

The church in Smyrna

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Date: 21 July 2019

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[0 : 00] Next day, that is after the day of preparation, the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered before Pilate and said, Sir, we remember how that imposter said while he was still alive, after three days I will rise.

Therefore, order the tomb to be made secure until the third day, lest his disciples go and steal him away and tell the people he is risen from the dead.

And the last fraud will be worse than the first. Pilate said to them, You have a guard of soldiers. Go make it as secure as you can.

So they went and made the tomb secure by sealing the stone and setting a guard. Now after the Sabbath, towards the dawn of the first day of the week, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary went to see the tomb.

And behold, there was a great earthquake, for an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled back the stone and sat on it. His appearance was like lightning and his clothing white as snow.

[1 : 12] And for fear of him, the guards trembled and became like dead men. But the angel said to the women, Do not be afraid, for I know that you seek Jesus who was crucified.

He is not here, for he has risen. And he said, Come and see the place where he lay. Then go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead.

And behold, he is going before you to Galilee. There you will see him. See, I have told you. So they departed quickly from the tomb with fear and great joy and ran to tell the disciples.

And behold, Jesus met them and said greetings. And they came up and took hold of his feet and worshipped him. Then Jesus said to them, Do not be afraid.

Go and tell my brothers, go to Galilee, and there you will see me. And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write, The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

[2 : 16] I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you were rich. And the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not. But to a synagogue of Satan. Do not fear what you are about to suffer.

Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.

He who has an ear, lets him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death. Now in the aftermath of the Sri Lanka church bombings we may remember in April, the Telegraph had the following headline.

The Sri Lanka attacks reflect an era of global Christian persecution that surpasses Roman or Soviet times. In May this year, a number of us will know that the Foreign Office published the Interim Report on Foreign and Commonwealth Office Support for Persecuted Christians.

There's a report that concluded that in the Middle East, persecution of Christians is coming close to genocide. And that there are an estimated 240 million Christians who face persecution for their faith around the world.

[3 : 40] Even a cursory glance at the Open Doors or Barnabas Fund websites show just the extent of persecution of various forms because of people following Jesus.

In Sudan, thousands of Christians have been displaced and killed as government ethnically cleanses the region of minority groups. Churches have been demolished and church leaders arrested.

In North Korea, with Kim Jong-un worshipped as a god, Christians are considered enemies of the state. It's thought that about a quarter of the 300,000 Christians in the country are worked like slaves in labour camps, unlikely ever to leave.

Wouldn't it be great if we could hear what Jesus had to say to these situations? Christians are marginalised as people express biblical truths which were just 20 years ago mainstream. Wouldn't it be great if we could hear what Jesus had to say into these situations? What comfort, what advice, what warning, what hope might he be able to bring?

[4 : 53] Well, we can hear what Jesus says because he's written just such a letter to just such a persecuted church. The church that we've just been reading in Smyrna.

Now, it's not normally acceptable to open somebody else's letters. But today, very much like last week in the letter we read to the church in Ephesus, it is written to a specific church at a specific time facing specific issues.

But just have a look down to chapter 2, verse 11. He who has an ear, hear what the Spirit says to the churches. So, not only do we have permission to read the letter, but we ought to.

But as we do so, as with all letters in this section of Revelation, we need to continually consider to what extent our situation is like that of the Smyrna church.

This, of course, will help us determine to what extent we can apply the letter to our own situation here in Dulwich. In any case, this is a letter that will be of great reassurance and encouragement to us in whatever way we face suffering or marginalisation for the sake of the gospel.

[6 : 02] Smyrna, which today, if you look on a map, is known as Izmir in Turkey, was in the 100s AD a prosperous seaport with about a quarter of a million people.

And it was an important Roman cultural centre. It was an impressive place. But it was also an incredibly hard place for Christians to live. And into this situation, Jesus comforts the church.

And you may want to follow the points down, printed on the service sheet in front of you. Firstly, I know your suffering. Look down to verse 9.

I know your tribulation and your poverty, but you're rich. And the slander of those who say they're Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. I know.

Jesus knows the seven churches because, as we saw last week in chapter 1 verse 12 and chapter 1 verse 20, he walks among them.

