

“LETTERS FROM THE LORD – 5: THYATIRA”

Revelation 2:18-29

I said last week that I believed compromise was possibly the greatest threat to the Western Church and that it was the most prominent theme in these seven letters that Jesus Christ dictated to John to be sent around seven of the churches in first century Asia Minor. After the service someone pointed out to me that the underlying theme of the all-age service when I was not here a couple of weeks ago was also the danger of compromise in the area of our faith. And then someone else asked me about a book he was looking for and wondered if I'd heard of it. I hadn't, so I had a browse round Amazon when I got home. The book was to do with the “purpose-driven church” franchise and I was soon wandering off looking at other books which were advertised on the same pages [several of which were attempts to argue that Rick Warren is a new-age guru, the Devil incarnate, the Antichrist or, worst of the lot, (I kid you not but they are mainly American) a Roman Catholic sympathiser. It goes back to what we said when we looked at the letter to Smyrna about people slandering Christians.]

Anyway, one was by a person called L P Meyers and entitled *This Church is Not Appearing Glorious, And it Doesn't Seem to be Purpose Driven*. The synopsis was as follows:

“What is a Christian? If you take away our t-shirts, bumper stickers, and little plastic fish, we look just like everyone else. Our divorce rate is way up there. Drugs, pornography, violence, giving in to temptation, impatience, lying, sexual promiscuity, adultery, the list goes on, and it looks just like the world ... We must break through, and be the people of God that He has called us to be. A little leaven still leavens the whole lump, and a little compromise still destroys the whole church.”

That seems to be the main point of what Jesus was saying to the church at Pergamum which we considered last Sunday and to the church whose letter we are looking at today – and it will come up again, so be warned!

This is the longest of the seven letters and it's addressed to Christians who are living in probably the least significant of the cities. Thyatira had no great claim to fame, other than as a trading city. It was on a very profitable trade route and had a flourishing wool trade and dyeing industry. Lydia, who was converted through Paul's ministry in Philippi, was a native of Thyatira and would have been very rich as a dealer in purple, the most expensive of the dyes. The plant from which it was manufactured grew in profusion around the city. In this centre of trading and commerce lived a group of Christians who needed to hear some strong words from Christ.

Firstly, though, there's some encouragement for the Christians – as there is in all these letters. Again, after the service last Sunday, someone pointed out that these letters demonstrate a textbook management approach to dealing with people – always give them several pieces of encouragement before any criticism. I suspect Jesus hadn't actually read any management textbooks and, as is so often the case, his

practice has been adopted as a model by others. Anyway, he praises their hard work and singles out their “*love and faith, service and perseverance*” for particular mention. These qualities embraced both their doctrinal faithfulness and their active, practical Christian witness. What’s more, unlike some of the churches who are to receive these letters, they are clearly making good progress – “*you are now doing more than you did at first.*” This church doesn’t seem to have the complacency of Ephesus or Laodicea, nor the coldness of Sardis (as we shall see next week).

“*Nevertheless ...*” There’s that word again – ἀλλὰ ἐχῶ in Greek – which is translated “*Yet*” in some letters and, as here, “*Nevertheless*” in others. There’s a song by The Travelling Wilburys which relates all the wonderful things this person has been doing, but has a chorus that goes “*The Devil’s been busy in your back yard*”. It can, of course, be interpreted on several different levels (he said pretentiously), but I’m pretty sure the writer of the song didn’t have the church at Thyatira in mind when he wrote it. It is, however, very apt here. While the church there has been going on strongly, the Devil has been at work right in their own back yard. And he has been doing so through this person, whom they tolerate, called Jezebel.

Now I don’t think there’s any doubt in anyone’s mind that this is a nickname. No-one in their right minds would have named a child after the infamous Old Testament queen whose idolatry and immorality were (and, indeed, still are) legendary. There was a case a couple of years ago of a white supremacist in New Jersey who named his son Adolf Hitler (it got into the news when a supermarket refused to ice his name on his birthday cake), but it’s probably safe to say he wasn’t really in his right mind. You can read about Jezebel’s exploits in the books of *Kings* and *Chronicles*. She it was who put out a contract on Elijah, for example, and encouraged the Israelites to worship Baal. But who she actually was in Thyatira has exercised the ingenuity of scholars down through the ages – a bit like trying to pin down who Nicolaus was.

There are three main suggestions as to who this person was. Some think she was actually the wife of the church leader, who was undermining his work by her behaviour, advice and persuasion – like a character in a Joanna Trollope novel with knobs on, or a bit like Sally Bercow, the wife of the Speaker of the House of Commons, is thought to be. Others maintain she was a sybil, a famous soothsayer who was known to live in Thyatira and was called Sambathé. It would be quite possible that she would try and seduce people away from their faith, but the letter makes it clear that this was happening within the church and even the Thyatirans wouldn’t have tolerated an openly occult person in their congregation, surely.

