Conclusion**

- Our memories can become unreliable, we go out for ice cream, strawberries and whipped cream, and we return with bacon and eggs – without the toast
- But some things are more memorable than others, and some things we are more likely to recall to mind
- Will you be remembered? Will your decisions and actions in life be remembered? And if remembered, would they be commended or not?
- Will you die faithful or not? Will you conquer and wear the crown of life?

- *“Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches”.*
- Thanks be to God. **Amen**