

On our response

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Date: 07 May 2023

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[0 : 00] Today's reading is from the book of Revelation and chapter 2, which can be found on page 1236. So it's Revelation chapter 2, and we're reading from verse 18.

And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write, The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

I know your works, your love and faith, and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first. But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman, Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.

I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality. Behold, I will throw her onto a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her works, and I will strike her children dead.

And all the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works. But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden.

[1 : 40] Only hold fast what you have until I come. The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I will give authority over the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received authority from my Father.

And I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Megan, thanks very much for reading for us.

Please do keep that reading open from Revelation chapter 2. And let me pray for us as we begin. Let's pray. Earlier in Revelation we read, Heavenly Father, we pray to you for the risen Lord Jesus, that he is the one who stands amongst the lampstands, his churches.

And we pray this morning, please would you help us to hear his voice. And as we hear the Bible being proclaimed and preached, to hear that as being the voice indeed of you, the living God.

And we ask it for your namesake. Amen. Well, this is the third in our series of three talks on how we should respond to the Church of England's General Synod vote in February to bless same-sex relationships, including the blessing of same-sex marriage.

[3 : 43] We'd rather obviously be talking about happier things, but this is the presenting issue of the day. It's the issue over which the House of Bishops have chosen to mislead the Church of England.

And as a result, it is the issue over which the denomination is divided. Now, so far, over these last couple of weeks, we've seen firstly that we can be clear on the Bible, confident that it is indeed God's word, that it is the way which God speaks to us, addresses us by his Spirit.

And then last week, we can be clear on the Bible's teaching, both on marriage, but also on same-sex relationships. And if you've missed either of those two talks, I'd love you to catch up online.

This is such an important series for us. Now, it seems to me that one of the reasons we find this also difficult is because as a culture, we are very much the beneficiaries of progress.

So there was a time, and I guess some of you probably in JAM in our youth group will be completely clueless as to what this is, but there was a time when you had to buy one of these to listen to your favorite music.

[5 : 03] And I remember, actually, this is my favorite album, obviously, when I bought it. I bought it in 1986. And although technology has moved on, I haven't had the heart to throw it away. Those, of course, were replaced by these things, which were fantastic, because you could actually listen to your favorite music in the car.

They were replaced by these, which, of course, sold themselves on the sheer quality of the music, and you could also listen to them in the car, and you could listen to them if you had the right bit of kit as you walked around the place.

But, of course, all you need now is a Spotify subscription, and you can listen on your phone to whatever you want to, whenever you want to listen to it. In countless ways, we are the beneficiaries of progress.

So isn't same-sex marriage just another marker on the road to progress? We're constantly being told that marriage equality, as it's called, is to be progressive.

And, I mean, of course, we all want to be on the side of progress, don't we? And we're being told that if we oppose marriage equality, then we are a traditionalist.

[6 : 15] And, frankly, who wants to be one of those? Now, I'm conscious that it may be that you're looking in on the Christian faith, and you may be feeling it is bizarre or, frankly, worse to oppose same-sex marriage.

And yet the reason we do so is not because we love tradition. It's because we love Jesus. We regard the Bible as God's Word, as Jesus did, and we regard marriage as between a man and a woman, as Jesus did.

And if you'd like to chat further about that afterwards, then do please come and talk to me. But this morning, as we continue to think about our response to the General Synod vote in February, we are thinking about how we should respond to false teaching.

We're in this book of Revelation, looking at one of the letters written to the seven churches in what is now Western Turkey. Just flick back to the beginning of the book, chapter 1, verse 1, and see how Revelation starts.

Revelation, chapter 1, verse 1. The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show to his servants the things that must soon take place.

[7 : 36] In other words, these words that we are reading this morning are the words of the risen Jesus, written, as Revelation is, to seven representative churches about how they should wait for the return of the Lord Jesus.

And we're looking today, chapter 2, verses 18 to 29, the letter to the church in Thyatira. It begins, verse 18, and to the angel of the church in Thyatira writes, the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

Jesus sees things with the blazing eyes of holy perception. And therefore, I want us to notice two things this morning. Firstly, Jesus says that false teachers are real.

Jesus says false teachers are real. Verse 19, I know your works, your love and faith and service, and patient endurance, and your latter works exceed the first.

Now, in some respects, the church in Thyatira is a church that's going well. In fact, it's a church which, in terms of their faithful service and patient endurance, I guess might put many other churches to shame.