The third, and by far the most convincing suggestion fits in with what historians tell us about the town of Thyatira. We need to fill in a bit of background here, so bear with me. As we’ve already said, Thyatira

was a great commercial centre, with all kinds of trades and businesses going on there. Although we've just mentioned textiles and dyeing so far, there were many others that were part of the activity of the town. Archaeologists have uncovered in Thyatira many, many inscriptions referring to trade guilds that were an integral part of the life of the city. Indeed, it's reckoned that there were more of these guilds in Thyatira than anywhere else in the region.

Now, these guilds could be likened to the Freemasons or the union closed shop. If you were in, you were made. If you weren't you'd go to the wall. To ensure economic and social survival, a businessman or tradesman needed to be a member of one of these guilds. Without membership it was very difficult to get a job and almost impossible to trade at all. A friend of mine at college married a girl who was an actress and a dancer. She couldn't get work in Britain until she had an Equity card: and she couldn't get a card until she'd worked. (She got her card after dancing in a bar in Turkey, but that's another story – and not too dissimilar a story from what was going in these guilds, funnily enough!) I once stayed with a man in Rotherham whose father had been a Freemason. This chap was a leading accountant and was invited to join the Masons, but he told them he wasn't interested – both from a Christian point of view and from the point of view of not wanting to dress up and do silly things in secret (as he said). Soon after that his business began to suffer and he suffered badly for a while, although things picked up again after a bit. It was a bit like that in Thyatira.

And the reason the Christians were unhappy about joining these guilds was that the social side of them (which you couldn't really avoid) involved a good deal of idolatry and, at their regular get-togethers, a fair amount of sexual immorality (and we're not just talking about strip-o-grams, either). We're up against the same problems as we saw at Pergamum last week – immorality and meat offered to idols, the two issues addressed explicitly by the letter sent by the apostles from Jerusalem to the new Gentile Christians, recorded in *Acts 15*.

But back to Jezebel, as Ahab used to say after a hard day on the throne. It seems as if she was a woman of some influence in the Christian community there – after all, the letter refers to her as a self-styled prophetess – and she was clearly encouraging the Christians to get involved in all this stuff. Her teaching was giving the impression that such things were OK for believers to get mixed up in. After all, everybody does it, it can't do any harm so long as you're in church on Sunday, don't be so old-fashioned about things – all that kind of thing by way of justification. And the church in Thyatira was, on the whole, tolerating this kind of behaviour. But Jesus says that she will be judged harshly for this “*adultery*”, whether it was literal (as it well might have been) or metaphorical (as was so often the case in the Old Testament – look at, for example, *Hosea* or *1 Chronicles 5:25*).

And these people were obviously saying that they couldn't make a proper living without being part of these guilds, they needed to join them to ensure their survival. If they didn't go along with this kind of thing they'd never be able to get on in their chosen field. But it was capitulating to, getting involved in idolatry – taking God off the top spot in their lives. And it was a live issue for many years. Seventy to a hundred years later, the great theologian Tertullian had to deal with this issue and his response was pretty dismissive of such compromise. To those who found themselves embroiled in it all he said, *“You should have thought about it before you got involved”*. And to those who said they must join in to survive he said, *“There are no musts where faith is concerned.”*

And this is still a problem today for many, many people – not just those who find themselves persuaded to join the Masons or whatever. How far do we go to ensure our economic and social survival? How far are we getting involved in twenty-first century idolatry in order to keep in with our peers? How often do we find ourselves – 30, 40, 50-somethings – saying, like our children do, “Well, everybody else is doing it? Why shouldn't we?” And for most of us, in a nice, middle-class city – and church – like ours, what we really mean is not survival, but how far do we go to guarantee our present standard of living or our standing amongst our peers, our popularity with our friends and colleagues? As we saw last week, there are all kinds of decisions we have to make in our business and financial dealings, in our social and leisure contacts. How close do we get to compromising our Christian integrity? To what extent do we as a church (like the church in Thyatira) tolerate ideas that don't really have much to do with living a distinctive and holy Christian life? Of course, we can all say that we have responsibilities to our families – but aren't we just passing on our own wrong ideas to the next generation? We can all give reasons for being in particular situations in order to witness to others – as, indeed Jesus did. But that only holds water if we are actually witnessing in those situations. If not, we become like the people L P Meyers mentioned in that opening quotation – *“we look just like everyone else”*.

John Sweet, in his commentary on this letter, writes, *“Where the issue was overtly political or religious, discernment would be easier than at Thyatira where it was perhaps mainly economic and social.”* They were tolerating stuff that was moving people away from Christ in a very insidious way and they were gradually moving beyond the clear boundaries that had been laid down less than half a century earlier by the apostles. And I believe that there are still clear boundaries which stand for us as Christians – the New Testament is full of them – and we need to be very careful and attentive if influential voices are not going to seduce us beyond them. Gradually your critical faculties can become dulled, your conscience can become anaesthetised, your integrity can become non-existent.

