

July 1st 2012 Letter to Sardis: Life in the Midst of Death: Rev3:1-6

"To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead."

In my long history of attending church services there are only two that I can remember walking out of because they just didn't feel right. One of those was a big Baptist church in Bali far away from the tourist areas. It smelt of money when you walked in. A grand building crammed full of well dressed Balinese people who were quite westernized in their ways. The service was in English and the preacher was American and all he spoke about was money. And the atmosphere for us was really oppressive, as though another God than the One we knew was being worshipped. So we got up and walked out and no one cared. Then we couldn't get a taxi because the place was so isolated and we went back in to try to get some help, and still no one cared, but thankfully God provided for us in His most wonderful way.

Now I get the feeling that for similar reasons Jesus would have walked out of any service held in the church at Sardis. For this letter in Rev 3:1-6 suggests that this church was in a like-minded position. It looked good and had a reputation for being alive, yet in reality it was dead. There is no harsher judgment made about any other of the 7 churches than this. And the worst thing was that they didn't realize how dead they had become.

Rather like the young boys who had sneaked into the neighbours yard to watch him kill a couple of chickens. Seeing them there he said, 'watch this' then chopped off the chickens head and let them go, and to the boys amazement for a short time the headless chickens kept running. 'Aren't they really dead', the boys asked. 'O they are dead alright', the neighbor replied, 'they just don't know it yet.' That was the church at Sardis and I admit that my greatest nightmare is to be in a church like that. Or even worst, to become a Christian like that, and not know it.

But even though they either didn't know it or hadn't yet admitted it, Jesus knew. He holds in his hand the seven stars that are the leaders of these 7 churches representing the churches themselves. He walks with these leaders in His hand amongst the lampstands that are the churches set in the different cities and sees everything about them. To hold them in His hand is to give them His protection and keeping but it also suggests the intimate knowledge He has of each church and its leadership.

But He also holds in His other hand the seven spirits of God. Seven is the perfect number and in this context the phrase relates to God the Holy Spirit. He is the power that works within the churches to do the will of the Father and the Son. He is able to give life in the place of death. Consequently even for this church at Sardis there is hope. That is why Jesus can say in 3:2

² Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God.

Rouse yourself and keep awake, the Amplified has. Watch, says the AV.

After saying so powerfully, I have checked you out and you are dead, Jesus now uses words that put hope back into the equation. Wake up! Strengthen what is about to die. Work at making your deeds complete in the sight of God.

That is the mercy of Jesus shown to churches and individuals alike. He casts nothing away because it is dead. Instead He points to a flicker of life that remains and calls for the church or the individual to seek for life again in Him.

We have this leafy plant in our yard that Kathy Boujos gave us some years back. I call it our resurrection plant, because I have seen it die through lack of attention and caring on my part only to come alive at the slightest sniff of winter rain. Jesus loves to resurrect churches. He delights to resurrect lost souls and if you feel in need of spiritual resurrection today then get excited about a Saviour who will not quickly throw you on the dung heap. But for such a resurrection to happen you must be prepared to do your part.

To wake up to yourself and acknowledge how far you have fallen from where you should be as a Christian. To check out where your passion is; Is it for Jesus who loves you as no other loves you, or for some lesser god that you have allowed the prominence that only Jesus deserves.

For the church at Sardis it would seem that ease of living, lack of persecution, and an affluent lifestyle had become more important than being alive for their Lord. For Sardis, where this church existed, was that type of city. It was proud and wealthy. Because of the way it was built into the mountain it believed itself to be impregnable to attack and it had suffered two major defeats in its history simply due to the fact that it hadn't bothered to set sufficient sentries in place. The city suffered from complacency and so did the people of God within it. That's why Jesus calls them to Wake up....or Watch.