[8 : 58] But then look at verse 20. But I have this against you, that you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess, and is teaching and seducing my servants to practice sexual immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.

We saw last week that when the Bible speaks about sexual immorality, it's referring to sexual intimacy outside the lifelong marriage between a man and a woman.

And what we discover in verse 20 is that in the church in Thyatira, there's a woman, she's called Jezebel, she describes herself as a prophetess, so at least she's given herself some kind of spiritual standing, if you like, within the congregation.

And yet she is teaching and encouraging sexual immorality, just as the House of Bishops in the Church of England, sadly, are teaching and encouraging the practice of sexual immorality.

And notice that what Jezebel has been teaching, notice it is not a mistake, it's not a kind of error, and she's seen the error of her ways, and she is now repenting.

[10 : 13] You know, she's not kind of saying, well, I see that what I once taught was wrong. No, verse 21, Jesus says, I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her sexual immorality.

In other words, this isn't about a failure of understanding, rather it is about an unwillingness to change. False teachers are real.

In other words, when we speak about false teachers, we're not talking about a merely kind of theoretical category. In other words, we're not crying wolf. You know the story, the little boy playing in his garden one day, he's feeling bored, so he cries out, there's a wolf, there's a wolf.

And his parents come rushing out, and of course there's no wolf, but it is fun anyway, and so a little bit later, he cries out again, still playing in the garden, there's a wolf, there's a wolf. And his parents again come rushing out of the house to see what's going on, and there's absolutely nothing whatsoever.

And a third time, sometime later, he cries out again, there's a wolf, there's a wolf. And this time, his parents stay inside. But of course, there really is a wolf.

[11 : 30] Now, it always struck me it was not the most reassuring of bedtime stories. But it does make the point that wolves are real, and we're not just pretending.

just as false teachers are real, and we're not pretending. And to persuade us that we're not crying wolf, I put some verses on the outline to show that actually throughout the Bible, the issue of false teachers is a real one, and we need to be alert.

So we're not going to do a paper chase through all these verses. I put them there so you can look them up later. But I do want to read some of them out. So in our growth groups just before, just a couple of weeks ago, we had Isaiah chapter 9, where you may remember the issue there is a failure of leadership.

Isaiah says, so the Lord cut off from Israel head and tail, palm, branch, and reed in one day. The elder and honored man is the head, and the prophet who teaches lies is the tail.

What is the problem? Leaders who fail who fail to lead and prophets who lie. Or Ezekiel chapter 34, I guess well known to some of us.

[12 : 51] Ezekiel says, the word of the Lord came to me, son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to them, even to the shepherds, thus says the Lord, our shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves, should not shepherds feed the sheep.

They are false shepherds because although leaders of God's people, they're more concerned to feed themselves rather than feeding the sheep. Or the seven woes that Jesus speaks to the religious leaders in Luke chapter 11.

He says, woe to you, for you are like unmarked graves, and people walk over them without knowing it. In other words, rather than bringing God's blessing into people's lives, they bring God's curse.

Luke 11:52, Jesus goes on, woe to you lawyers, not lawyers generally, by the way, for those who are lawyers, but these specific lawyers.

Woe to you lawyers, for you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering. Leaders who themselves haven't entered God's kingdom, and they hinder others from entering God's kingdom by their teaching.

[14 : 09] Or the words of the Lord Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew chapter 7, verse 15, beware of false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

A picture the Apostle Paul picks up in Acts chapter 20 in his farewell to the elders of the church in Ephesus. He says, I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock.

And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore, be alert.

By way of summary, the Apostle Peter in 2 Peter chapter 2 says, but false prophets arose among the people. Speaking of the Old Testament times, false prophets arose among the people and he goes on to say, just as there will be false teachers among you.

There were false teachers in the Old Testament. There are false teachers now. We must expect them. Now, I'm not trying to bamboozle us this morning with lots of Bible verses.

[15 : 19] I'm simply trying to show us the problem of false teaching is a real problem. We're not crying wolf. And of course, they're not easy to spot. The Lord Jesus himself describing them as wolves but in sheep's clothing.

And yet, you and I should be in no doubt whatsoever that false teachers are real. And of course, just as it's a loving thing if you're a parent to warn your children of stranger danger, so it is a loving thing to call false teaching out for what it is because it guards the flock.

