

The Church in Sardis

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[0 : 00] So, we come to the church in Sardis, and I want to, if I may, just spend a little time introducing some of the themes that I hope you will see will be picked up when we actually come to the text.

I want to start by talking about that, and there is quite a lot of data from the world of psychology on this, and that is the temptation of human beings to kind of talk things up a little bit.

As somebody who has stood at the back of churches, as people filed out one by one, and I would say, good morning, thank you for coming, how are you?

I don't think anybody ever didn't say, I'm fine. I knew that some of them were deeply bereaved, some of them were suffering from mental health issues, some of them were struggling in marriages, and yet their default was to say, I'm fine.

I did discover, although I was told to ask the question in this way was slightly anal, if you say to people, on a scale of one to ten, where would you put your life at this time?

[1 : 31] Ten being, it's the most amazing time in my life, I love it. One being, I need to call Samaritans. People will then generally think about it, and they'll probably say six, seven, maybe give a little more truth to it.

Or again, one of the things I've noticed is, it's almost like when people go on holiday, and the weather's terrible, they kind of don't like to admit it.

They come home and you say, oh, you know, I'm so sorry, you know, your holiday must have been awful, you know, the weather was terrible, and you had the kids with you, and you know, I know from my own experience that when it pours with rain, and you've got your children with you, it's more expensive, you've got to find stuff to do.

People would say, oh no, we had sun, you know, it's fine, thank you very much for asking. We talk things up, and I want you to hold that thought, if you can, as we come to the text in a few moments to the church in Sardis.

So the second thing I want to say by way of introducing this is another aspect of our modern culture, and that is what I call when image trumps substance.

[2 : 53] What I mean by that is, and social media has truly turbocharged this, that it's made life kind of performative.

And you can go on websites and you will see people who are basically, I mean, there's so many video clips of people just dancing in front of the camera, not very good dancing often, but dancing, because that's what they do.

Or if you click on beauty products, you will find thousands and thousands and thousands, I mean, obviously I don't, but you will find thousands and thousands and thousands of offers made by young people, very often whose image has been airbrushed.

What you're looking at is not the real person. You are looking at the image that they want to project. And I don't think God is that concerned with image.

Remember, in the Old Testament, he said that man looks at the outward appearance, God looks at the heart. I don't know, you know, whether you look in the mirror every morning and say, you know, thank God, Lord, that you made me so beautiful.

[4 : 16] I feel sure you may not. But look, what God's interested in, and this is hard in our culture, is the cultivation of what we might call inner beauty.

Who are you? What are you like? And at the end of the day, no amount of cosmetic surgery, no amount of makeup, no amount of these things can hide what you are inside.

Was it John Lennon who wrote that song and his strapline was, one thing you can't hide is when you're bitter. Is it bitter? Is it bitter?

Inside. Something like that. Third thing is, one of the things that I think can be true of us all is that we can so quickly become complacent.

You know, I've said many times, when I say from this pulpit, I mean in this church, I've said many, many times that there are a lot of things that we have in our culture, which approximately 60% of the world does not have.

[5 : 48] Most of us, maybe not all of us, can put food on the table in this country. Most of us sleep on a bed, unless we've got a bad back. Most of us have got running water.

Most of us have got sanitation plugged into our homes. There are billions of people worldwide who just don't know things like that.

And I mean, I'm not asking you to shout out, but I mean, I wonder deep down if ever we take things like that for granted. A kind of hallmark of complacency.

And then finally, by way of introduction, I think another human trait is our capacity to be deluded.

That is to imagine things about ourselves that nobody else imagines. And this is not an important, actually, in churches where we talk about spiritual gifts, quite rightly.

[7 : 02] And we talk about how the Spirit gives those gifts to his people in order that the church can be the church, and in order that the church can serve the world and glorify God.

But how do I find out what my gift is? What I've discovered is, as somebody used to be in local church ministry, there are a number of people who stalk this planet, who imagine that their primary gift is something that nobody else who stalks the planet thinks is their primary gift.

I used to stand next to, for a little while when I was in a local church ministry, in the evening we had the remnants of a choir.

In fact, one person. Who I think just liked wearing robes and used to stand next to me. And have you heard that thing that, you know, somebody said, if you gave a monkey a typewriter, eventually, randomly, just by banging the keys, it would type a word.

Well, on that same principle, you might think that somebody who's in a choir might hit a note that was right occasionally, and we're talking about Cyril.

[8 : 20] And when I said to Cyril, forgive me for asking, you know, but why are you in the choir? He said, what do you mean? I said, well, A, there's only one of you, so the idea of leading the congregation in singing is, you know, a bit of a long shot, frankly.

