Letters to the Churches - Revelation 2-3

Series: The Lamb Wins - Revelation
Date: 11 October 2026, 18th Sunday after Trinity
Location: St George's Battery Point
Texts: Revelation 2-3

What makes it hard to keep going as a Christian? What are the spiritual challenges that you face? Feeling that you're the only one of your friends or family who is a Christian. Feeling like you need to keep your head down, and stay silent about your faith. Pressure to go along with the sexual ethics of our culture, or not be entirely straight with your taxes or work finance. Maybe it's wrestling with a habitual sin or battling mental illness.
You might not be a Christian, you're here checking this whole Christianity thing out. Even if you haven't yet given your allegiance to Jesus as your king, you still face spiritual difficulties. But my guess is that, whether you're a Christian or not, these are not at the top of your list: Balaam. Jezebel. The synagogue of Satan.

We're continuing our series in Revelation, and today we're looking at chapters 2 and 3 and the letters to the 7 churches. Revelation is all about how Jesus is on the throne of history, and even though it can look like evil is winning, Jesus will bring in his eternal kingdom. We saw last week that Revelation uses symbolic language to give a heavenly perspective on earthly realities. And that it's a letter to 7 churches in western Turkey in the late 1st century AD. We looked at John's first vision, of Jesus in all his glory standing among the churches. In these chapters Jesus gives a letter to each of these 7 churches. These letters give us a window into the challenges each of them were facing but they also have a message for us as the church and as individuals today.

Before we dive in, it's worth noticing the **structure** of each letter. I'm sure many of you have used a SWOT analysis in your work. SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. It can be a helpful tool to see how your team or organisation is going. Well Jesus does something similar for each of the 7 churches. But he doesn't start with Strengths. He starts with himself. Each letter begins with a statement of who Jesus is, taken from that vision in chapter 1. Then Jesus says, "I know" something about the individual church, usually a Strength. Then he highlights a Weakness or Threat. He finishes each letter with an Invitation and a Promise that links to his identity and the future he will bring in.
So, for example, let's have a look at the first letter to the church in Ephesus.

> 1 These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands

That's taken straight from John's vision in chapter 1.
Then here's where the church in Ephesus is strong:

> 2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked people, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false.

But, they've got some weaknesses as well, verse 4:

> Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken the love you had at first. 5 Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place.

Finally the invitation and the promise. The invitation is always the same: "**Whoever has ears**, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches." So pay attention to the letter. The Holy Spirit is speaking to you! And the promise is always the same, "**To the one who is victorious**". But each letter gives a different piece of the picture of the future that Jesus will bring when he returns. In this case, "I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God."[1] That's a reference back to the tree of life in the garden of Eden which gives eternal life to all who eat from it. It's a picture of forgiveness and the restoration of humanity to eternal fellowship with God. But remember Revelation loves symbolic language, and it draws on the whole Bible. So the lampstand in the temple was designed to look like the tree of life, and from Zechariah we saw this is lit by the Holy Spirit, and now Jesus is the one who walks among the lampstands which are the churches. So that image is of the church being given eternal life by the Holy Spirit in the new creation.

All these pictures come together in the final two chapters of Revelation. The one who is victorious is the one who perseveres and holds on to Jesus through life to their death. In chapter 21.7 we read, "Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children."

Ok, so we've got the structure of each letter. Jesus commends the churches for their perseverance and patient endurance; For their faithfulness in the face of persecution; For their doctrinal and moral purity; For their love, faith and service. I wonder which of these things Jesus would commend us for?

[1] Revelation 2.7

Let's look at the challenges the churches face, so of which are similar to us, some to churches in other parts of the world, and then how who Jesus is and what he promises will help us persevere to the end.

Challenges

Jesus commends the church in **Ephesus** for not putting up with wickedness and false teaching. But, he says, "You have forsaken the love you had at first." Now this may have been that the church was lacking in love. That in their concern for moral and theological purity they had lost the grace and kindness of the Spirit. They can become like the Pharisees - self righteous, proud, always making you feel guilty. Some commentators take a different reading. In Zechariah 4 the lampstand symbolised Israel as a witness. From Isaiah, Israel was to be a light to the nations. And in Revelation 11 the prophetic witness of the church is pictured as a lampstand. It's the Spirit that gives fire to the lampstand to shine, and on this reading, the Ephesians forsaking their first love is a lack of dependence on the Spirit for their public witness to Christ.

