

“LETTERS FROM THE LORD – 3 (SMYRNA)”

Revelation 2:8-11

A couple of weeks ago, we looked at the first of the letters that the Risen Lord Jesus Christ told John to write to the Christians in seven churches in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey. That letter to the church at Ephesus was a very challenging one. Yes, it included some encouragement for them, but it also had strong words of warning and rebuke for its readers. We're moving on this week to look at the letter to the church in Smyrna, and we find quite a contrast. It's a message of encouragement and support sent to a community of Christ's followers who are having a really tough time.

We said last time that we weren't necessarily going to go into all the historical and social background of these churches unless it was going to help us understand them better, and this week I think it will. And what we learn about the general situation in Smyrna may well help us as we look at the other letters as well, because a lot of what the Smyrnans were having to cope with was happening in the rest of the Roman Empire too. I'll try not to make it too boring!

Smyrna is the modern city of Izmir and it's still a centre of learning and piety within the Christian Church, particularly in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. It is, in fact, the only one of these seven cities where the tradition of Christian witness has survived unbroken down through the centuries. At the end of the first century, when John was writing *Revelation*, it was a magnificent trading city with a well-defended harbour. It was the birthplace of Homer (the poet, not the yellow cartoon character from Springfield), a beautiful and cultured city, with a famous stadium, a well-known library and the largest theatre in Asia. Seven hundred years before the city had been destroyed and it lay in ruins for at least three hundred years before being renewed and coming back to life again to be one of the Greco-Roman civilisation's most cultured cities.

But this fine, prosperous city was also a very dangerous place to be for Christians. There were two reasons for that. Firstly, there was a sizeable Jewish population and many of the Jewish people regularly informed to the authorities on the Christians. Judaism was a tolerated religion within the Roman Empire and many Jews had assimilated to the Roman religions, but Christianity was very much an outlawed sect. Many Romans thought of Christianity as a perversion of Judaism (after all, it had begun amongst the Jews of Palestine) and the Jews obviously didn't want to be tarred with the same brush, so they put as much distance as they could between themselves and the followers of Jesus Christ.

But secondly, and perhaps more dangerously, Smyrna was a centre of Caesar worship. It was a base for the cult of what was known as *Dea Roma*, which means *The Goddess Rome*. Basically, that meant that the Empire and the Emperor were deified, were treated as divine by the people and everyone was

expected to worship at the dedicated shrines. As long as you offered the compulsory pinch of incense to this goddess and got a certificate of sacrifice for it, you could then go and worship whoever else you wanted. There were Jewish people who were prepared to do this – worship the Emperor and then go and worship Yahweh – and, no doubt, there were some Christians who did it, but most of them were understandably reluctant to do this and suffered for it. Perhaps the most famous “refusenik” was Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna until his execution at the age of 86 in 167AD. It’s possible he might have been a youngster at the church when John wrote this letter to them. He refused to burn incense to the gods and goddesses of Rome and lost his life because of it. And there were very many others who suffered the same fate in the first two or three centuries of the church’s life.

So much for the history. You may also remember that we said each letter has a reference back to the vision that John had of the Risen Christ in chapter 1. Well, in this letter Jesus is introduced as “*the first and the last*”, taken from *1:17* and a reminder that Christ is behind and beyond everything. But he is also the one who “*died and came to life again*” (*1:18*), an appropriate title to choose given the destruction and rebirth of Smyrna itself. The Christ whom the Smyrnan Christians are to serve is the one who has conquered death and who gives new hope to those constantly under the threat of death. This double title of Christ means that in life there is someone with us from whom no time and no event can ever separate us, and that in death there is one with us who has conquered death itself. As Paul writes in *Romans 8:31*, “*If God is for us, who can be against us?*”

With that initial encouragement, the letter continues to talk about the difficulties which the church faces. Christ says to them, “*I know your afflictions and your poverty*” – he has been there, he himself has experienced these problems. He understands and sympathises. The writer of *the Letter to the Hebrews* reminds us (in the words we read earlier on – *Hebrews 4:14,15*) that Jesus is someone who has actually been through the trial and tribulations that we have, he has actually faced the temptations that confront us. When he speaks to these Smyrnans – and to us, to “*those who have an ear*” – he can identify with us, he knows our hassles. So what are they?

1. AFFLICTIONS

The Greek word that is translated as “*afflictions*” here is *thlipsis* and it means “*pressure*”. In fact, in Classical Greek it was always used in a literal sense; for example, a man being crushed to death. These Smyrnan Christians were constantly under pressure which could sometimes seem as real as being physically crushed. They were under pressure to conform, to compromise, to loosen up a bit on their principles.

