

# Sermon 21<sup>st</sup> July 2019

Revelation 3.1-6  
Matthew 23.27-30

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

## **Introduction**

- An old man was lying on his deathbed and so he summoned to his bedside his three most trusted friends who just happened to be his lawyer, his doctor, and his vicar
- When the three friends had arrived the man said, "I am going to die tonight, and I want to prove that when you go to heaven you can take it all with you."
- "So to my three most trusted friends, you three of course, I am leaving £50,000 in cash in each of these envelopes. When I die you must come to my funeral and put your envelope in the coffin with me"
- The dying man then handed the three men identical envelopes
- A day later they each received the news that, during that night the old man, their friend, had died, and each knew they must go to his funeral and fulfill his last request
- Standing over the coffin one week later the vicar confessed to the other two, "I can't hide what I've done. I took £10,000 from the envelope because the church needed to be painted"
- But after the vicar had said this, the doctor started to fidget and then confessed "I must admit, I took £30,000 from my envelope because the hospital needed a new wing"
- Finally, looking pleased with himself, the lawyer said, "Well, it

looks like I am the only honest one around here. I wrote him a cheque out for the full amount!"

## 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 and Thyatira
- And this Sunday, we are heading into the home straight as we look at the Church in Sardis
- We will stop, look at and ponder on the prophetic message to the Church in Sardis from the Lord Jesus Himself
- At the time when the message is received, sometime in the Domitian reign 90-95 AD, the city of Sardis was in a sorry state
- Previously Sardis had been the capital city of the Lydian kingdom, most famous and at its peak under King Croesus in 6<sup>th</sup> century BC
- Croesus is proverbially famous for his wealth, and is reportedly the wealthiest man to have ever lived
- The Lydian kingdom was the first to develop a system of coinage and the city of Sardis was the first to develop the art of dyeing wool
- However, by 90 AD the city was in a sorry state, living on its former glory, and it was said of Sardis that “no city in Asia

presented a more deplorable contrast of past splendour and present unarresting decline”

- Indeed, the city situated at the junction of five major roads, and commanding the Hermus valley, was a commercial centre and wealthy...
- ...but it was never again going to be what it once was; wealth and ease were there, but decline had set in

## **Commendation**

- And so, we come to the beginning of our letter, our prophetic message to the Church in Sardis
- And as we have seen beforehand in the other letters, the Lord Jesus begins with a commendation, He encourages first – or so it seems...
- *“I know your works; you have a name for being alive”*
- So, like last Sunday and the commendation, the encouragement to the Church in Thyatira, Jesus says *“I know your works”*
- It is that forthtelling part of the prophetic, Jesus telling the church the situation as He sees it, “I know” or “I see” your works
- For Thyatira this forthtelling prophetic message was a great encouragement, a great commendation because Jesus says,
- *“I know your works—your love, faith, service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first”*
- You are developing great Christian qualities, but better still, those great Christian qualities are getting better and better

- So, the opening words of the Lord Jesus to the Church in Sardis could be seen to be the same as that for Thyatira, *“I know your works”*
- Jesus says, *“I know your works; you have a name for being alive”*, I know you have a name for yourselves
- You have made a reputation for yourselves for being alive, like Thyatira with all those great Christian qualities
- But, and there is always a “but”, and Jesus adds the word “but”, *“you have a name for being alive, but you are dead”*
- The commendation to the Church in Sardis is phoney, but then no more phoney than the Church in Sardis is
- If, and it is a big “if”, if there is any commendation in the Lord Jesus’ prophetic message to the Church in Sardis, then it is
- *“Yet you have still a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes”*
- So, the only commendation that the Church in Sardis receives is that a few of them were still acceptable
- Where a few had had been misled or allowed themselves to be misled at Pergamum and Thyatira, here, in Sardis, only few had not gone astray

## Complaint

- So, it is little wonder that the Lord Jesus quickly moves on in His prophetic message to the Church in Sardis to make His complaint
- *“Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is at the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my*

