

Sermon for Sunday 21st February 2016
11.00am Morning Worship at St Stephen's.
Lent 2: Challenged to change 2
Theme: Hold onto what you have.

Readings: Revelation 2: 18-29; Mark 13: 21-27

Sermon

Welcome to the second in our Lent series, challenged to change. Each Sunday during Lent we are looking at one of the letters to the churches that we find in Revelation chapters 2 and 3 and seeing how the challenge to change they offered to each of these ancient churches might echo through time to still challenge us to change today. Last week we were in Ephesus hearing about a church that despite doing many good things, despite looking to all intents and purposes like an active and serving and even successful church, has forgotten something. They have, as Jesus says in the words that John writes: Forsaken their first love. And the challenge to change we faced last week was to ask ourselves: is it possible to be an active church, even a successful church, but have forgotten to be a loving church.

Today we are moving on a bit. As I can only include 5 sermons in this series and there are 7 letters, we are moving on to the 4th letter, the letter to the angel of the church in Thyatira.

Thyatira was a town in the Roman province of Asia, in the far west of what is now Turkey. It lay on the banks of the river Lycus, The river was important to its economy as it became a centre for the manufacture of dyed fabrics, the supply of water being essential for this. Thyatira is mentioned in another place in the Bible, anyone care to guess where?

Suggestions:

It is mentioned in Acts chapter 16 as the home town of a woman called Lydia who Saint Paul met in Philippi and who accepted the gospel and became the first member of the Philippian church. Lydia, you may remember, was a dealer in purple cloth. Cloth that was no doubt dyed in Thyatira and then traded by Lydia from Philippi, which stood at the junction of several major trade routes, across the Roman world.

But Lydia tells us something else about Thyatira that is important to know. Generally the Roman world was dominated by men. Yes there are powerful women in Roman history, but more often than not they had power and influence because they had influence over powerful men. Lydia though is a business woman. She has clearly taken control of her own life. She has accumulated a degree of wealth, enough to enable her to move to Philippi to build her business even further. In many ways Lydia was pushing at, and indeed breaking down, the traditions and restrictions that Roman society would normally place upon women, something that suggests that Thyatira was quite a liberal and progressive town. Maybe a far more tolerant and far less prejudiced place than much of the rest of the Roman world.

So the Christian community in Thyatira exists within a society that is apparently quite 'cool.' It is laid back and tolerant. Maybe not so much of a place of persecution and opposition as we saw in Ephesus last week.

Surely that is a good thing isn't it? Maybe Thyatira was a little foretaste of the cosmopolitan, liberal, open, accepting, tolerant society that most of us hope for and strive for today. I'd guess if we were able to walk its streets, we might conclude that Thyatira was a pretty nice place. Maybe even a place we felt we recognised from our 21st century perspective.

And, as I say, the Christian community at Thyatira was in many ways able to flourish. The beginning of the letter seems to support this:

I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.

They are a church characterised by love and faith. Love and faith that work their way out in deeds, in actions of love and service for Christ within Thyatiran society. But, as with all these letters there is a but! But there is a problem, and the problem is this: how can you remain distinctive and faithful to the Gospel in a society that holds up tolerance as its golden rule? How can you be faithful to the gospel within a society that sees all spiritualities as legitimate pathways to God? How can you remain faithful to the gospel in a society that regards morals, ethics and personal behaviour as entirely relative – all things are a matter of personal choice and all things are acceptable, indeed commendable, as long as they do not infringe the freedom of others.

The Thyatiran Christians are a tolerant lot. They fit nicely into Thyatiran society, and it is most probably because of this that they are allowed to flourish as just one of the multitude of spiritualities on offer in the town. But, as we heard, Jesus says:

Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling.

There is something going on. A bit like in Ephesus where the Nicolaitans were a corrupting force, so here in Thyatira there is a similar sect. A group that has in some way attached itself to the Christians, but there is a subtle, but pretty significant difference. The Ephesians hated the Nicolaitans, the Thyatirans tolerate the members of this sect.

The use of the name Jezebel you may guess refers to Queen Jezebel who was the Canaanite wife of King Ahab who was king of the northern kingdom of Israel during the time of Elijah. Jezebel was a powerful personality who sought to promote the pagan Canaanite worship of Baal and lead the Israelites astray. She made several attempts to end Elijah's life but, as you may remember, God delivered him each time. There is unlikely to be a woman actually called Jezebel leading this wayward sect in Thyatira, but the reference gives us today, 2,000 years later, a very clear picture of what this is all about. I want to try and avoid getting bogged down in the condemnation of this Jezebel as the references to the ancient queen of Israel continue. Queen Jezebel was cast upon a bed of suffering and in fact came to a pretty nasty end when her body was consumed by the wild dogs. The Jezebel in Thyatira is destined for destruction, yes, but her bed of suffering is I think more figurative than literal.

The thing that the Christians in Thyatira are criticised for is not that they are taking part in these pagan practices. It is not that they are visiting temples, being promiscuous and eating food sacrificed to idols and so on. No, it is that they tolerate what others are doing. Or in other words, at the very least they remain silent and let it go on, and at the worst they say and do things in the interests of tolerance that condone and give authenticity to these beliefs and practices. Knowing the truth of the gospel and knowing the path of destruction that all those who follow this Jezebel are on, they choose to say no words of condemnation or rebuke. They choose to remain silent. They choose to accept their co-existence with this perverted sect. As the letter says: they have chosen to tolerate the beliefs and practices of Jezebel.

Tolerance is a good thing, of course it is. But the question is: when does tolerance start to degrade the faith that we hold up as the truth? When does tolerance of things that are not compatible with the Christian faith begin to weaken our faith both in the eyes of the world and within the church?