I said, but also, you can't sing in tune. Oh, yes, Rector, he said, I know that. So I'm like, really? He said, yeah. He said, I only joined the choir because I was so sorry for Mr. Lawrence, your predecessor, that he was on his own at the front of the church.

I thought, I'll go and stand there and join him. I won't tell you the long story now, but we discovered that Cyril's primary gift was working with his hands.

And he became a completely different person when he was released to be the odd job person around our church. Sadly, I had to get rid of the choir altogether before I could get him out of his robes.

When I say get rid of the choir altogether, I mean, actually, I asked Cyril not to stand at the front in robes when our music group were holding forth. We can have illusions about ourselves that become quite dangerous when they become delusions.

[9 : 44] And I would imagine that most human beings, at some point, exercise a level of delusion in their lives. And here's a church where I think all these human characteristics are at work.

Risen Christ said, these are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. We'll come back to that. I know your deeds. You have a reputation of being alive.

But you are dead. As you well know, you know, I used to function as a bishop.

And so I went round to loads and loads of different churches. Sat in the house of bishops, you know, the seat of decision making amongst the bishops who were making decisions to take to the general synod of the Church of England.

I have rarely been in a group that felt the need to talk up what really wasn't very good. And that is the statistics that go with the Church of England.

[11 : 03] I lamented the day that the Church of England appointed PR people who earn a lot of money by trying to create an image for the Church, which actually isn't anything to do with the Church in reality.

I've been part of a conspiracy in the Church called complacency.

I look back over my ministry. I think to myself, did I speak up enough? Did I try and speak prophetically and biblically in the kind of corridors of power of the Church of England? Or were there more things that were important to me than that? Like my reputation? And when illusion becomes delusion, I cannot think that the risen Christ could have said anything more condemning of that Church than your reputation is that you're alive.

But I know. He who knows everything, I know you are dead. And I ask myself the question, I wonder if the risen Christ were, you know, dictating letters today.

[12:35] How many churches would fall victim to the same accusation? And I just thought, I don't know why I thought this, but I thought that, I'd just like to highlight, I mean, this is not, you know, I haven't been up to Mount Sinai and come down with these ideas.

But I, you know, my experience is having worked in a local church and then having supervision over 260 of them. These are the things that I've noticed are in a church where I think the church could be described as alive.

So I just want to take your time, if I may, just for a few minutes to introduce to you the characteristics of a healthy church.

The first thing, godly leadership. Let me say that again, godly leadership. Men and women who understand what it is to be a minister of God, understand what it is to be the least of God's servants, not somebody who is owed a living by their congregation.

Godly leaders understand that in their own strength, they can do nothing of eternal value and therefore constantly throw themselves before God, seeking His will, seeking His strength, and seeking, seeking the knowledge that's needed to lead a local church.

[14:24] Kind of, you know, just an aside really, but one of the things that used to puzzle me was that I'd have clergy coming to me saying, you know, they were on the edge of burnout and I would say, well, take me through your week and take me through your week and I'd think, why are they saying this?

You know, they've either got very low capacity or there's something that doesn't add up here. What I learned was, if you're coming to see the bishop, people are frightened to talk about reality in their own lives because they fear, I'm going to get a black pen out and make a mark in their personnel file saying, you know, clueless, something like that.

And actually, the acceptable way to talk about their pain was to talk about physical tiredness. Most of you are church members and I want to tell you what I think is the real drag on a lot of clergy, which they can't talk about because they think it might make them look bad.

And it's this. Church leadership is about the oversight of a rather complicated set of interpersonal relationships whose balance is very easily imbalanced and conflict and trouble begin.

Godly leadership understands this and seeks to build trust with the people to whom he or she has been called to minister.

[16:09] The second thing, highly contentious in my own church, but not so contentious for many of you, biblical integrity. That is, what does this church teach?

my view is, there is only one piece of guidance we have if we want to build faith in the church. It comes in Romans chapter 10 and the great apostle tells us that faith comes through hearing and hearing through the word of Christ.

Jesus himself told us in that parable of the two house builders, a wise man is like a man who hears my words and puts them into practice.

So if you want to build some rock into your life and if you're a church leader and you want to build some rock into the life of the church that you have responsibility for, here's my advice, preach the word of God in season and out of season.

use it to teach, train, rebuke, whatever but don't let the Bible be put on the substitutes bench of your church life.