[7 : 03] Do you remember Jesus walking among the lampstands? At the start of chapter 2, Jesus rebuked the Ephesians because he knows them. And today he's able to reassure and encourage the Smyrnans because he knows them.

Now by this point in history, Rome was an imperial cult, with citizens being required to worship the emperor as a god. In Smyrna, for example, at this time there was a whole temple dedicated to the emperor Tiberius.

And to get by in any sort of business, trade bodies and guilds required various forms of idol worship as part of membership. So, if you weren't prepared to worship a Roman god, you'd be excluded.

Now the Jews, as a monotheistic religion, were themselves not prepared to engage with this sort of activity and they were given exemptions. And that enabled them to remain integrated in society and therefore become rich.

The Christians, on the other hand, had been removed from this exemption. They were excluded from this ability to trade and this led to inevitable poverty and marginalisation.

[8 : 13] And so, in the middle of this rich, prosperous city, the Christian church was materially poor, being disregarded and overlooked.

And into this situation, Jesus says, I know. I know your tribulation and your poverty. I know when you can't afford food or somewhere to live.

I know when you're mocked and excluded and not listened to because of me. I know. And I know the slander.

Now it's almost certain that certainly the Jews who'd betrayed the Christians to the authorities, those pious religious who'd led the Christians to their position of poverty, those who we read in verse 9, say that they're Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

The claim to be Jewish was a claim to be a people of God. But since the coming of Jesus, the true people of God are those who've recognised Jesus as Lord and worship him.

[9 : 17] The Jews here claim to be God's people, but their actions and their attitudes to Jesus prove themselves to being no different to the pagans around them. Only a few years after the writing of this letter, the Christian bishop of Smyrna, a man called Polycarp, was executed for being a Christian.

And according to the famous account of his martyrdom by Ignatius of Antioch, written in AD 107, Polycarp is brought in front of a packed auditorium and we read, The whole multitude, both of Gentiles and of Jews, who lived in Smyrna, cried out with a loud shout, This is the teacher of Asia, the father of Christians, the puller down of our gods, who teaches people not to sacrifice or worship. Saying these things, they called out together that Polycarp should be burnt alive. This all happened so quickly, quicker than words could tell. The crowds collecting from the workshops timber and sticks, and the Jews more especially assisting with this, as was their zeal, as was their want. You see, the religious elite, joined with the Roman authorities, calling for and arranging for Polycarp's death. And this, it all rings bells, doesn't it? Jesus' greatest opponents were the religious elite. It was they, of course, who pursued him, who accused him of blasphemy, who slandered him and put him to death. And nothing has changed today.

[10:46] The greatest opposition to Jesus, and therefore that faced by Christians, can so often come from those who you might expect to be followers of Jesus. Bishops, RS teachers at school, theology professors, colleagues who claim to be Christian.

In fact, we saw something similar last week in the letter to the Church of Ephesus. People who claimed to be apostles, but were not. The Smyrland was slandered. They were made poor. And into this situation of tribulation and injustice, Jesus says, I know. I've been through it myself. I was stripped of everything. I was poor.

I was slandered by the religious elite. I know what you're going through. I know. But he knows something else too. Did you notice those brackets in verse 9?

I know you are rich. The contrasts here were quite stark. The city was known for its culture and wealth and beauty, but Jesus' followers were impoverished.

[11:56] The local elite were considered themselves worthy, while the Christians were blasphemers. Society is free and able to indulge in trade and the arts.

The Christians are locked in prisons. All that was materially true and of no doubt. But the ultimate reality, Jesus is saying, is the exact opposite.

Charles mentioned at the beginning Amazon. They were a bookseller, as you may know, a few years ago. And for the first six years of their existence, Amazon didn't make a profit. Who in their right mind would want to invest in a loss-making company like that?

We want money. We want it now. But the underlying reality was different. And of course, this year Amazon became the world's most valuable company. A company that was, even at those early days, of great worth, even if it didn't look like it.

Now, despite appearances, it is Christians who are rich. It is Christians who have been forgiven, who have been accepted, and who are ultimately and eternally free.

[13:08] Short-term material riches and comfort, or eternal spiritual riches and comfort. Which is it we live for today? Whether it's true or not, that the Sri Lanka attacks reflect an era of global Christian persecution that surpassed Roman or Soviet times, it is certainly true that the Christian life is one of suffering.