Our calling as St George's is to be the Light on the Hill. Without sound doctrine and holy lives we won't shine Christ's light. But likewise we won't shine Christ's light if we're not marked by love and if we don't depend upon the power of the Spirit for all we do.

Unlike the church in Ephesus, the challenge for the church in **Smyrna** was external not internal. They were being slandered by "those who say they are Jews and are not but are a synagogue of Satan" and persecuted, even to the point of death. What's going on here?

In the first century everyone in the Roman empire had to sacrifice to the emperor as a god. The one exception was for the Jews. The Romans recognised the antiquity of their ancestral monotheism and allowed them to simply pray for the emperor. The early Church was seen as a Jewish sect and so came under this exemption. But as the Church grew it was more and more seen as not Jewish, but new and suspect. And Jews were often keen to distance themselves from the church, and even encouraged Romans and other nations to oppress the church. That's the situation here. The phrase "those who say they are Jews and are not" indicates how John sees that the Church is now the true Israel and inheritor of God's promises, while unbelieving Jews are "not Jews". Satan means accuser. And so in slandering the church they have become "a synagogue of Satan". Behind their accusations and the severe persecution of local authorities John sees a spiritual opposition - the devil.

This is a situation quite removed from peaceful Tassie. But Christians in many countries around the world face intense persecution and even death from government and religious authorities. A decade ago Islamic state were beheading Christians if they refused to convert to Islam. Christians face persecution in Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist countries and from regimes like that in North Korea.

And what does Jesus say? "I am the First and the Last, who died and came to life again." "The one who is victorious will not be hurt by the second death."[2] They may die, but Jesus will give them the victor's crown of eternal life.[3]

The Christians in **Pergamum** faced similar violent persecution as those in Smyrna. Jesus says, "I know where you live, where Satan has his throne." Strong stuff! Pergamum was gifted to the Roman people in 133BC, and it was the centre of the imperial cult in Asia minor. But here the challenge Jesus says they face is compromising with the surrounding culture. The reference is to Balaam from Numbers 22. Verse 14:

> There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.

Balaam became a catchword in the Bible for false teachers who for financial gain sought to influence God's people to ungodly practices. It's likely here that John has in mind the idolatry and sexual immorality that went together in the feasts of the imperial cult and other local deities. Everyone in society was expected to participate and to refuse would result in economic and social exclusion. Some in the church in Pergamum were giving in to that pressure.

Here Jesus has a warning for the church. "Repent! Otherwise I will soon come against you and fight against you with the sword of my mouth." It's a symbol of Christ's role as judge. And we're reminded of Hebrews 4 which says "the word of God is sharper than a double edged sword, … it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart."[4] On the other hand there is Jesus' promise to those who don't compromise. " I will give some of the hidden manna."[5] This is a reference to his own life as the true bread of heaven that gives eternal life.[6] It's an invitation to rely on God and his provision of daily bread, rather than the food of idolatry. The white stone commentators suggest is a stone of acquittal. And the "new name", is a

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[2] Revelation 2.8,11
[3] 2.10
[4] Hebrews 4.12
[5] Revelation 2.17
[6] John 6.25-58

reference to Isaiah 62 where Jerusalem is promised a new name. This is fulfilled in Christ and given to those who enter the new Jerusalem, where they will "see God's face and his name will be upon their foreheads."[7]

The challenge for **Thyatira** is the same as for Pergamum. But here it's not just some people in the church who follow false teaching, it's the church leadership.

> You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols.[8]

Like Balaam, Jezebel is one of the Bible's iconic villains. She was the wife of king Ahab who championed the worship of Asherah and Baal and enticed Ahab to murder Naboth and steal his vineyard. The emphasis here is not so much on sexual immorality, but this as part of participating in idolatry. It's about spiritual adultery.

Now, I'm always hesitant to say things like this, but it is very interesting to me that in our own time, in the Anglican church globally, leaders who have given up on the divinity of Christ, Jesus' death atoning for sin, and his bodily resurrection as triumphing over death also reject the Bible's sexual ethics. It's hard to see how they are any different from the surrounding culture. And I'm terrified that the warning Jesus gives to the church in Thyatira might be visited upon such leaders today.

It is also interesting how Jesus ends this letter.

