

Sardis

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[0 : 00] So for a few minutes we're going to look at the message that Jesus has for this church. The seven churches were real churches, they're not made up churches, they're not just symbolic churches, they were real churches.

But broader than simply being real churches, they also do speak of the kind of issues that every church faces at different ages and stages in its life and as individuals as well.

So it's a message that remains relevant in other words for the church today. It's not a message that was just for Sardis or was just for Philadelphia because it's part of the living word of God.

It's not unlike the letters that Paul wrote to the different churches we're looking at Ephesians in the morning. But here Jesus gives a very particular message to each of these churches, but there are elements in all of them that I'm sure we can find in all of us.

So we listen for what God is saying to us and we recognise that what they do speak of is that they speak of the message of the living God in Jesus Christ who has his hand on the churches.

[1 : 23] He holds the seven Spirits of God in the seven stars as we're told in the beginning in chapter 2, he holds them in his hands. And this is Christ's church and Christ's spirit lives in his church and therefore Christ has a living and ongoing message for his church and for you and I as members of that church.

He has an intense grip on us, he's holding us and that can be a good thing if you're lost on the hillside and you've got someone holding your hand who knows the way, that's great.

But it can also be a frightening thing in the sense if you're being held back from doing something you want to do as a recalcitrant child by a loving parent, you might not be so keen on that particular grip.

This is the living God who has a grip on us and on his church and this is his church. And he is speaking here to a church in Sardis, Sardis was a popular and successful city.

But complacent, they were a bit like if they had been built on Castle Hill, they were a bit like that, they felt they were impregnable and that they couldn't be attacked in days when lots of city states and that would have been attacked.

[2 : 52] And in their past a couple of times the enemies that they faced sneaked up on them and pillaged them because they weren't prepared, they were complacent about their position and they were complacent about their wealth and about their idolatry, idolatrous worship that went on in that city and it seems here that the church was falling into the same kind of mistakes and was comfortable and was peaceful and there wasn't much grit and wasn't much strength of what Athel was speaking about this morning, about the light of the gospel changing them so that they brought a friction into the Gentile society in which they lived.

So Jesus here uses three illustrations as he comes to them and speaks to them and they are very relevant as we think about the message that Jesus might have in our own, both our personal lives but also our spiritual lives as a church.

And I want you to think tonight as well about the church, the congregation, the corporate nature of the gospel here in the congregation. I think it's easy to be consumerist, it's easy to think you come along to church, the church provides for you, the church does services, you rate the sermons out of ten, they're good, bad or indifferent, you go away and live your life and the church is a kind of add-on or it's a kind of consumerist reality and yet we have here something very far different in Jesus' understanding of the church as his body, of which we all belong to, of which there's both an individual and a corporate responsibility.

So we all belong to the church here and we all have a corporate responsibility to that church both as individuals and as I say, as we come together as a people.

So Jesus here speaking to Sardis, there doesn't seem to be any raging doctrinal failures within the church, not massively drifting away from the truth.

[5 : 15] There's nothing clear that can be revealed as it were as in some of the other churches. It's actually not even that much that's terribly good in this church.

But Jesus comes and he uses three illustrations, he uses the illustration of being a doctor, of being a thief and also of being the master of the roles.

You see that briefly as he speaks to the church because he regards the church here like a patient and he regards himself as the one who knows the needs of that patient.

I know your works, you have a reputation of being alive but you are dead. So the reputation is that the church, maybe among other churches and maybe even within Sardis, hey this is a good church, this reputation of being a vibrant kind of living church of being alive.

They had lots of things, they were busy all week and they came together and when they sung the singing was wonderful and all these kind of things that gave the impression that things were good.

[6 : 27] It was busy, it was active, didn't seem to be any heresy there, there also doesn't seem to be much persecution going on which maybe gives us a hint. But there was an inoffensiveness about this church which gave it a reputation in the community and possibly in the wider church were not clear.

But certainly it had a reputation of being alive, being a vibrant church and there is such damning diagnosis here by Jesus who says I know your works, I know you.

Isn't that, he doesn't need to say anything else does he? And that is a challenge for us this evening isn't it always? However we present, however we come before God or come before one another, however we think we are living our lives, let us take, if we take nothing else, let us take the words of Jesus who says I know you, I know you, I know what you are like in your inner being, I know what the reputation you have is, I know what you have as a reputation as a church, as St Columbus potentially.

But he says I know what you are like spiritually. He says that to Sardis and he says you are dead, you have a reputation for being alive but you are dead.