It might be quiet and subtle and rare. It might be ongoing, significant, painful. Whatever it is, Jesus says firstly, I know your suffering.

Secondly, verse 10, what you're about to suffer, do not fear, be faithful. Do not fear, be faithful.

Now, you and I could have written verse 9, because if we'd visited the area, we would have seen for ourselves that the Smyrland Church was a suffering church. But verse 10 is different, because it's about the future.

And no one but Jesus, the Jesus who of course knows his people, only he knows what's ahead of them. So verse 10, do not fear what you're about to suffer.

[14:22] Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested, and for 10 days you will have tribulation. The suffering of the Smyrland Church is about to become worse.

And Jesus appeals to them, do not fear what's ahead of you. The greatest fear for the Christian is often less about what's happening here, today, right now, but actually what might happen in the future.

I mustn't speak out as a Christian in my office because that might happen. I mustn't speak out as a Christian in my office because this might happen. I can't challenge that way of thinking in the hospital war because that might happen.

And there aren't many lawyers or bankers or doctors or teachers or shop assistants who've lost their jobs because they've stood up as a Christian, but many who don't speak out because they might.

The Lawyers' Christian Fellowship produced this pamphlet a couple of years ago. It's called Christianity in the Workplace, and please do take it from me at the end if you're interested. It's an excellent guide to what is permitted within law, within the workplace, and a great antidote for this unfounded fear.

[15:36] And as the pamphlet says, we're fortunate to live in a tolerant and diverse society which robustly safeguards the rights to freedom of belief and to freedom of expression for everyone.

And it goes on. And these fundamental freedoms are both enshrined in both domestic and international law. So we may fear what might happen, but in being a Christian, proclaiming what we believe as Christians, we are simply, in the UK, demonstrating the freedom of thought, conscience and religion, that is recognised as one of the foundations of our democratic society.

And we must, therefore, put our own fear of future suffering into that context. This, of course, is different to the Smyrnans who were facing tangible suffering with worse to come, and two reasons are presented to help them not be afraid.

Firstly, don't be afraid, be faithful, your suffering will be limited. Have a look down again at verse 10. Do not fear what you're about to suffer.

Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. In the Greco-Roman world, a prison was not a punishment in itself, but more a sort of holding pen for some future punishment, which may well be execution.

[17:03] And it appears that much like he did with Job, God had given Satan some restricted control under his authority for a fixed, limited time, a time possibly stated here symbolically, of ten days, a time of persecution that will strengthen the Christian's faith.

Satan tests God's people who, if they trust God, if they remain faithful, come through their persecution triumphant. The persecution faced by the local Smyrnan church, and as we see in Revelation chapters 12 and 17, the suffering experienced by the universal church is more, therefore, than just from the Romans or the Jews.

The persecution is an attack of Satan who is at war with the church. And so it's right to take Satan. It's right to take this persecution seriously, but it is not right to fear him.

Because the persecution of the Smyrnans that is limited, well, just like that limited persecution, Satan's power is limited. Satan, because of the cross, has already been defeated and will one day be snuffed out completely.

Don't fear what you're about to suffer, Jesus says. Suffering will be limited. Suffering is really a matter of perspective. It's a matter of time scale.

[18:33] For us in Dulwich, in the medium term, even in a tolerant and diverse democratic society, the source of suffering we might expect could be issues of job security or status or family stability, perhaps our social position.

it might, as some across the country are facing, ultimately lead to the loss of jobs, in time possibly even criminal proceedings. And there is no doubt that these things are horrible.

There's no doubt that in the context of the remaining years of our lives, any such persecution would be hard, unpleasant, intimidating. But if we're able to see such suffering in the context of eternity, what happens in these few short years becomes considerably less important.

What is, after all, a few years' hardship now compared to the joy of eternity? Suffering may be short-term, it may be long-term, it might even lead to death.

But the appeal here is to remain faithful regardless. because secondly, at the end of the time of persecution, verse 10 again, I will give you the crown of life.

[19:47] The image of a crown was a very powerful one to Smyrlands because as well as part of the city which was built on a hill actually having the appearance of a crown, it was convention in the area to award a crown on the back of a military or sporting victory.