The picture of Christ given here, again taken from the vision that John has in chapter 1 (*1:14,15*), is of the one who can search our hearts and minds with the blazing gaze of his eyes and trample down the forces of

evil with his feet of glowing bronze. In the older versions of the Bible, v23 refers to “*reins and hearts*”, or kidneys and hearts – a rather odd way of putting it all. To the people of the first century, the kidneys were thought to be the seat of the emotions (what we now call the heart) and the heart for them was the seat of the intellect (what we now call the mind). Christ can look into every part of our lives – at our motives and our rationale, at our feelings and our gut reactions, at our behaviour and our excuses. He knows what we are doing and what we are tolerating that is inimical to his will.

We’ve mentioned the letter that the apostles sent to the Gentile Christians from Jerusalem in *Acts 15* and here is another phrase taken from that letter – “*I will impose no other burden on you*”. What he wants them to do is simply (simply?!) keep faithful to what they already know – “*Only hold on to what you have until I come.*” That seems fairly straightforward, doesn’t it? You know what the boundaries are, what you can and cannot do if you are to remain distinctive followers of Jesus Christ, people who follow his ways with integrity. Stick to that and don’t allow the Jezebels of this world to lead you astray. Be especially careful of those who appear to be within the Christian community, whose siren voices can so easily cause you to compromise your faith in the rat-race of western society.

Those who do hold on, who are faithful, will have the prospect of eventual triumph – and maintaining your standard of living here and now is nothing compared to the glory that is waiting in heaven. Christ says, “*I will also give him the morning star.*” The presence of Jesus Christ himself is promised, the Jesus Christ who is himself “*the morning star*” (22:16). Don’t be hoodwinked into selling out your principles for short-term gain, when there is so much more in store for the faithful who hear and act upon the words of Jesus Christ. “*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*”

Discussion notes on next page

THE CHURCH AT THYATIRA *Revelation 2:18-29*

This is the longest of the seven letters in *Revelation*, but is addressed to probably the least important of the seven cities. There is no great historical or political significance attached to the place, and it seems to have been a fairly uninspiring city. The usual temples and cults flourished there, but nothing on the scale of Ephesus or Pergamum. It stood in an important position at the intersection of two valleys, however, and was a "gateway" to Pergamum. From about 290BC it was a military outpost, with the main purpose of delaying any attack on Pergamum.

It was a city of some commercial importance, though. Standing as it did on a profitable trade route it was a busy city and it was also a centre of textile industry – wool trade and dyeing (Lydia came from there – *Acts 16:14*). Madder, the plant from which the expensive purple dye was extracted, grew in profusion around the city.

The letter contains some encouragement – Christ praises the Christians for their "*love and faith, service and perseverance*", qualities which embraced their doctrinal faithfulness and their active Christian witness. What's more, unlike most of the churches, they are actually making some progress in their Christian lives – "*you are now doing more than you did at first*". "*Nevertheless ...*" there are problems in the church, caused by "*Jezebel*". This is certainly a nickname – but for whom? Some suggest that she is the wife of the Bishop of Thyatira, who is undermining his work. Others say she was a sibyl, or medium, who was seducing people away from their faith. The most likely explanation is that Jezebel was an influential woman within the church who was encouraging Christians to get involved with the trade guilds in the city, which was leading to compromise (again!).

The trade guilds were a bit like today's Freemasons or union closed shops: you couldn't really make any progress unless you were a part of them. Unfortunately, it also meant getting involved in idolatry and sexual immorality. It was an insidious way of moving people away from their allegiance to Christ. The picture of Christ here is taken from *1:14,15* and relates to the burning gaze of one who can search our hearts and minds. He calls on his people to "*hold on to what you have until I come*." They need to stick to the boundaries and not let the likes of Jezebel lead them astray. In the end, economic survival in this world is nothing compared with the prospect of "*the morning star*" (cf *22:16*). Don't be hoodwinked into selling out your principles for short term gain, when there is so much more in store for those who are faithful and who hear and act upon the words of Christ.

Questions for discussion

1. Christ has given Jezebel time to repent (*v21*). Do you think Christ ever gives up on people completely? Why/why not?
2. To what extent is it valid to accuse people of "guilt by association"? What examples can you think of?
3. The idea that Christ will "*not impose any other burden*" on the Thyatiran Christians is reminiscent of the letter from the Council of Jerusalem (*Acts 15*). Are we guilty of adding to the burdens of church members? How? What is the bare minimum we should expect?
4. The reward seems to be a share in Christ's authority (*vv26,27*). How might that work out in practice for us?
5. What have you personally learned from these verses? Will it make any difference to you?