[17:39] Thirdly, I think in a healthy church people are faithful in worship and in prayer. it would be a strange church wouldn't it who decided they would stop worshipping God together.

Though there seem to be a number of churches around today which have almost come to that conclusion. And faithful in prayer, I am, I love getting together with people in our church to pray. And we have some set prayer meetings and it's really good to turn up at them. I was in a church which had a large membership and our parish prayer meeting on a good evening might muster 40 people.

It's a weekly meeting, might muster 40 people. And once I got a guy called Wallace Ben to come and do a weekend away for the church on prayer it was excellent.

And for about for a few weeks we had almost 200 people at the prayer meeting. After about a month I had gone down to 60 and after two months we were back to 30.

[19 : 10] Same. Mostly older ladies. Many of them ex-missionaries or ex-teachers. And I've never understood why is it?

I'm not saying you know you've got to come to a church meeting to be faithful in prayer. But I do think there is something that goes on when we pray together. I really do believe that.

Fourthly a healthy church empowers people. It seeks to build discipleship. Ministry is not about controlling people. It's setting them free.

Fifth thing is it helps if your church has a vision. There's a lot of stuff talked about that out there in the marketplace. place. And I want to say that you once you've got your mission statement or your vision statement put together that you know a lot of churches behave like that's the end.

I remember the Roman Catholic Archbishop of Leeds told a story of he had a dream one night and in his dream he dreamt that outside his church there would be a banner and it said Jesus is Lord on the banner and he woke up very enthused and then he went to bed a few days later and he had a total nightmare and he saw that outside all the Roman Catholic churches in the Archdiocese of Leeds there was a sign and it said on the banner we've always done it this way.

[20 : 58] Again a vision isn't the end it's the beginning and I would suggest that alongside a vision what a local church needs is a plan and then it needs to work out how we're going to effect this plan and most importantly and I rarely met a church that did this you then need to apply some metrics to say this is what we said this is what we envision this is what we said we would do how do we know if we're achieving it?

How can we measure that? Sixthly by the way these are in no order of importance so probably godly leadership and faithful worship and prayer which should be an R somewhere near the top.

A healthy church is concerned for the lost. lost. You know why use that language? Well in Luke 15 you get this incredible section of teaching that Jesus gave.

First of all there's the lost coin sorry the lost sheep and then the lost coin and then the prodigal of the prodigal the parable of the prodigal son lost son and then you get the parable there's a parable about a lost job and Jesus seems to or at least Luke is arranging his material to get across the message that lost people matter to God and therefore they should matter to his people.

I you know this I really liked church fellowship you know I like the people in the church I was minister of you know and I liked hanging out well hanging out with most of them but the danger of that is your whole relationship span can get locked into church life.

[23 : 04] I remember preaching a sermon on evangelism and telling people you know talk to your friends about Christ and a lot of people came to me and said well we don't have any friends who are not in the church.

I remember a Salvation Army minister said that to James Kennedy the founder of Evangelism Explosion amazing man came to our fraternity in Slough goodness knows how that happened and so we're there and the Salvation Army guy said well you know how you know how do we make contact with unbelievers you know James Kennedy said to him he said why don't you go down to the nudist beach.

I think it was a joke. Healthy church is concerned to loss and then finally imaginatively engages the local community.

I say imaginatively there because I think that one of the things we learn from the parable of the good Samaritan is that the Samaritan didn't just patch up this guy and leave him he took him to an inn and then paid for him to get some accommodation there while he recovered.

I would say that's imagination. So here's a dead church in Sardis. Here's my view of what a church that is alive might look like.

[24 : 35] So I want to move to the text now to Sardis. Sardis today is the city of Izmir.

If you go to Turkey on your holidays the likelihood is you'll fly into the airport at Izmir. It's in Turkey and today it's a kind of modern bustling city.

There's a big port there and there is a little bit of the ancient town of Sardis left but mostly it's been overtaken by modern building.

The role of Izmir in antiquity and I'm talking about maybe from 400 AD onwards it kind of took on the role that Ephesus had had.

If you've been to Ephesus you know it's about three miles inland from the sea but you can go and stand on the jetty which used to be where the sea was. It's silted up and so it's now inland.

[25 : 38] Izmir in a way has taken over the role of Ephesus in modern Turkey. It's a big port and lots and lots of goods are exported through there.

You'll be aware that Turkey today is a massive manufacturing nation and quite a lot of our stuff that we have in our shops comes to us from Turkey.

In Izmir there was a massive temple right on the headland and I have read that it was twice the size of the Parthenon in Greece and if you've been there you realise we're talking about a very big building.

