

Sermon for Sunday 28th February 2016
11.00am HC at St Stephen's.
Lent 3

Series: Challenged to Change.
Theme: Wake up!

Readings: Revelation 3:1-6 Matthew 23:23-28

Sermon:

Welcome to week 3 of 'Challenged to Change.' As you hopefully know by now, we are spending Lent in the early chapters of the book of Revelation and digging into some of the letters to the 7 churches that we find in chapters 2 and 3 to see if the challenges offered by Jesus to them nearly 2,000 years ago might still be relevant and challenging to us today.

In week 1 we found ourselves in Ephesus with the challenge to 'Remember your first love.' The Ephesian Christians seemed to be doing great things, but there was one thing they had forsaken or neglected, simply to love God and one another. And the question we asked was: 'Is it possible to be an apparently active and successful church, but have forgotten what it is to be a loving church?' Then last week we spent some time in Thyatira where we heard the challenge to 'Hold onto what you have.' The Thyatiran Christians are letting their faith slip through their fingers as they do all they can to 'fit in' to the liberal, multicultural and multi-religious community in which they live. And, if you have used the questions for reflection during the week, we have been asking ourselves questions about how we can live faithfully today. How can we retain the truths of our faith in a world that places a special demand and burden on us as Christians to be tolerant and compromising in all circumstances.

Today we travel to Sardis. This is another town, or indeed a city, in the Roman province of Asia, now in modern day Turkey. Sardis was once a great city. It was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia and archaeology has uncovered a city that was clearly once wealthy, with a large temple to Artemis and the largest Jewish synagogue ever found from this period.

When John writes the words of Christ to this church the city has passed its hey-day though. It is now another regional Roman town, but is still most probably a wealthy and comfortable place to live. And as we try to think ourselves into the context of this ancient church, 'comfortable,' is probably a good word to use. Sardis is a comfortable middle to upper class place. Its economy is based on the wool industry and there is money around for most people not to have to struggle in their day to day lives.

If you were on holiday in Sardis and popped into the Church on a Sunday for worship or to look round, you would no doubt meet some nice people. You would

get a warm welcome, look at notice boards that told you about a great church social life, how to join the choir or the cleaning rota, the up-coming church fete and the inevitable coffee morning and bring and buy sale. It would all look great, but!

I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.

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The judgement is that far from being the living, vibrant, faithful church that they no doubt think they are, they are in fact close to death. Physically and outwardly they might look as if they are alive, but somehow inwardly they are failing and, if that failure continues, the prognosis is bad, very bad.

In my reading about Sardis this week I came across a description of the church there as being 'the perfect model of inoffensive Christianity.' 'The perfect model of inoffensive Christianity.' Or in other words, a place where nothing is real. A place where an unreality is constructed and really people play act a representation of faith while in their hearts things are very different. Everything is nice. Everyone is Oh so polite. There is a place for everything and everyone, and everything and everyone is in their place.

Maybe you could say that the Christians in Sardis are a bit like a piece of veneered chipboard furniture. It all looks great. But when you look closely you realise that it is all too perfect. There are none of the imperfections that real wood brings and none of the individuality or indeed beauty that those imperfections bring to the whole.

In Matthew 23 Jesus brings out a torrent of analogies in a conversation with the Pharisees. He is indignant about their hypocrisy! They give of their possessions but not of their hearts, he tells them. They force others to strain out a gnat when it comes to the keeping of the complex Jewish law, but they are so lax in their keeping of the law that they themselves swallow a camel! They are like cups and bowls that have been cleaned on the outside but inside are full of stinking, festering and rotting food. They are like whitewashed tombs, looking great on the outside but full of death on the inside.

Or in other words, it all looks good, but it is all only a very thin veneer. Their faith and commitment and love for God go no deeper than the clothes they wear and the words they recite. It is not a faith that is rooted in their hearts. I'm not so sure that this quite fits as a description of the church in Sardis but the idea is just the same. On the outside the Sardis Christians look as if it is all going on. As if they are a committed, lively and thriving church. But inside they are empty, hollow. They have no real heart of faith that their outer appearance is expressing.

The challenge that this letter offers us today though is a difficult one. It is to ask ourselves some pretty difficult and challenging questions. Questions that, just like the church in Sardis, it is important that we answer honestly and openly, Because for us, as for the Christians in Sardis, this is a matter of life or death. So the challenge is to ask ourselves: Is this in any way a description of us here in St Stephen's? It is to ask ourselves: are there things about our worship, our life as a church, our own individual lives as Christians, that have become routine and only, or maybe not even, skin deep? It is to ask ourselves: where is our faith rooted? Is it in our hearts or has it somehow become more shallow than that? It is to ask ourselves: are we the vibrant, living, faith-filled church that we think we are, or are we in some way hollow? The challenge is to ask ourselves: is Jesus challenging us to wake up in some ways. Do these words: 'you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead, wake up!' have relevance for us today?