It guards the flock. So firstly, Jesus says false teachers are real. Secondly, Jesus says false teachers mustn't be tolerated.

Have a look at verses 25 and 26 where we see how the church in Thyatira should respond. Verse 25. Only hold fast what you have until I come.

The one who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, to him I'll give authority over the nations. How are they to respond? Well, verse 25, they're to hold fast to Jesus verse 26, they're to conquer which in Revelation language means to keep going until the end.

[16 : 50] It means not to give up. What do you say? What does that look like? Well, it means they mustn't tolerate Jezebel and her teaching because I wonder if we notice that Jesus not only condemns the false teacher Jezebel, we can see that in verses 23 to 25 where he speaks of the judgment that will come upon her.

Severe language, I guess, but presumably that's because it shows how severely Jesus takes false teaching. He not only condemns Jezebel but in verse 20 he also condemns the church that tolerates such false teaching.

Verse 20, I have this against you that you tolerate that woman Jezebel. Now here's a question I'd like us to ponder and you can do this either on your own or you can do it with your neighbor and I'd just like you to ponder which of these two things is worse, which is more serious.

A Christian leader who practices sexual immorality but doesn't teach it or a Christian leader who teaches sexual immorality and therefore encourages others to do it and yet doesn't practice it themselves.

Got those two things in your head? Have a ponder, perhaps it might be easier to turn to your neighbor. Which of those two things do you think is worse? Just spend a minute on that. Okay, let's come back together.

[18 : 29] Lovely to hear a good buzz of conversation and discussion on that. Now I guess the temptation might be to think that it's more serious if a Christian leader is practicing sexual immorality rather than teaching it.

But actually the opposite is in fact the case. It is far more serious to be teaching it even if they are not practicing it themselves because their teaching will lead countless others astray and into sin.

That is why false teaching is so very serious. Now tolerance of course is a wonderful thing. It's good to be tolerant of people.

It's one of the ways in which we love and serve people from different backgrounds and cultures and those of different opinions to us. And there are plenty of areas of life in which I guess we'd all agree that we could do with a bit more tolerance.

But the risen Jesus says we shouldn't tolerate false teachers. We shouldn't tolerate them. That is the word he uses. Now again it's not peculiar to this particular part of the Bible.

[19 : 46] We saw in 2 John didn't we in our growth groups before Easter 2 John verses 10 and 11 I put them there on the outline. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

John you'll remember most likely writing to a church rather than the individual and he's saying the false teachers shouldn't be given a platform. They should be no platforms.

Don't give them the microphone. Don't welcome them because it will give them the opportunity if you do so to spread their error and their false teaching. Or listen to the Apostle Paul in Romans 16 verse 17 again it's there on the outline.

I appeal to you brothers to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you've been taught. Avoid them. It follows therefore that having a robust response to false teaching isn't about temperament.

I think we can sometimes think it's essentially about temperament that it's the kind of thing that the more combative those who are by temperament more combative should be doing while those of us who are more gentle can sit on the sidelines.

[21 : 10] But I hope we can see it's not a matter of temperament it is a matter of faithfulness to the risen Lord Jesus. After all in Revelation chapter 2 verse 18 this letter like all the letters to the churches in Revelation is introduced we're reminded these are the words of the risen Jesus.

in verse 29 these are the words of the spirit. This is about safeguarding people's spiritual welfare their eternal future.

So then what might it look like for us not to tolerate false teaching? Well the first thing to say is that the Church of England isn't a church. the Church of England is a denomination.

And therefore we're not in breach of this command by remaining within the Church of England. And yet like many churches we are asking for public credible structural reorganisation or structural differentiation as you may have heard people talking about it.

It's something which the CEEC, the Church of England Evangelical Council is campaigning for. The CEEC you may know represents a variety of evangelical groupings within the Church of England.

[22 : 35] And they have launched a campaign called Compelled to Resist. It's already been signed by over a thousand Church of England clergy and over 10,000 others.

And if that's something you'd be interested in signing for yourself then you'll see I put the link there on the outline so you can look that up. Now this is clear structural reorganization or structural differentiation is something which you also may already be aware is beginning to happen in the Anglican communion worldwide, the global family of Anglican churches.

In particular there are two main groupings, the Global South Fellowship of Anglicans and GAFCON, the Global Anglican Futures Conference, which together those two groupings, they represent 85%, 85% of the Global Anglican communion.