So a captain returns from a distant battle having fought and won and he is in a celebratory service crowned. So the crown is a mark of a conqueror and the reward being handed out to the suffering church of Smyrna at the point of death is, verse 10, the crown of life.

Have a look down now at verse 11. The one who conquers will not be hurt by the second death. How much we can trust someone's word depends on who they are and how dependable they've

been in the past.

That used car salesman has the reputation he has for a reason. But look at who these words are from. Verse 8, the words of the first and the last who died and came to life.

And if we looked at chapter 1, I died and behold I am alive forevermore. I have the keys to death and Hades. Who is it then that makes the promise of the crown of life but Jesus himself?

[21 : 12] Who is the one who removes the possibility of the second death? The death that we see in Revelation 20 is the eternal lake of judging fire but the one who has authority over death.

Who is the one who promises eternal life? The one with the keys to the grave. Who is the one that provides all resources now and in eternity? It's Jesus.

And for the Smyrland Christian who is being persecuted who is facing the threat of prison and possible execution these words I will give you the crown of life spoken by the one who has conquered death.

Well to them this is not only life saving but life changing news. It's reassuring. And it's comforting and inspiring and emboldening and perspective changing.

It's thought that Polycarp would have been about 20 years old when this letter to Smyrna was received. It's quite likely that he will have heard it read for the first time and almost certain that he would have had it in his mind on this day in that auditorium as he faced his execution.

[22 : 23] Having received his death sentence we pick up the account from Ignatius of Antioch once again. But when the magistrate pressed him hard and said swear the oath and I will release you revile the Christ Polycarp said for 86 years I've been his servant and he's done me no wrong how then can I blaspheme my king who saved me?

Polycarp then said you threaten me with that fire which burns for a short period and then is quenched for you are ignorant of the fire of the future judgment and eternal punishment which is reserved for the ungodly but why do you delay?

Come do what you will. Polycarp trusted the words of Jesus the first and the last who died and came back to life. He knew that the short term horrors of being burnt alive were nothing compared to the fire of future judgment.

He knew the short term gain to be had from recanting at that very moment as he had the opportunity to do was nothing compared to the eternity of wearing the victor's crown of life.

And this of course is just the same today for the Christians living in North Korea worked as slaves nervously meeting as a church family in a bathroom to pray. This is the good news that will keep them going.

[23 : 53] This is the good news for the Sudanese Christians as they're forced out of their homes desperate for stability and safety. This is the good news for the Sri Lankan Christians mourning the deaths of their family members fearful of future attacks.

It's the good news for the 240 million Christians who face persecution for their faith around the world. And it's the good news for us as we face opposition at work at home from our neighbours. So what is our experience as we stand out as Christians at work or at school or at university today? Perhaps today we find ourselves being marginalised quietly or overtly shunned by suspicious people around us.

Perhaps we can point at times at work or with neighbours when we've been overlooked. Perhaps an invitation has been missed or even a promotion simply because we are Christians.

Maybe we're aware of the secret whispering about us behind our backs. Other forms of marginalisation. Maybe it's the RS teacher who undermines us in class or the boss who cleverly puts us down because we're followers of Jesus.

[25 : 06] Well Jesus says I know your situation. I know whatever suffering you are experiencing for my sake. Be faithful and you'll receive the crown of life.

And as we look to the future what will happen if in the UK biblical principles become outlawed at school or in the home? What happens if Christians make a stand on certain issues avoid teaching certain societal norms?

Or perhaps there will be persecutions. perhaps there will be real tangible impacts on Christians and their families. Perhaps for us there is worse persecution to come.

And when this persecution happens how will we support each other? Well of course corporately there is that simple encouragement to keep going.

To be bold. To be bold in our offices with our neighbours with our workmates or our associates. to encourage each other. To remain faithful to battle to keep proclaiming Jesus even if the short term is hard.

[26 : 17] But given that it is Jesus who has the keys of death and Hades given that it is Jesus who provides all our resources the very best we can do corporately to encourage each other is to continually remind each other of the truth of the gospel.

to remind each other just how rich we Christians are in Jesus. And in all this to remind each other what we've been reading this morning.

Jesus says I know your situation. I know whatever suffering you'll experience for my sake.

Persecution will be limited. Do not fear what you're about to suffer.

Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life. Amen. Let's pray.