The old town of Sardis was built on a headland so three sides were impregnable.

And then there was just a very thin isthmus which was very easy to defend and because of that, hold this thought, because of that they considered it impregnable.

[26 : 48] And though it was impregnable it was twice fatally invaded. On it was this temple of Artemis Cybele.

This is not the same as the Roman and Greek god of Artemis. This is a local Anatolian god called Artemis Cybele. Only really commemorated in Sardis.

And Sardis has a similarity with, I was trying to think of a modern day city which went the way of, and I came up in my mind with Detroit in North America which at one time was an extremely affluent place that earned a lot because the car industry of the United States of America America was largely based there.

And as more Americans bought more Japanese cars and the market dipped, etc, etc, Detroit, you can buy it now, well I don't know now, but five years ago you could buy a whole street in Detroit for \$120,000.

I don't think there'd be many places in America where you would achieve that. And in 600, a king called Croesus had governance of the city of Sardis.

[28 : 15] And he was a very, very wealthy man. And things were good. It was profitable. They were known for their, they were good at dye stuffs and they dyed a lot of cloth in different colours.

Purple was a very popular colour. I don't know if I told you this last time when we were talking about Thyatira, but purple was popular because it was the Roman regal colour.

It's the colour of choice for people who are in governance in. If you wore purple, you were somebody. Which incidentally, hard to believe, is why bishops traditionally wore purple. they opted for the Roman Catholic model of episcopacy and wore purple. That is, you know, to show people, at least it would have been in Roman times, to show people that you were somebody. The city was pretty well defunct and Croesus was defeated by Persians. And from then the city went from bad to worse.

[29 : 28] until the Romans arrived. And in AD 17, the Emperor Tiberius deployed a huge force of builders to rebuild the whole city. And it was rebuilt.

So the risen Christ arrives there. And he's introduced to us again as him who holds the seven spirits.

These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. Interestingly, in the Greek text, there is no conjunction there.

It just says how the seven spirits of God, the seven stars, implying that they're the same things. The only English version of the Bible, I think, that translates the Greek like that is the New English Bible. Clearly, the seven spirits, as we know from our early study, refers to the Holy Spirit to the churches in his fullness.

[30 : 34] Sorry, the Holy Spirit to the churches in his fullness. This is Jesus filled with the Holy Spirit addressing the churches.

And the seven stars are mostly thought to be the seven churches and or their leaders. Jesus. So, the gravity of the accusation.

I know your works. You remember in Ephesus, the risen Christ started his message with exactly the same words. But in this case, they are evidence of disapproval rather than evidence of approval.

There is the evidence of their delusion. I know your deeds, you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. And of the works that they sought to do, in verse 2 we read that the risen Christ says,

he's not found their deeds complete in the sight of God.

the gravity of the message means that Jesus uses quite interventionist language. In verse 2, he tells them to wake up.

[31 : 57] He tells them to strengthen what remains. John Angle was telling me before we started, that's a very, very important verse for him in terms of his ministry overseas.

Then he tells them they've got to remember. That remembering was such a big theme, wasn't it, in the Old Testament. When the Jewish people were going through times of hardship and difficulty, they were told, remember, remember the covenant that God made with you people.

Remember the way he saved you from slavery in Egypt. And in remembering, there's a Greek verb which occurs words in, the words we use in communion about bringing to mind the things that Jesus did.

The Greek word comes, is an amnesia. And it's not a kind of cold, nostalgic remembering. It's remembering the past in a way that will give us courage in the present and hope for the future. Wake up, strengthen what remains, remember, and then the risen Christ says, I will come to you. And then to the faithful few, he says this.

[33 : 22] One, they will walk with me in verse four. I have noticed when visits to the Middle East, and to places like Africa as well, that very often when I've been visiting church leaders there, they love to kind of walk with you.

And many, many times, I remember with the Archbishop of Uganda, we kind of met very formally and exchanged gifts and all that stuff. And then he said, come with me.

And we walked around his garden for ages. And he walked around and all the time he held my hand and stroked it while he was talking to me.

I'm not really used to that. But I've noticed that, I noticed it with Bishop Munir in Egypt, and I can't remember his name now, the Bishop of Iran, who of course can't live in Iran.

It's a kind of walking with somebody is more than just a walk. faith. It's a way of kind of expressing trust and affection.

[34 : 40] Secondly, they will wear a white robe. I mean, that imagery comes up a lot in Revelation, that the faithful will be given a white robe. The use of it here seems to me to be in line with the rest of Scripture, that it will be the faithful few who are given a white robe.