And that's no less true today, is it? We are constantly under pressure. Maybe it's not quite in the same way that those early Christians were, nor as extreme as many Christians in other parts of the world still face today, but the effects can seem just as real to us, even manifesting themselves in physical ways – ulcers, heart attacks, headaches and so on. There are still pressures on us to conform, to go with the flow, to disregard the principles we claim to hold as Christians – at work, at home, pressure from our peers, from advertisers, from the boss, from the customers. Why should we stick out for our principles? After all, we can offer the pinch of incense in our slightly compromised work arrangements, in our use of time or resources, in our willingness to go along with the crowd – and still come here to worship on a Sunday.

There are those who buckle under the strain. But if we choose to remain faithful to him, Christ is there, able to lift us up, to stand us on our feet and help us withstand the pressure – because he “*knows*” the pressure we're under. He “*knows [our] afflictions.*”

2. POVERTY

Sorry about this, but another Greek word is important here. The word translated as “*poverty*” is the word *ptokeia* and it doesn't simply mean being poor; it means being utterly destitute. Christ himself gave up the riches and splendour of heaven to come into our world to live with no settled home, no personal assets, no material possessions. Once again, he “*knows*” how we feel when life deals us a blow in our pockets and we have to live with very little. In the first century, and in many places today, Christians are poor, destitute, because they refuse to compromise their principles to effect material gain or promotion.

In a wealthy city like Smyrna, poor Christians would have stuck out like a sore thumb. Possibly their goods had been confiscated or pillaged. According to *Hebrews 10:34* such things were not unknown. If we really put our Christian principles into practice in our lives, it may well become obvious by our lifestyle or our standard of living. I can think of three people who particularly stick in my mind because of this, two people who refused to go along with the business practices of their employers and were sacked and a third who uncovered corruption in the local authority where he worked and lost his job for whistle-blowing. They all faced not only poverty, but real affliction. It was difficult in many ways for them – they had families, mortgages, responsibilities. In the short term it did mean poverty. But God honoured their stand for him and blessed them in many other ways.

Our trouble is that we have become so deeply compromised by what we expect and what we acquire that it is very difficult for us to extricate ourselves. And our idea of poverty is nowhere near the level of

destitution that these Smyrnans were coping with and many people today have to cope with as they seek to remain faithful to Jesus in hostile environments. But Jesus has promised to stand with us in our difficulties if we remain faithful to him and to his ways. He will bless us – as he did the three people I mentioned earlier – and, as we shall see in a bit, he will make us rich in other ways.

3. SLANDER

The third thing that the Christians of Smyrna were having to cope with was slander. Jesus identifies the perpetrators as so-called Jews who form a “*synagogue of Satan*”. The point here is, I believe, that if these really were God’s people they would not have been slandering the followers of the Messiah. They were more concerned that others would link the Christian sect with them and they would suffer. So they informed and made up stories about them. Their own comfort was threatened so they attacked anything that contributed to that.

Alas! That kind of thing still goes on today. The person from African Enterprise who was with us during the Keswick Weekend was giving away a biography of Michael Cassidy, founder of the organisation and a key evangelical leader in South Africa before and after the ending of apartheid. In his own book, *Bursting The Wineskins*, he says that, in his attempts to help bring peace and justice to that troubled land, he took far more flak from other Christians than from all the Marxists and Muslims combined. They all wanted to fight their corner, to keep their comfortable ways of life untouched, but Cassidy was too principled and too uncompromising to give in to the demands of state, tradition and racism.

We see it in our own situation, too. A group appears that we don’t agree with – they’re too enthusiastic or they challenge our half-hearted approach to Jesus Christ – and we don’t want others to think that they’re anything to do with the kind of Christianity we espouse, so we repeat rumours, half-truths, gossip about them. Or we find ourselves on the receiving end of such tales. I’ve heard all kinds of Christians referred to as demonic (including the good folk at Alpha) and seem lots of other daft stuff written about certain groups of Christians by other who don’t want to boat rocked.

Maybe you’ve been on the receiving end of gossip at work or in your neighbourhood, even in your family. Maybe people – even seemingly good people – are slandering you. It’s a constant danger in Christian leadership. Christ says, “*I know: I’ve been there.*” People called Jesus mad, demon-possessed, selfish, criminal, a liar – they still do. He knows, he identifies, he cares.

In *v10* some specific sufferings are referred to, things which were doubtless soon to become a reality in the lives of these Smyrnans. “*Ten days*” is a Greek idiom meaning a short time. But the high point in this letter, just as it was the low point of the letter to the Christians at Ephesus, comes part way through *v9*. The triumphant phrase “*Yet you are rich!*”. What a contrast to the “*Yet ...*” in that other letter. There it was a mirror image of this – a great church that was struggling to remember its first love. Here we have a struggling church who are told they are “*plutocrats*” – they have wealth untold. Yes, there are afflictions, poverty, slander – and they are not to be taken lightly, as Christ himself has experienced – but there are untold spiritual riches for those who remain faithful.