The Christians there had also allowed the ways of the world they lived in to pollute them. They happily conformed to the pattern of the world around them rather than being transformed by the Saviour who dwelt within them. And the result was horrendous. They were dead in the sight of Jesus, yet not so dead that there wasn't any hope. The next verse says:-v3

³ Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you.

Remember....Obey.....Repent.....

I believe that each communion service gives God's people—together as a church and yet separate before God as believers—one such opportunity to do these three things. To Remember, Obey, and Repent, where repent means to turn your life around and do the things that you should be doing, or stop doing those things you should not be doing. When I was in America some years ago I came across churches that only celebrated the communion feast once a year, and I was astounded by that. How else could they check their pulse to make sure that they were alive than around this table.

But whether it is at this table or somewhere else the Lord calls us all to remember. To remember all He has done for us but especially to remember anything we once did for Him but no longer do. The home groups which were once so important to us. The prayer times that we cherished. The joy with which we once sought opportunities to speak to others about Jesus. The Mission trip we went on or the Missionaries, to whom we once gave so much that it hurt.

If in our remembering we find that such things have slipped away, then obedience and repentance on our part is vital, whether it be as a church or as individuals. For the coming of Jesus as a thief is not speaking here of His second coming, but of a coming to take away everything from His people that would happen quickly and without warning.

Everything spiritual that keeps that connection with Jesus on this earth alive and strong. Everything that gives the assurance that when He does return for His church He will receive us with gladness and joy. It will be taken away from the heart of that church. From the heart of that believer.

I strongly believe that God will keep those who are truly His own and that none will snatch them away from His hand. Yet I have known some people, who were once so passionate and alive for Christ, who have fallen away from following Him. And I see the great loss of all the spiritual vitality and assurance they once had, and I grieve for them. For it is as if they have been robbed of a precious treasure and cannot seem to find their way back. I can only trust that God will keep their souls and bring them back according to His promise. And at the same time I plead with any who are becoming complacent about their Faith. Hold firm to what you have. Remember, Obey, Repent. Scriptures such as Hebrews 10:23-25 are ignored at our own peril:-

²³ We must hold tightly to the hope that we say is ours. After all, we can trust the one who made the agreement with us. ²⁴ We should keep on encouraging each other to be thoughtful and to do helpful things. ²⁵ Some people have gotten out of the habit of meeting for worship, but we must not do that. We should keep on encouraging each other, especially since you know that the day of the Lord's coming is getting closer.

But there is some really good news in this letter. Look at verses 4-5

Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. ⁵ He who overcomes

will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.

There was Life in the Midst of Death. Jesus could see that the church as a whole was dead, but He knew that amongst those people were a few who were alive, and it made all the difference.

I recall a strong Christian who regularly attended a church which had all the marks of death about it. Its teaching was not biblical. It showed no concern for others or for the spread of the Gospel. Its leadership seemed to follow their own agenda rather than that of the Holy Spirit. And when I asked him why he stayed there he simply said, "that's where God has put me and I will stay there and do what I can for Him till He sends me elsewhere".

I reckon that was the case for these believers at Sardis. They battled on for the truth with little support from others. They avoided the compromise with the world that the others had embraced. And because of that the Lord Jesus promised them the righteous white robe of victory in glory. That their name would never cease to be in His book of life, and that one day He would acknowledge their names as His before the Father and His angels.

Just recently the Australian race horse, Black Caviar, was taken all the way to England in order that it could win a race in front of the Queen. Why? So that its owners and its trainers could be acknowledged as such before the Queen herself and receive from her hand the winners prize.

What the believer is promised here is so much, so much greater. And it is noticeable that it is Christ who does it all for His own. He simply calls us to be one of those who stay true to Him on earth. Who lives in such a way that their clothes are not soiled by compromise with the world but are made pure by their obedience to Him.

Sometimes that will be hard. Especially when others around do not seem to share the same level of commitment. But the Lord of the church is with us, and in the end He will receive us with joy and with praise. For He is Faithful and His Promises endure forever.