> To the one who is victorious and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations – [27] that one "will rule them with an iron sceptre and will dash them to pieces like pottery" – just as I have received authority from my Father.[9]

That's a quote from Psalm 2. This is an extraordinary promise: That those who don't compromise will share in Jesus' authority as the Messiah. The question the prophet Elijah had for Jezebel's priests and the people of Israel was "How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him."[10] When it comes to our worship and our sexual ethics, it is the same question: who will be our authority? The surrounding culture, or the Lord who searches our hearts and promises we will share in his kingdom?

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[7] Revelation 22.4
[8] Revelation 2.20
[9] Revelation 2.26-27
[10] 1 Kings 18.21

The challenge for the church in **Sardis** was spiritual slumber. "You have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up!" This letter plays on the idea of a "name", as both an identity and character. They might carry the name of Christian, but are they actually living for him? Do their lives look different from their neighbours, or are they "soiled". This is always a challenge for the church. It's easy to be a sleepy Christian who comes every Sunday but who is not shining for Jesus. Maybe this is a word for those who tick "Anglican" on the census, but for whom the name makes no difference in their lives. But for those who do own the name of Christ and who seek to live for him, Jesus says, you'll be dressed in white, "I'll never blot your name out from the book of life, but will acknowledge your name before my Father and his angels." There can be no greater honour or reputation.

The Christians in **Philadelphia**, like those in Smyrna were facing opposition from the local Jewish population. They were weak and small. To this Jesus says, "I hold the key of David", what I open, no one can shut and what I shut, no one can open."[11] The key of David is the key to the kingdom of God. In Colossians Paul prays for the door to be opened for the Gospel message.[12] Here the door that Jesus opens is for the synagogue of Satan to hear and turn to Christ, and recognise that the Church is in fact the true Israel, Jesus' beloved. Jesus' promise is that to those who are victorious, "I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. I will write on them the name of my God, and the name of the new Jerusalem".[13] The key to the kingdom has opened the door of the temple, and now his people who bear his name dwell in his presence forever.

In meditating on this letter, I couldn't help but think of the church in today's nation of Israel. It's small and mainly Arabs and Palestinians. They face all kinds of hardship from the Jewish state and from Jewish settlers. What a prayer, that the one who holds the key of David might open doors in that land for its peoples to come to the Prince of Peace.

The challenge for the church **Laodicea** was their wealth. This letter has the most famous sayings from the book.

> I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! **16** So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth.[14]

[11] Revelation 3.7
[12] Colossians 4.3. Cf. Ephesians 6.19-20, Acts 14.27
[13] Revelation 3.12-13
[14] Revelation 3.15-16

Laodicea had two neighbours: Heirapolis which was known for its hot springs, and Colossae which had cold springs. Laodicea by contrast had to pipe its water in, so that by the time it arrived it was lukewarm, and filthy, unfit for drinking. And this is the point. Not the temperature, but the freshness and health. Jesus says the spiritual condition of the Laodiceans was not better than their water. Their wealth had blinded them to their spiritual poverty.

> You say, "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing." But you do not realise that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked.[15]

In Deuteronomy Moses warns that wealth feeds spiritual pride, making you think you're self sufficient, so you forget God who gives you all you have.[16] Jesus' call to the Laodiceans is to return to him, the true treasure, the one who can clothe their spiritual nakedness with the robe of his righteousness, and who can open their blind eyes.

It's a bracing word, and one we in wealthy Battery Point need to hear. But listen to the wonderful words Jesus says next:

> Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. **20** Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me.

This is Jesus' invitation to all of us, whatever our spiritual state. Like the Laodiceans we might look great on the outside, but on the inside we're in a filthy state. Like the Philadelphians we may be small and weak. We might have compromised and gone along with Balaam or Jezebel for money or pleasure. We might be sleepy and almost dead like the Sardians, or self righteous and lacking love like the Ephesians. Whoever we are, whatever is going on in our lives, this is Jesus' invitation. Turn to him. He stands at the door of our hearts. He calls our name. He offers a place with him on his throne! He is knocking, longing to come into our lives. If we open the door, he promises he will come in and eat with us. He will be with us and we with him, today and for eternity.

Will you hear his voice? Will you open the door and welcome him into your heart? Will you keep following him?

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[15] Revelation 3.17
[16] Deuteronomy 8.11-18