*God. Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you”*

- Wake up, says the Lord Jesus, or be watchful in other translations
- The ease and wealth of the city made for an attitude of casualness and slackness
- The city was built on a hill so steep that its defences seemed to be impregnable
- But twice in its history, firstly by Cyrus the Persian in 549 BC and secondly by Antiochus in 218 BC, the city had been captured
- On both occasions enemy troops had scaled the hill by night and found the overconfident city with no guards stationed to watch
- So, wake up, be watchful, you are at the point of death – the Church in Sardis has often been nicknamed the Walking Dead or the Church of the Living Dead
- But after the warning to wake up and be watchful, the Lord Jesus gets straight to the heart of His complaint – *“for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God”*
- The Church in Sardis had a good reputation, yes, but the reality was very different and this was the core of the complaint – hypocrisy
- Looking like one thing and pretending to be one thing, when in reality you are another altogether, looking good but being bad, looking alive but actually dead
- Like the lawyer in the story at the beginning, pretending to be more honest and more generous than the vicar and the doctor, but in reality being thoroughly dishonest and selfish

- Or the Pharisees in our Gospel reading this morning, to whom the same Lord Jesus said,
- *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which on the outside look beautiful, but inside they are full of the bones of the dead and of all kinds of filth. So you also on the outside look righteous to others, but inside you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness”*
- Beautiful and white on the outside, full of filth and dead bones on the inside
- And the Lord Jesus’ reference to *“a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes”* is making the same point
- In Sardis, pure white robes were given to newly baptised adults, white and undyed
- But unseen, it seems that many had soiled their clothes, looking like one thing and being another – hypocrisy
- But, and there is always a “but”, but what was this hypocrisy, in what ways had the many *“soiled their clothes”*?
- Well, in the reign of Domitian, imperial worship, that is worshipping Caesar and his ancestors, was at its height
- In Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum and Thyatira, the Christians were facing persecution and were commended for their *“patient endurance”*
- So why not Sardis? Why no commendation for *“patient endurance”*?
- Because they were too wealthy, too comfortable and probably did not “rock the boat”, they were Christians in name only

- So, finally the Lord Jesus adds another warning, *“Remember then what you received and heard; obey it, and repent. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you”*
- As a city that had been twice captured when all the citizens slept. I am sure they would have understood that warning!

## **Promise**

- But, and again there is a “but”, but thankful after that lesser commendation but that major set of complaints there is a promise
- *“If you conquer, you will be clothed like them in white robes, and I will not blot your name out of the book of life; I will confess your name before my Father and before his angels”*
- For those Christians in Sardis who remember what they first heard and were taught, who then obey that teaching, and finally, who repent of the hypocrisy of the past...
- ...they will be vouched for in heaven, no one need fear rejection or humiliation because the Lord Jesus Himself will speak up for them

## **Conclusion**

- So, a pause...in what ways have we, as individuals or as a church, gone to sleep?
- Have we been too busy doing and insisting on doing the same things in church (the way we like them and are used to them) and ignored the fact that our neighbour is not part of our church?
- Have we convinced ourselves that we are too busy now, or have done so much in the past for the church that our discipleship is

sufficient when we turn up at church once a week and then go home?

- Have we closed our ears to the teaching we hear in church as we have heard it all before, and we know what we are doing?
- In what ways are we the Walking Dead or the Church of the Living Dead? Are you asleep?
- Another pause...in what ways are we, as individuals or as a church, hypocrites?
- Are we calling ourselves Christians but in reality only serving ourselves and not the Church?
- Are we calling ourselves Christians but in reality not acting as so outside of Church or on a day which is not a Sunday?
- Are we calling ourselves Christians but in reality are not learning or growing as a Christian?
- In what ways are we whitewashed tombs, beautiful on the outside but full of filth and dead bones on the inside? Are you a hypocrite?
- *“Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches”*
- Thanks be to God. **Amen**