

Revelation 3:1-6 Letters to the churches

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Letters are pretty special these days.

I'm not talking about bills or pieces of direct marketing,
but letters.

You know,
the ones where someone sits down with a pen and paper
and writes something.

I get probably 30 emails a week.

Personal emails where someone has written to me
not spam.

But I rarely get a letter.

Wouldn't it be exciting to get a letter from Jesus?

How good would that be?

In our reading today we have just that.

Letters from Jesus to the churches.

They're not form letters,
like the Christmas letters

we sometimes send out to friends and relatives.

Jesus has a personal message for each one of these churches.

You'd really sit up and take notice if you got a letter from Jesus,
wouldn't you?

Well you have.

Even though we're not in Pergamum or Philadelphia, Smyrna or Sardis,
these letters are for us.

They're addressed to the church,
and we are the church,

and we share similarities with the individual churches
that Jesus originally addressed.

We're more like some than others,
but we can learn from them all.

We haven't got time today to look in detail

at each of Jesus' letters to the churches.
I'm just going to look at letter to Sardis.
But before I do that,
I want to think for a moment about the connection between these letters
and the rest of Revelation.
Jesus' letters to the churches deal with the day to day issues
that churches face:
standing firm in the face of persecution,
remaining pure and steering clear of the temptation of immorality,
not being swept along by the winds of false doctrine.
The rest of the book of Revelation
is about things that are happening in the heavenly realm.
Pictures of heaven and what is going on there.
Pictures of earth and a great battle being waged
between God and his angels and Satan and his followers.
What is the connection
between the everyday struggles of ordinary believers like you and me
to stay true to our Lord Jesus
and the cosmic struggles between light and darkness?
Even though at a first glance
the subject matter of these two chapters might seem very distant
from the beasts and dragons, the trumpets and seals,
the lamb and the lion
that we find in the rest of the book,
actually they are two sides of the same coin.
Those cosmic battles
of the beast and the dragon fighting against the lamb,
that we can't see,
where are they played out?
They are played out in the lives of ordinary believers.
And particularly they are played out in the churches.
Every time a church stands firm in its witness to Jesus
despite persecution,
the lamb and the lion have won a great victory
against the beast and the dragon.

Every time a church rejects false doctrine,
 and pledges their allegiance to the gospel of Jesus Christ,
 the beast and the dragon are in retreat.
 In the church we often feel like we are small and struggling.
 We feel that the decisions we make aren't particularly note worthy.
 Nothing much hangs on them.
 I know I sometimes feel that way.
 My friends that I grew up with are doing some impressive things now.
 One has negotiated M&A worth hundreds of millions.
 One is be running the intensive care department of a hospital.
 Being pastor of a local suburban church
 doesn't sound too impressive at the school reunion.
 Let me tell you the reality is far from that.
 If we are a faithful witness to Jesus in this town,
 then the angels in heaven are cheering,
 and the letter Jesus writes to this church
 will be like Smyrna or Philadelphia not Laodicea.

So let's get to the letters.
 Jesus' letters to the churches are individual letters.
 They aren't form letters.
 But they do have a common pattern.
 They start with something about Jesus.
 They pick up some aspect of the vision of Jesus that we looked at last
 week.
 It's not a randomly chosen part of the vision of Jesus.
 It's the part of the vision that applies most to that church.
 If the church has a problem with holiness like Thyatira,
 then Jesus opens his letter with,
 "These are the words of the Son of God
 whose feet are like burnished bronze."
 Burnished bronze represents Jesus' holiness.
 Next Jesus tells the church something good about what they are doing,
 if there is something good to say..
 Then Jesus tells the church some aspect of their life together

that doesn't please him,
 if there is a word of rebuke they need to hear.
 Then Jesus tells them something they should do.
 It's flows out of what Jesus has told them about their situation.
 If he's told them something that doesn't please him,
 the action he want from them will be to repent.
 And finally he makes a promise to them.
 If they do what Jesus asks them to do,
 then this is what Jesus will do for them.
 The promise is focused around eternal life,
 but the descriptions of eternal life
 vary according to the church's situation.