The riches we have in Christ is a common theme in the New Testament. Just look at a few references – *Ephesians 1:18; 3:8; Hebrews 11:26; 2 Corinthians 8:9*. Our eyes are so often fixed on the riches of the world around – the tangible, visible, glittering things we can see and count and grab now – that we miss the excitement of what Christ himself has to offer.

It’s no wonder, then, that with that kind of encouragement, with that end in view, the Smyrnan Christians and all those who are prepared to listen, are exhorted to “*be faithful, even to the point of death.*” I mentioned Polycarp earlier on. He remained faithful to the very end. As he faced his executioners and the crowd called on him to recant, his last words are reputed to have been, “*Eighty-six years I have served Christ and he has done me no harm. How can I blaspheme my King who has saved me?*” At death there is the promise of gaining “*the crown of life*”. For the Smyrnans, as they listened to this letter being read out to them in their little meeting place, those words would have conjured up visions of the laurel wreath given as a crown of victory to athletes (like a trophy or medal), or as a mark of service to a municipal official (like an OBE), or as a sign of great celebration at a festival. Yes, it is worth putting up with all the afflictions, the pressures, the slander and the temporary deprivation – because what we have in Christ is infinitely better and greater.

As you go through life – through this next week, maybe – shouldering burdens, as a direct result of your Christian faith or as a result of the fact that you are human and prone to illness, anxiety and so on, remember with the Christians of Smyrna that Jesus knows your problems. He knows, not just in the sense that he can see it happening, but in the sense that he has been there, he has experienced it himself. If you’ve got an ear, listen to what’s being said again (*v11*). Hang on in there, “*be faithful*”, trust Jesus and look forward to life everlasting at his side. Be encouraged this morning that Jesus is there with you – and praise him for it.

Discussion notes on next page

THE CHURCH AT SMYRNA
Revelation 2:8-11

The letter to the church in Smyrna is in marked contrast to the first letter, to the church in Ephesus. The tone is much more positive and there is much encouragement and support for the community of Christ's followers who are struggling in a very dangerous situation. Smyrna was a city of great beauty and culture. It had benefited greatly from the Roman political system (having always backed the right side in civil wars!) and had a rich Greek cultural heritage – a well-known library, a large theatre and the distinction of being the birthplace of Homer. The danger faced by the Christian community was due to the large Jewish population, who were very antagonistic towards them, and the fact that Smyrna was a centre of worship of the *Dea Roma*, the "Goddess Rome". This was a state-initiated religion which involved compulsory regular sacrifices to Rome. The Christians, naturally, refused to offer these sacrifices and were often severely punished as a result. The best known martyr is probably the Bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, who was executed at the age of 86 in 167AD.

The Risen Christ reminds his people that he is behind and beyond everything, and is the one who has himself conquered death. He tells the Smyrnan Christians that he knows what they are going through, he can identify with them in their difficulties (cf *Hebrews 2:17; 4:14ff*). He mentions their:

Afflictions The Greek word is "thlipsis" (θλιψις), which means steady pressure, often the pressure used in torture. They were under pressure to conform and to compromise, but Christ was willing to lift them up and help them withstand the pressure.

Poverty This is not simply being poor, but being absolutely destitute. The Greek word is "ptokeia" (πτοκεια). It's possible that the goods of the Christians had been confiscated or pillaged (cf *Hebrews 10:34*), and poor people would stand out in a wealthy city. Jesus, who left the glory of heaven for the poverty of life on earth, knows how they feel.

Slander Some Jews who were "of the synagogue of Satan" were anxious not to be identified in any way with the Christians, so spread false rumours and informed on them. Jesus experienced similar treatment and cares for his people who suffer in this way.

The high point of the letter is in *v9* – "Yet you are rich!". There are untold spiritual riches for those who remain faithful, even in the face of the sufferings described in *v10*. The Smyrnan Christians are exhorted to remain faithful to the point of death, when, paradoxically, they will receive their "crown of life" – a laurel wreath given to recognise exceptional service in some field of public life.

Questions for discussion

1. In what areas of our lives today are we under pressure to conform and compromise?
2. We may not find ourselves destitute today as a result of our faith, but in what other ways might we stand out from the crowd because we are Christians?
3. "Yet you are rich!" refers to the reward in store for us. Isn't this just "pie in the sky when you die"? Why/why not?
4. Is the fact that we are relatively untroubled by persecution due to our lack of radical witness?
5. Do you find the prospect of "the crown of life" inspiring? If not, what does encourage you to keep going in your faith?