

Fading reputation or lively engagement?

Revelation 3:1-6 – About Sardis

The ancient city of Sardis, like the other six cities of these letters, was in what we now call western Turkey. It was in the middle of the Hermas valley at the foot of Mount Tmolus which, at this point, formed a high spur in the valley. The citadel of the city sat on top of this spur with cliffs dropping away on three sides.

The city was proud of its great history. It had been the capital of the ancient Lydian kingdom of which Croesus had been the king. A stream running through the valley washed down gold from Mount Tmolus – the stream was even said to be golden in colour. Gold dust and even nuggets of gold found in the river had made the city and its king very wealthy – hence the phrase "as rich as Croesus".

But its great history was just that – it was history. The citizens had thought that their citadel was impregnable, but on two occasions it had been captured by stealth, first by Cyrus the Great whose soldiers had scaled the cliffs. Centuries later it was similarly captured by Alexander the Great. The citizens' pride in the supposed impregnability of their city had resulted in carelessness. They had failed to keep careful watch and so both the city and the independent kingdom of Lydia had fallen.

Furthermore, in 17 AD – perhaps within living memory of the oldest readers of this letter, or of their parents or grandparents who had told them tales of the city – a great earthquake had devastated the city, wiping out its ancient history and requiring it to be rebuilt.

It is to the Christians in this city that the risen Lord Jesus speaks these words through the apostle John.

Christ's verdict on the church in Sardis

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. ²Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. ³Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, 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.

The one who addresses them is the risen Lord Jesus, their Lord and the one they profess to follow. He "holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars." He is the one who has the fulness of the Spirit of God; all power in heaven and earth has been given to him. And he holds the stars, the mysterious representation of the churches themselves. He is filled with all the power of God that it might be exercised in and through his church and for the sake of the world.

Christ is intimately involved with the life of his people and determined to bless them with his presence, power and glory. He is determined through them to accomplish his purpose of bringing all things in heaven and earth under his lordship (see Ephesians 1:10); that every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:10-11).

But the church at Sardis must not forget that the blessings of the risen Saviour cannot be taken for granted. He who has the power to save also has the power to judge. They may be a church with a fine reputation, but Jesus is concerned to look beneath the outward appearance to the heart. They have a reputation for being alive but in reality they are dead – without the vital life of God. They had begun well but have now have left off being the church of the living Saviour only part way through their mission. There is a little life left but they need

urgently to wake up to the reality of their condition. They need to recognise that they are in danger of being utterly destroyed. The one they name as Saviour and in whom they profess to have placed their hopes will come like a thief in the night while they are sleeping and will sweep them away – just as had happened to their city.

In what way had the church at Sardis fallen asleep? We are not told explicitly, but it would seem that they had become complacent and had lost sight of the mission the Saviour had entrusted to them to be witnesses to him in their pagan society. Christ had called them to challenge the false gods of their society: the pursuit of pleasure, money, and power; the pursuit of things that never satisfy – like Vanity Fair. He had called them to proclaim the good news that Jesus gives freedom from the enticing but tyrannical gods of this world. He alone gives life in all its fulness. The church had lost sight of its mission and had become complacent, content to live on the undemanding comfort of past reputation rather than pursuing the present task of building Christ's kingdom. They were not willing to rock the boat and make waves in the surrounding society.

From 1st Century Sardis to 21st Century UK

There is great danger when churches live on their past reputation thinking that a fine reputation for their work in the past will guarantee their future. To misquote Proverbs, "pride comes before a fall".

Look around the landscape of our country with its many churches and chapels – testimony to past times when the Christian message and the power of Christ made a real impact on this country and shaped the life of the nation.

Go over the bridge and see the many churches and chapels in Wales that stand as testimony to a time when the Spirit of God moved throughout the land in revival. How many now are empty or converted to houses or workshops or the place of worship now of a few elderly people?

The church throughout this land has a noble history. It was at the forefront of providing hospitals and care for the sick and the dying. It led the way in providing education for all, in the abolition of slavery and of child labour, in campaigning for women's rights and providing care for the elderly. The Christian church in this land took the lead in shaping a humane and caring society in which every person was seen as someone to be cherished, valued and cared for since they were each made in the image of God. Church and Gospel took the lead in shaping the character of our society. We have a history to be proud of.

But what of today? Is the Gospel and the testimony of contemporary churches still shaping the life of our nation? Is our nation still being moulded by the call of God and the truths of the Gospel? Or will the churches of our day soon also become dead monuments to a noble past?

What reputation does the church have today? What reputation does it have with young people and young adults? What would be the response if we were to go out on the streets and ask people in our neighbourhood whether they saw the church as the source of good news?

Application to Christ Church

We are about to start a new chapter in the history of Christ Church Downend. The community around us has watched as the parish church has undergone redevelopment. They have seen the barriers around the church building and may have wondered what is going on. They may have then seen the pictures and articles in Downend Voice. We hope that many will turn up in 3 weeks' time for the various activities of the open weekend and to see what the inside of the building now looks like.

But the building is not the church; we are the church. What impression are we going to make on the people of Downend in coming weeks, months and years?

I do not doubt that Christ will continue to build his church – to establish his kingdom and draw people to himself; but will he do it through us? We need to "hear what the Spirit is saying" to his church. We need to wake up to the call of Christ and be sensitive to the sound of his voice. What is he calling us to be and to do today? How is he calling us to live in relationship with the society where he has placed us? How might we be used to bring about kingdom change in our own day?

Let's not rest on past reputation but rather be wide awake to future vision and present calling. What kind of society would delight the heart of the risen Saviour? How can we be instruments in forming such a society?

The promise of Christ

But the risen Lord Jesus also has a promise of blessing for the sleepy church of Sardis and has the same promise of blessing for us:

⁴Yet 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. ⁵The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. ⁶Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Listen to this wonderful promise Christ has for those who are awake to the voice of the Spirit, who watch over their lives and seek to reflect and live for the glory of the Saviour. Jesus names them as his own, acknowledging them before his Father. Those who acknowledge him before the world and who live for him he will acknowledge in heaven; they will walk with him and share his glory.

I am reminded of some verses that Nigel shared in our home group a few weeks ago. The Book of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament is full of words of warning and threats of judgment, but toward the end of the book we read these lovely words:

Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honoured his name. 'On the day when I act,' says the Lord Almighty, 'they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him. (Malachi 3:16-17).

Christ's faithful people are his treasured possession, his jewels. Those who listen to the call of his Spirit he also listens to and he remembers them. They will never be blotted out of the Lamb's book of life.

Christ calls us today to lives of bold discipleship. He calls us to more than a reputation for churchgoing or a reputation for what we have been in the past. He calls us to live lives continually touched, transformed and animated by his life-giving Spirit, lives that touch and transform the lives of others, lives he will gladly name as his own.

Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

Peter Misselbrook

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