That's the general form of Jesus' letters to the churches.
 Jesus. Good. Bad. Action. Promise.
 Something about Jesus.
 Something good the church is doing.
 Something bad the church needs to repent of.
 Something Jesus wants the church to do.
 And a promise of eternal life

OK we are just going to look at one of the letters in detail today.
 It's the letter to the church in Sardis.
 Not because I think Hastings is most like Sardis.
 I hope not,
 because Sardis was the church in Revelation most in need of rebuke.
 But if I explained the details of a bunch of churches,
 we wouldn't have any time to think about how it applies to ourselves.
 Last time I preached from Revelation, thirteen years ago,
 I tried to cover three churches in one sermon.
 There were lots of interesting details to explain.
 But little time for application.
 So this time I've just randomly chosen just one.
 "These are the words of him
 who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars."

It's a picture of Jesus
from the vision we looked at last week in chapter 1.
But why not say,
"These are the words of him
whose voice is like the sound of rushing water"?
Or "These are the words of him
who has a golden sash around his chest"?
It's because the seven spirits of God and the seven stars
are particularly important for Sardis.
The seven spirits of God is Revelation language for the Holy Spirit.
And the seven stars are the angels.
The church in Sardis is nearly dead.
Don't get me wrong,
it's not that they were dying out.
It's not that people were leaving the church.
There was lots of action.
The church had a reputation for being alive.
But spiritually it was dead.
Lots of sound and action,
but no substance.
What did the church in Sardis need?
It needed the empowerment of God's Holy Spirit.
You can have all the activities, all the programs you like.
You can give all the appearance to the community of being a church
that is alive.
You can even delude other Christians that you are spiritually alive.
But without the empowering of God's Spirit,
you are not alive.

When I was 15,
I started going to a youth group
that gave all the appearances of being alive.
The church my parents were going to had no young people my age.
I had been on a Scripture Union camp,
rafting down the Thompson River.

And some of the teenagers on the camp
went to a youth group at Christ Church Ormond.
The Anglican church on the corner of North Rd and Wheatley Rd.
I made a decision on that camp
that there was no reason
that I couldn't ride my bike to be part of that youth group.
So I did.

I stopped going to church with my family
and rode maybe 8 km and past maybe 20 churches
to be part of this youth group.

And let me tell you.

The youth group was alive.

We did all manner of great activities,
the kids were fun to be around.

Couple that with a group of teenagers of both genders –
(remember I went to an all boys school)

I had a ball.

But that youth group was spiritually dead.

Or at least spiritually on life support.

At its peak there were 30 kids in that youth group.

When the youth leader left that job

and the fun activities dried up,

there were 4 of us left in the church.

Four teenagers committed to Jesus.

26 teenagers who were there for the good times.

But it had a reputation for being a happening place.

You can imagine that an Anglican Church

with 30 kids in the youth group,

people in other churches round about

would have looked on quite enviously.

Well it doesn't take much spiritual vision to detect a problem
after the kids have all disappeared.

30 years later, as far as I know,

of the four of us who were still there when the games stopped
two have gone to be with Jesus and two still follow Jesus.

But could you have seen a problem when the group was full
and everything was booming?

The problem was visible for those with eyes to see.

The bus was full when the youth group went on an activity together.

But when the youth leaders organised a Bible Study,
there were only four people who turned up.

Guess which four.

Well hopefully that gives you the picture of what it looks like
to have a reputation for being alive but actually being dead.

But it's a bit off at arm's length.

What would it look like for us at Hastings?

One of the ways

your church can get a reputation for being alive in our world,
is to be busy with new projects.

We have three of them going at the moment.

We've got our Op Shop rebuild, our kitchen renovation
and our video upgrade.

These could give an appearance of spiritual vitality.

You can imagine a new person to Hastings asking around.

"I'm looking for a church.

Which ones are alive?"

And the answer might come,

"Well the Anglicans have just built themselves
a new Kitchen and an Op Shop.

They stream their services on Zoom and it looks pretty professional.

They must be alive."

But of course that wouldn't be a good measure of spiritual vitality.

How many people turn up to the prayer meeting on Sundays at 5pm?

How many people are in home groups?