And again I put the links there on the outline and if you want to actually chase the links through just by clicking then you'll see Vicky sent the outline through electronically on Friday so that you can do that.

Now both the Global South and GAFCON have declared that in deciding to bless same sex relationships the Church of England has disqualified itself from leading the Anglican communion.

[23 : 52] because it's broken communion, it's broken fellowship with those provinces which hold to the clear teaching of the Bible. They've also declared, and this happened a few weeks ago, that they no longer recognize the present Archbishop of Canterbury as the leader of the Anglican communion and that instead they'll work together and with others to reset the Anglican communion and to do so on its biblical foundations.

Now 85% is a huge majority isn't it? A huge majority. And I think it's easy perhaps for us to feel that we're simply a rather awkward difficult minority making a fuss about something which the Church of England has made a decision on.

And yet on a global scale we are part of that 85%. now that is potentially very exciting because it means the Church of England is moving away from its kind of colonial model centered on Canterbury and centered on an Archbishop who is appointed by a British Prime Minister.

It seems to me and to countless others that it's going to lead to a more representative, a more dynamic, a more genuinely inclusive and more biblically orthodox worldwide Anglican communion.

So structural change is taking place globally. And we must pray that it will also take place in England. In some dioceses, clergy have already held meetings with bishops to explain why, as we saw last week in 1 Corinthians chapter 6, this is a salvation issue and asking for clear structural change, clear structural differentiation within the Church of England.

[25 : 57] So for example, there was a meeting which I attended a couple of weeks ago in this diocese, in Southwark Diocese, 65 clergy were present with a further 15 apologies, representing more than a quarter of the clergy in the diocese, all opposed to the blessing of same-sex relationships.

You may know that before Easter there was a similar meeting in London Diocese, it's a bigger diocese, with over 150 clergy present. As a church council, we are keen to continue to work together with like-minded churches in the diocese.

In addition, you'll have seen the letter that as a church council, we wrote to the Bishop of Southwark explaining the House of Bishops have placed themselves in impaired partnership with us by walking away from the clear teaching of scripture.

So, what happens next? Christ? Well, we need to pray. Just as the Lord Jesus sees and knows exactly what is happening in each of the seven churches in this letter to the seven churches in Revelation chapters 2 and 3, so he does with the churches today.

Let's pray that the House of Bishops would repent and come back to a clear understanding of marriage and sit under the authority of the Bible.

[27 : 28] That they'd be willing to go against the grain of our culture. That they'd be willing to be unpopular by calling sin, sin. It would be a wonderful way to express love and pastoral care for those who experience same-sex attraction.

And, of course, it preserved the unity of the denomination. Clearly, we need to wait and see how things unfold over the next few weeks and months.

I gather that although the final authorization of same-sex blessings was meant to be taking place at General Synod in July, I gather that is now likely to be pushed back to November, if not later.

Let me finish by saying that although, yes, of course, this is deeply painful and deeply grievous. And yet, we can also be confident because the Lord Jesus is the head of his church.

He said he will build his church. He said the gates of hell will not prevail against it. I think for many of us who went to Word Live before Easter, one of the great encouragements, I think, was a series of talks which we heard each morning in acts.

[28 : 46] And the reminder, as we look to see how churches were started and how the gospel was proclaimed in leading cities of the Roman Empire, how so often that took place in the face of adversity, opposition, persecution, and obstacles.

And you and I know that that is exactly what is happening in much of the world today. who knows how the risen Jesus may use this moment, perhaps for renewal within the Church of England, perhaps for renewal outside of the Church of England.

And we should pray to that end. Let me lead us in prayer together. Only hold fast what you have until I come.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you haven't left us to fumble around in the dark on our own. We thank you for the words of the risen Lord Jesus.

And we're conscious, as we reminded earlier, that we are all sexual sinners, and we repent of our sin, and we confess our sin to you.

[30 : 09] And we pray, Heavenly Father, for your mercy on the Church of England, even at this stage, that there might be a real repentance and a turning away from wrongdoing and from error and false teaching, and a reaffirmation of your clear, good purposes for sexual intimacy within marriage, church, and a willingness to say that sin is sin, and a willingness to be unpopular in our culture.

And we pray, Lord Jesus, knowing that you are indeed Lord of the Church, we pray that you would please bring a renewal to the Church in this country, as the gospel goes out, as people are born again, as churches are established, whether within or outside the Church of England.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.