There is a serious sickness in their soul, it's not presenting just like somebody who could look well and who doesn't give any signs of being unwell but who is rushed into ICU when they have a heart attack that is potentially fatal.

[8 : 12] It is the same spiritually that spiritually it needn't be, what God is saying here, it needn't be that it is obvious and it is patently clear that you are spiritually dead in a church context.

But Christ knows our hearts and that is a hugely significant thing. And so for us part of the challenge is that reputation is insignificant at one level, if that is what we are relying on, it's not that it doesn't matter how we live of course, but if we are leaning on that, if we are looking for the praise and adulation of other churches or other people because of our reputation, you are a great Christian, you are a great preacher, you are a great person in the congregation, you do great things. If that is where we are looking for our identity and our significance and not caring for our internal relationship with God then Jesus is saying is warning us of not leaning on our reputation.

He is saying that corporately, which is why prayer and the prayer life we live both corporately and individually, and personally you must be looking after your heart and I will go on to say a little bit more about that.

But remember that basically there is a church here that as a reputation have been a living church, an active church, the Christians in it have a reputation of living and active and have a reputation of being alive.

However that revealed itself in the church in that day and yet Jesus says I know your heart, please take that as we consider ourselves. Think of Amos chapter 5 verse 21, I hate, God says, I hate, I despise your religious feasts.

[10 : 12] I cannot stand your assemblies away with the noise of your songs, I will not listen to the music of your harps. He is saying he isn't really, if we are leaning and depending on our gatherings are simply being together, the wonderful way that we can sing and the professionalism of our Christian lives, if that is taken away from our personal relationship with Christ then he hates that because it is hypocrisy and as we know that is what Jesus hates more than anything, it is hypocrisy.

Woe to you, we did this not that long ago. No we didn't actually, sorry, I just did it. Teachers of the law, Pharisees, you hypocrites, you are like whitewashed tombs which look beautiful on the outside

but on the inside are full of dead men's bones.

Jesus said it as it was, he didn't mess about as we saw this morning, Holy Spirit threw Paul and Ephesians as well. In the same way on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness. Now that is shearingly challenging to each of us as the light of the gospel shines into our hearts.

Whatever we might be on the outside in terms of righteousness we may be full of hypocrisy and uncleanness on the inside and that is the kind of issue that Jesus is dealing with here in the church in Sardis.

It seemed to be a good going church but it wasn't a good going church. Wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die. They were about to die, the church was about to die, the Christians were about to die and there is a great challenge in that for you and for me.

[12:04] However we appear on the outside, there is this great need to consider what is dying, our personal relationship with Christ through the reading of the word, is our personal walk with Christ through prayer.

When was the last time we shared our faith with anyone from our hearts? Because we have a story to tell. When was the last time that anyone came to faith through our life or witness?

The vibrant living witness in life that we have. These are questions and as we think of the intensity of the importance of the gospel in our hearts we need to ask about what is about to die.

What is drifting from our ongoing Christian life? What are we jettisoning in our Christian life? Are we keeping going with church because that is outside and everyone sees us because it is a routine. Have we jettisoned the personal, private, individual walk with Christ because no one sees that? If you were honest with yourself and you looked in the mirror of Scripture could it be that you and I have to say we are about to die?

[13:21] Or as Christ says here, effectively you are dead, your heart has grown cold and you are living a hypocritical life because your heart and your desires are for what we saw this morning, the kind of lifestyle that we ought to be dead to as Christians.

So it is a very challenging message as he makes his diagnosis as the spiritual physician doctor. But he gives a cure and that is always encouraging but he is not saying that you are beyond hope. He does not want anyone to leave Scripture with a council of despair and say, I never was a Christian, there is no hope for me because as always with his warnings he is wanting to draw us back from the edge.

And maybe some of you here this evening are just on the edge of being about to die inside, masking it well but inside about to die and you know it. You know it this evening, you have come with heavy feet to the house of worship.

You have come not really wanting to be here, you have dragged yourself from something that was much better fun and what is inside is about to die. And he gives us this cure and it is a command.

[14:43] It is an imperative, we have heard that word quite a lot, we are learning our English grammatical phrases these days, it is an imperative. Now we have wake up he says, strengthen what remains inside about to die. I have not found your words complete.

Remember then what you have received and heard, keep it and repent. So we have five things there very quickly in terms of a cure, you go to the doctor and you want to receive something that will make you better. You have got to take your tablets every day.