Are the people actually living out the love of Jesus in their lives?

Is the bible being preached faithfully in our services?

Those are the kind of questions that decide whether a church is alive

Now I'm confident that Jesus wouldn't describe our church as with a reputation of being alive but actually dead. But that's not to say that we shouldn't take the warning seriously.

In the history of the Anglican Church in Melbourne, there have been numerous churches that have been spiritually alive, and moved to being spiritually dead.

St Matthew's in Prahran where I did my curacy was the largest church in Melbourne in the 1890s.

They would have a thousand people in church on a Sunday.

The Sunday School ministry was huge.

There were all kinds of gospel endeavours.

But the time I started my curacy there in 2002, there were 30 people meeting on a Sunday.

The church was pretty dead.

We needed to take the words of verse 2 to heart.

"Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die."

In any church that moves from thriving to nearly dead, there is a period of time

when people remember the glory days of the past,

and their perception is that 'we are still going great guns'.

We need to always assess where we are at now.

Spiritual decline starts long before the numbers start dropping off.

We need to make sure that real spiritual vitality is always at the forefront of our minds.

Jesus sees the same problem in the church at Sardis.

His message to them –

“Wake up!

Remember!

Repent!”

Yet like in the youth group of my teenage years,

there were some in the church in Sardis who were spiritually alive.

Jesus has a message of encouragement for them.

Rev 3:4-5 “They will walk with me,
dressed in white,
for they are worthy.

The 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.”

What does it mean to be dressed in white?

Well the short answer is
that it's a picture of being with Jesus in eternal life.

But there are lots of pictures of eternal life in the letters to the churches:
in Philadelphia, they are pillars in the temple of God;
in Pergamum, they are eating hidden manna.

Why in Sardis are they dressed in white?

The answer is in the contrast with the members of their congregation
whose faith was found to be counterfeit.

They are described as having soiled their clothes.

Dirty clothes is a metaphor for moral compromise.

White clothes is a metaphor for purity and holiness.

Moral compromise kills the church.

People often defend moral compromise
as being broad minded and tolerant.

But Jesus won't send the seven spirits from before the throne of God
to make a church spiritually alive if it is morally compromised.

And without the enlivening Holy Spirit the church is dead.

But even within a morally compromised church,
there are some members
who choose to take the costly decision of serving God in holiness.
And it is a costly decision.

People will label them as narrow minded and doctrinaire.

If they work for the church,
then they will be denied professional opportunities.

But at the end of the day,
they will walk with Jesus dressed in white.

This is the question of our generation in the Anglican Church.
 Not so much for Holy Trinity Hastings,
 though we are not immune to the big questions of our time.
 But across Australia and the Western World the big question for us is,
 "Will we compromise with the spirit of the age?"
 These questions were up for discussion
 at the General Synod of Australia
 that was scheduled to meet last month.
 Now they didn't meet because of the coronavirus,
 but don't think for a moment that the questions have gone away.
 They have just been deferred.

The Anglican Church in Australia is not like Sardis.
 Here there are not just a few people escaping
 from a totally compromised organisation.
 In our case, those who remember what they have received and heard
 and hold it fast are in the majority.
 But just across the ditch in New Zealand, the opposite is the case.
 There only a few congregations, 12 in all,
 who have not soiled their clothes,
 who will walk with Jesus dressed in white.
 Their names will not be blotted out from the book of life.
 Jesus will acknowledge them before the Father.

As we finish up,
 I'm just going to fit the church in Sardis to the pattern of the letters.
 That way if you choose to read through the other letters,
 you will be able to do that for them too.
 Here's the pattern again.
 Jesus, good, bad, action, promise.
 Jesus: the one who gives the Holy Spirit to make his church alive.
 Good: nothing for Sardis, it's the only church
 Jesus doesn't point out something he appreciates about them.
 Bad: they are spiritually dead due to moral compromise.
 Action: they need to wake up, remember and repent.

Promise: those who keep themselves morally undefiled
will walk with Jesus in white clothes,
and he will acknowledge their name before the Father.

Let's pray that we might not only have a reputation for being alive,
but might have real spiritual vitality.