The gospel reading has taken us to Mark 13 and Jesus teaching about his coming again to bring his kingdom to completion and perfection. He issues us with a warning:

At that time if anyone says to you, 'Look, here is the Christ!' or, 'Look, there he is!' do not believe it. For false Christs and false prophets will appear and perform signs and miracles to deceive the elect- if that were possible.

Jesus warning is simple really. Be on your guard. Be on your guard for the people and things around you that make false claims. Be on your guard against people and things that claim to offer you a better life, a more fulfilled life, a more meaningful life. Be on your guard, says Jesus, because there is only one who offers these things. There is only one who can offer you, and indeed only one who can give you, a better life, a more fulfilled life and a more meaningful life, and that of course is Jesus himself. There is nothing that the world can offer you, nothing that any person can offer you, nothing in all creation here on earth or in the far flung corners of the universe that can in any way add to what Jesus has given you, is giving you right at this moment, and will give you at the moment that he gathers you from the four winds to take your place amongst the elect.

But all around us in today's world the voices are crying out. 'This is what you need!' Wealth, status, authority, respect, power, the latest gadgets and fashions, and so on and so on and so on. All around us are the voices of Jezebel that can so so easily tempt us to put our trust in other things. Voices that can so easily tempt us to think that God's love and grace in Christ are not really enough, but that we need other things to really make us feel fulfilled.

So, says Jesus, beware of anything that whispers in your ear: 'This is not enough. You can have more, and I can give it to you!'

I said that if we could visit Thyatira we might find it a strangely familiar place. Familiar because its liberal, tolerant, multifaith, morally and ethically relative society was very much like our 21st century liberal western European society is today. Many of the foundations of that liberalism are in fact strong Christian principles. Equality, care, supporting the weak and vulnerable, freedom, justice, truth, and much more. But the sad fact is that there are many aspects of the way that local, national and global society works that are not compatible with our Christian faith or Christian way of life.

- The grossly unequal distribution of wealth.
- The reinforcing of class through poor provision and lack of opportunity.
- A banking system really founded on no more than gambling and greed and morally corrupt at its heart.
- An arms industry that sets out to put into the hands of already corrupt leaders weapons by which they can increase their power to oppress and manipulate people.
- Energy and commodity companies that mine and devastate vast swathes of the earth for maximum profit.
- Drinks companies who profit from the misery of hundreds of millions across the world who have been enticed into alcohol addiction and abuse.

And so much more, across the world, within our nation, here in London, around us in our own neighbourhoods, In our own lives, at home, at work, in the institutions that we find ourselves dealing with or being part of from day to day.

The challenge to us is that we are clearly being told that we should not be tolerating these things because that is just the way that it is. And we are also being told that it is not enough just to ignore these things. It is not enough to try and live our Christian lives in isolation from these things, letting them continue around us. Tolerating them as an inevitable part of the life of the world and our nation that we can do or say nothing about. No, that is just what the Thyatiran Christians are pulled up short

over. Jesus words are not: Nevertheless I have this against you, you take part in the practices of Jezebel. No, his words are: Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel,

Because the sad fact is that so easily tolerance leads to acceptance, acceptance leads to participation, and participation leads to corruption. And it all happens in the blink of an eye before you've even noticed what is going on.

There is lots of bad stuff going on around us, we know that. There is corruption, dishonesty, injustice, the abuse of power, exploitation in every aspect and at every level of society. It is not possible to live in some splendid spiritual isolation from this. But that doesn't mean we have to keep silent. That doesn't mean that we have to silently tolerate the way the world is. In fact as Christians, it gives us an extra responsibility to speak out, to be noisy, to point out injustice wherever we see it and experience it.

Jesus instructions to the Christians in Thyatira is to 'Hold on to what you have until I come.' To 'hold on to what you have.'

What you have in the gospel of Jesus Christ is all you will ever need. There is nothing else in the world that can offer you what Jesus is offering you. There is no fulfilment, joy, peace or love greater than that which Jesus has given, and is giving, you. Holding onto this can, and indeed should be, costly. Because holding onto what you have means rejecting and speaking out about everything that will try to snatch the truth of Christ away from you. Rejecting and speaking out about everything that would try and dilute the truth of Christ in you. Rejecting and speaking out about anything that would try and corrupt the truth of Christ in you. So that, come the day when Jesus does return, he cannot say of you: 'Nevertheless, I have this against you, you have tolerated the Jezebel's of the world and allowed their corruptive power and influence to go unchallenged.'

So, is it possible to live faithfully here in London, in Canonbury today? Well yes it is, but it is not easy. It is, and should be, costly, because it means that we, that you, must speak out in the face of injustice and corruption and hatred and abuse and dishonesty. It's not an option, it's a command. But the cost of maybe finding that you are unpopular at times is as nothing compared to everything that is yours in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. 'Hold onto what you have,' says Jesus, because what you have is priceless treasure. Treasure that will last beyond the temporary and fading trials and experiences of this life. 'Hold onto what you have.' Keep this Gospel treasure pure. Don't let the Jezebel's of the world corrupt it or dilute it or steal its glory. For it is those who still have the treasure in their hands who will receive the reward; the morning star. The fullness of Gods glory in Christ for all eternity.

Let us pray:

Almighty God,

All around us the voices of the world cry out and seek to sell us a fulfilment that is only skin deep.

All around us we see your world and your people being corrupted by those who seek power or selfish gain.

Give us the courage to be intolerant when that is your will,

And to speak your words to this lost world.

Give us the strength to hold onto what we have in the gospel of Jesus Christ and to keep it pure and bright for the day when he shall come to take us home.

Lord, may we not be afraid to bear the cost of living for you and speaking for you today,

That we may know your final reward and behold you in your glory;

Through Christ our Lord. Amen