You have got to take them. Katrina has had to take her tablets every four hours, morning, noon and night. And during the night she has to wake up to take them. She has to do that if there is to be a cure. And we also need to listen to what God says spiritually to us as we maybe analyse our lives and see a spiritual dryness and deadness and even hypocrisy that sometimes is surely there in our lives. He says, wake up.

Now you know that was very meaningful to the people of Sardis because twice they had been sleeping as a city when they were complacent because of their ramparts and where they thought they were safe and they had been rampaged and pillaged.

So it meant something to them. Wake up. It may have happened in your city but don't let it happen to you spiritually. Be alert. Don't be in a spiritual stupor in your life but rather be alive again.

[16:16] Wake up to the significance of where you are. Now that's an interesting thing isn't it that he commands the one who holds the seven spirits, the one who is the spirit of God. The spirit belongs to the church.

He commands his spirit filled church to wake up. He doesn't say just wait. He doesn't say you can't wake up because you haven't got any power. He says, wake up.

He says, be alert and wake up to the reality of your situation. Take it seriously. You can't do anything when you're sleeping and he wants us to wake up and that is what we must do.

And in waking up we then strengthen what remains. Strengthen what remains is about to die for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. And he wants them to get back to basics.

You know if you are dangerously ill and you nearly die there is a rehab period, rehabilitation, where you strengthen the basic things. You learn to sleep again, you learn to eat again, you learn to breathe again and you sometimes have to start right from the beginning.

[17 : 28] And he says it's a spiritual rehab for us sometimes that we need to strengthen what is significant and what is important. We need to get back to the basics of our Christian lives, the very basics.

So the things that you did at first when you woke up in the morning, you spent time with God on your own. You know they talk about quiet times and sometimes you know the kind of 24th century church mocks that discipline in some ways or other.

But it's just simply about being in touch with the living God. It doesn't matter when you do that. But take time to speak with your God to let his light shine into the darkness of your heart. It takes time. We can't do it without time at something. I've recognised just a fresh again recently how important it is to make the time to strengthen what remains. We can't live the Christian life on a wing and a prayer.

Sorry, that's not a very good illustration. But you know the phrase I mean, prayer is important. But you can just skim through your Christian life and dip into church and hope that the odd service and the odd fellowship will keep us going.

[18 : 49] There needs to be the time when we allow his light to shine and expose the darkness and the greed and the selfishness and the independence spirit that we have. We need to be in his word. We need to speak with him. We need to be prayerful and recognise all that comes strengthening the basic works of Christian living, the basic service of loving God and loving one another.

That is a hugely significant thing. And as we are doing that, it will transform the way we are in the world in which we live so that we start becoming grace filled irritant in the world we live.

That was the problem with service. They had stopped becoming an irritant in the world. They were comfortable. They had a good reputation. Everyone loved them because they had nothing to say. I've got a great quote from a tremendous commentator.

Leon Morris, who commentates on the letters to the seven churches, said, This church may have pleased men, but it didn't please God. Nothing it did was complete in the sight of God. Its works were not brought to fulfilment.

Why did both Jews and Romans leave this church undisturbed, unlike some of its neighbours? The answer may well be its lack of aggressive and positive Christianity, content with mediocrity, lacking both the enthusiasm to entertain a heresy and the depth of conviction which provokes intolerance.

[20 : 27] It was too innocuous to be worth persecuting. People just passed by in Sardis when they saw the church because it was a nothing church. It didn't really do anything other than have a good reputation.

It was too innocuous to be opposed. It didn't really believe anything properly so that that would be the conviction which drove its life as a church and as individuals. That to me is challenging.

It's challenging for me personally. It's challenging for St. Columbus and for our individual lives and our testimony. Strengthen what remains. Remember, he says, Thirdly, what you received and heard and keep it or obey it.

So remembering the teaching, getting back to what we were told this morning, getting back to the reality of the cross, to the sacrifice of Jesus, to his incredible self-discipline and self-control and self-emptying in order to be a redeemer, in order to give us what we didn't deserve and the reality of being purchased, belonging to being a new creation. Remember that. Go back to that teaching. Keep going back to that teaching. There's nothing new. There's nothing novel.

There's nothing different that we can bring to your attention. But go back to what once brought a smile to your face, which once thrilled your soul when you heard that message which was genuinely life-changing and transforming for you.

[22 : 11] Which sometimes we have cast aside and no longer remember. Remember, Thirdly, Fourthly, obey that. Keep it. Obey it. There's no contradiction between remembering and loving and being passionate and obedience.

If you love me, you will obey my commands. It's kind of un... It's not hipster now to talk about obeying Christian... obeying in a Christian context. It's just feelings and moving forward in that kind of context.