And even those who've been given a white robe have the opportunity, have the possibility, that they can soil them. And their names will be indelibly put into the book of life.

Verse 5. The book of life has a kind of long biblical history, and also is mentioned a couple of times in the Revelation of St.

John. It first comes up in Scripture in Exodus chapter 32, and verses 31 to 33.

So what's happened here is the people of God have just been found worshipping golden images.

So Moses said to the people, you've committed a great sin, but now I will go up to the Lord.

[36 : 05] Perhaps I can make atonement for your sin. So Moses went back to the Lord and said, oh what a great sin these people have committed. They have made themselves gods of gold, but now please forgive their sin.

But if not, then block me out of the book you have written. again comes up in Psalm 139 and verse 16.

We read there. Sorry, let me get the light on this. Verse 16.

Your eyes saw my unformed body. All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.

I mean that's an amazing verse, isn't it? You know, the days of our life are ordained from the moment we are being formed in our mother's womb. I know people who are absolutists on the theme of abortion borrow on that verse very strongly to say that, you know, we should have far more respect for the fetus because God is at work when the fetus is in the womb.

[37 : 29] I'm not trying to be controversial, I'm just explaining the way some people use the Bible. But the idea that there is a book, and of course the Calvinists love this, because, you know, their thing is, well, if our names are written in the book that early, it means we are predestined in some way.

We are already in the book of life. People in Sardis, it doesn't seem quite so straightforward for them, does it? Because they're told that only the faithful, only those who wear the white robes, will have their names indelibly written in the book of life.

So, Sardis, a church that I find deeply challenging, because I think it speaks to the reality of a lot of churches in the Western world, in the 21st century.

In 2000, I was asked to speak at the wonderful Keswick Convention, which interestingly takes place in Keswick. And I was asked to give what they rather grandiosely call the millennial lecture.

And I took as my theme why I weep for the church. And without repeating the lecture now, I mean, what I said was, you know, how the church in this country has had so much blessing, so much opportunity, so much church plants, so many ministers, so, and basically we're presiding over something that is diminishing at high speed.

[39 : 31] Incidentally, you compare that with the church in America, which everybody thinks is a lot more robust, and certainly is more robust than we are in the United Kingdom, but it is declining at an alarming rate at the moment.

I think I may have told you last week, I can't remember who I said this to, but four and a half thousand churches were closed in 2022 in America.

That's mitigated slightly by the fact that 3,500 churches were started, but if you do the math, it works out to 28 churches a day being closed.

I mean, I would say that's enough, wouldn't you? So, I think this church has a lot to say to us, and I think that we really have to heed these warnings, these things that the risen Christ said to them.

Waken up, strengthen what remains, remember that in this country we have been greatly blessed with the gospel since maybe as early as the fifth century, maybe earlier, and we mustn't be complacent, and we mustn't stand over, decline, feeling complacent, and oh, there's nothing.

[41 : 05] I mean, the number of times I went to churches and I said, you know, last time I was here, there seemed to be a lot more people here, and the church wardens said, well, we do what we do if they don't like it.

Tough love. Is that really the mark of a healthy church? I don't think so. Wake up, strengthen what remains.

Do your remembering of the blessings that God has given you, not with sentimentality, but in remembering that we might find courage for today and hope for tomorrow.

And if we do that, says the risen Christ, you will know my presence. Maybe in new ways, maybe for the first time, wonderful when a church awakes, isn't it, and comes to life.

So, just to recap very quickly, what have we learnt? We've learnt that Ephesus, doctrinal purity without love, is not what the risen Christ calls us to.

[42 : 21] Love without doctrinal understanding leaves the church undefended to those who prevail. We'll be given as a gift, not anything we can earn, eternal life.

And Paul quite often uses the idea of keeping our eyes on the promises of God that will be realised in the future. Constantly molitor the balance between collusion and compromise.

What a message that is to the 21st century Western church. You can fool all of the people, but you can't fool God.

Sardis. Avoid idolatry. Big deal in our culture. Be very careful with the slippery concept of tolerance. Good up to a point, but comes a point, it just becomes a total cop-out. Be honest about yourselves.

[43 : 22] it was the fault in Sardis, that they had a great reputation, but the risen Christ could see exactly what was going on. Focus on substance, not image.

image. I think it would be far better if imagining that, you know, any amount of cosmetic surgery or makeup would make us beautiful.

Instead of thinking about that when we stand in front of a mirror, maybe it would be better for us to just remind ourselves when we stand in front of a mirror, I am fearfully and wonderfully made by the God who loves me.

Amen.