Maybe a place from which to think about this is to think about what might be the signs of life that we would hope to see in a church. The signs of life that Jesus was looking for and hoping for in the Christians in Sardis. Well, all animals or organisms that are alive have two distinct potentials that are really the signs of life. The potential for growth and renewal and the potential for healing. The potential for growth and renewal and the potential for healing. The potential to grow and mature and to be constantly renewed throughout our lives as that process continues, and the potential for the healing of the wounds and injuries that are picked up as that process of growth and maturity continues. Growth and healing, and from the smallest amoeba, through insects to mammals of all sizes and to humankind, these two potentials being seen in action are what indicates the presence of life. They are the 'vital signs' of life.

And I think that these two potentials are a good measure of the spiritual life and health of us as a church and as individual Christians as well.

Are we a place of spiritual growth? Is St Stephen's a place where people grow? A place where people are led on a pathway of growth and maturity in their spiritual lives? Do you feel that you have grown in the past year or two? Do you feel that you have matured? Do you feel that you understand more of what it means to live a life of faith, or at least feel you are closer to asking the right questions? And then, do you feel that St Stephen's is a place of healing? A place where bruises and injuries can heal? A place where broken relationships can be mended? Where wounds are not left to fester but cleaned out and tended to so that the healing process can begin? Is St Stephen's a place where we see the vital signs of life? The vital signs of growth and healing?

Because all of these things are signs of a living church. A church that is not like the church in Sardis, dressed up on the outside but empty on the inside. But rather a church that has life at its heart, the life of Jesus Christ.

And where does this life come from? Well it is God's gift to us in the Holy Spirit. It is his living presence, shaping us, moulding us, changing us, purifying us, challenging us to not just be skin deep or veneer Christians, but to have growth and healing at our very heart, and in that to be fully alive.

The Holy Spirit is in many ways like our spiritual umbilical cord. He or she is our connection to God. He or she is the conduit through which life can flow from God to us, from his heart to our hearts. Life through which the vital signs of growth and healing can be seen in our lives, as a church together and as individual Christians.

The misapprehension that the Christians in Sardis seem to be under is that they appear to think that their own Christian lives and the life of the church are entirely the result of their action and effort. The church is what they make it. But that, as the letter says, is the road to death, the road to nothing. If we have truly invited the Holy Spirit into our lives and into the church though, if we have truly invited the Holy Spirit into the very heart of what we are as a church, St Stephen's will not be what we make it, but what God makes it. For it is only when through the Holy Spirit, God feeds us, that we can grow. It is only when, through the Holy Spirit, God touches us, that healing can be seen in our lives. It is only when through the Holy Spirit, God fills the empty space at our heart, that we become fully alive and open to all the startling and surprising and life-giving challenges and opportunities that God in Christ is offering each one of us. And it is only then, when they are inspired and directed by the Holy Spirit, that our deeds become complete in God's sight.

As with all the letters, the ending is a promise. And in this letter it is a promise to all who are alive, to all who have woken up and opened their hearts to the Holy Spirit and become fully alive:

They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. All who overcome will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out their names from the book of life, but will acknowledge their name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

Just go back and think about those vital signs once again. Growth and healing. Growth and healing. Is this what you see and experience here at St Stephen's? Are our vital signs healthy? Or are we failing in some way? Are we too comfortable? Are we in danger of becoming 'the perfect model of inoffensive Christianity?' Do we need to wake up? Do we need CPR? Do we need reviving? Do we need to wake up and throw off our own expectations and desires and vision for the church and invite the Holy Spirit amongst us to bring us the blessing of life once again. To fill the centre of what we are as a church so that the outer layer is not a thin veneer over a hollow heart, but rather a strong, shining and glorious representation of the life that God longs to plant within us. Life where growth and healing are seen in abundance and all people can find life in all of its fullness.

Let us pray:

Come Holy Spirit,
come with your life-giving, transforming presence.
Come wake us up!
Come fill us again.
Come transform our hearts and lives.
Come give us life in all of its fullness
And make us a people and a place of growth and healing.
Fill us afresh today as individuals and as your church,
that we may be found worthy to have our names written in the book of life,
and may join the saints dressed in white to stand before you and the angels of
heaven;
In Jesus name we pray. Amen