And yet we have this great self-control of the Holy Spirit that enables us to obey out of love, out of gratitude and follow Him.

These are the things that were missing from the church in Sardis, you know? The heart matters.

These were the heart matters. They were forgetting. They were weak. They were asleep.

They weren't obedient. And lastly, they weren't repenting. They weren't repenting in their lives.

Now, we mentioned at the beginning about the text in Isaiah. And I think that does remain a critical part of our Christian lives. That we are people who are continually repenting.

[23 : 26] That we are coming back to the Lord. That we are recognising our need. That we are not being bound and not being guilt-driven and not being held back by failure.

But they were turning from it and being strengthened and being renewed. That is the glory of the gospel. There is no probation period. We come back to Him and we make a fresh start each day and we keep our accounts. As my old colleague in Ruskin, Kenny MacDonald, my old boss, used to say, Derek, keep your accounts short, God. Keep your accounts short. Always be in His company. Always be in His presence. Always be repenting of the things that you know are taking you from. And the only way we know them is as we are in Him and in His Word. So He gives us that fivefold cure. The first steps that we take in our Christian lives to deal with the spiritual tiredness, weariness and deadness that so often invades our lives.

And that He was speaking about here in Sardis. And He says to them, the third picture, sorry, the second picture, the first is a doctor, the second is of a thief.

And He says, remember and repent, if you will not wake up, I will come like a thief and you will not know the hour I come against you. And often in the letter to the seven churches, Jesus speaks by way of warning and speaks about the importance of acting on His Word.

[25 : 03] He says, if you don't act on my word, I am the great physician. I know you. And if you don't act on my word, He says, don't expect nothing spiritually to happen as a result.

If you remain unrepentant, if you shake your fist heavenward, or if you think, ah, doesn't really matter, Jesus says He will come as a thief. And the picture there is basically coming when you least expect Him. Now what does that mean? What is Jesus saying here?

Generally the picture seems to be that He will come in discipline on His own, or ultimately in final judgment on those who are professed, but never truly repented and believed.

And He says that He moves on the basis of our inaction. And if we don't take His cure, which is simple and which is free and which is full and which is spirit ordained, then He says the consequences are genuine for us. He will not let, if we are genuinely His, and we are not acting on His Word, then He will come into our lives in a form of discipline, as a loving Father, but He will discipline us and He will come when we possibly least expect Him to do so. Churches, as we know, rise and fall.

And we've seen that, we've seen that with the seven churches and the lack of witness in these places today. And we've seen it in our own denomination over a hundred or two hundred years, we've seen it through history, that churches rise and fall.

[26 : 52] You sit here this evening and St. Columbus is full here at what level? It's tiny fullness and insignificant fullness in many ways, but churches rise and fall.

And if we are leaning, depending on our reputation as a church, on our preaching, on our leadership, on our membership, on our hospitality, on our giving, on anything that might give us a reputation, we will fall.

We will fall, because churches rise and fall because Christ comes like a thief and will judge those that do not turn towards Him. How many churches do you know? How many churches do you know that have been torn apart by bitterness and by cheating and by lying and by adultery and by backbiting in the leadership and membership, by taking worldly principles and putting them into practice in the church.

If we don't recognise the need to be very different as a body because we are Christ's, then we will fall. And Christ is saying exactly that. He will come in judgment, He will come in discipline and He will not allow His church to be soiled.

In this way. So He comes and He will come and He comes into our own lives also as believers in discipline. He pulls us back, sometimes brings events into our lives or sometimes it may be in a multiplicity of ways, but He takes us and catches us and comes into our lives and disciplines us because He loves us.

[28 : 39] Father, who loves His children, don't despise the Lord's discipline, but may you enable Him to implement His cure through your obedient in response to Him.

And lastly and very briefly, He speaks about being the master of the roles. Yet I have still a few names in Sardis people who have not soiled their garments, they walk with me in white for they are worthy. One who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, I will never block their name out of the Book of Life.

I will confess His name before my Father, before His angels. It's kind of a picture here of Christ as the holder of the book, you know, the great Book of Life. And He points out to, in some of the other churches, there's only a few that are making a mess of things and kind of like flies in the ointment. But in Sardis case, it's only a few that are living the way they should be and who are dependent on Christ, who are walking. And He's got this picture of them walking with white clothes and those who are worthy and those who overcome.

And there is simply kind of symbolic pictorial language of those who are living a committed Christian life from the inside out, who have, are following Jesus Christ from their hearts, who recognise and who are alert and who are spiritual.

[30 : 05] It's not speaking about people who are worthy of themselves, people who will be wrong sometimes, who are misguided sometimes, who will say the wrong thing, who make mistakes, but who sorrow over sin, who are living a life of constant repentance, who desire the fruit of the Spirit and who live in the shadow of Calvary.

And they are worthy because they are putting their faith and trust and hope into one who is worthy. They are clothed with His righteousness and they are those who will live with and be with and will be confessed before the Father on that great day.

And that's a really important thing, it's a really significant thing. Some people have asked, well how can people's names be blotted out of the book of life? What happens about election and stuff like that? Clearly we know that every believer, everyone who's truly elect, their names can never be taken from the book of life, we have that promise in Scripture.

But the challenge is here, the challenge here is for us who profess the name of Christ to live that profession and to remember the responsibility of what that means.

And it may be that there are those, we know, because the Scripture says there are those who profess the name of Jesus Christ, but whose names are not in the book of life. Because they never allow their profession to go beyond the surface, it never reaches their hearts.

[31 : 33] And Jesus himself speaks of that, doesn't he? When he says, Lord, Lord, there'll be those who say, Lord, Lord, and we do great things in your name, then we cast out demons in your name, then we do amazing things in your name.

And he says, depart from me, I never knew you. And so there's that, the core reality of the Gospel comes through here is this knowledge, not intellectual knowledge of God, but the knowledge of Christ as saviour and as God as father.

And so we recognise the importance of our identity being in Christ. Now, I find it hard to believe, but there may be some people who are in danger of arresting their identity on their position in the church.

Elders here, the fact that your name is on the role of session is not what matters. Or members here, that you're on the role of the membership is not what matters.

You're on the role of preachers, if there is such a thing, you can be a castaway, and I can be a castaway. And it's not in our attendance or our belonging at that level.

[32 : 47] It is our name in the Lamb's Book of Life. And our name is in that book as we keep close to the saviour of Calvary and as we know him, because he says, I know you.

And that is the great thing, isn't it, about the Word of God is that it kind of, it just pierces into our hearts. And it moves beyond the surface.

And it moves beyond simply listening or being a Christian, either on the surface or listening to the Gospel for other people.

And the challenge always in the house as we come to God's Word and as we come to preaching is recognising, as we've often said here, as the activity that you've engaged in.

You are not passive as you listen to the Word of God. You allow that Word to, the light of that Word into your soul and you examine your heart and I examine mine as to our walk.

[33 : 52] And that we will learn from the church in Sardis and that we learn not to be like the church in Sardis. Because I don't see any reason why this church can progress and grow and flourish and plant churches as long as we keep our eye and our heart on Jesus Christ.

But that is the great challenge. Don't ever become proud. Don't ever think we are something when we're nothing in and of ourselves. And don't ever depend on people's reputation, either individually or as a church.

And remember your leaders. Because as we plant churches and as we seek to reach out with the Gospel, individually and as a church, we will be attacked. And you will be attacked.

And the only safe place is in the shadow of Calvary. So please remember that and please be vigilant to take forward this week of prayer, which is the most important week we have.

And it mustn't just be the week now and then the week in autumn. It must be bookends that just engulf our Christian lives as a community in prayer and in honest, faithful Christian living.

[35 : 04] Let's bow our heads and pray. Heavenly Father, we pray for wisdom and grace and humility to learn from your word. We thank you for the simplicity of your word, which uses pictures that we can understand that are simple and clear.

And that you give us steps to spiritual health that we can all take. Forgive us when we resist these steps.

Forgive the intransigent of our hearts sometimes and the selfishness and the pride. Forgive our love of sin and the ease with which we rely on surface walk with you.

Give each of us that commitment to a personal relationship with you that takes time and energy and is a priority in our lives.

We always make time for what we love. We always make time, Lord, for what is important to us and may that be true. Ultimately, and as a matter of priority of our Christian faith, that we make the time to develop our knowledge and our insight and our understanding and our walk with Jesus Christ as disciples.

[36 : 28] So help us, we pray. Remember us. We do crave conversions. We crave people to come to faith here and in Cornerstone and in S Bank and in S Valley Rary, rather, and in the Gospel partnership churches and throughout the city and throughout the free church and throughout the country.

We crave in these dark days the light of Jesus Christ to transform miraculously people's lives. Lord, in wrath, remember mercy and the judgment that you bring on us because of the misery and degradation of our hearts.

Remember mercy and bring people to faith. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.