

Sermon – 17/12/2006 am

The Church at Philadelphia

Study Text: Revelation 3:7-13

Growing up on a farm we rarely had holidays – I remember just two. On of those occasions we were all packed to go but the key to lock the front door could not be found. No one had seen it since our last holiday. We never locked our doors on the farm. Day and night, every day, the house was open.

Open Door

As the Jewish leaders dragged Stephen out of Jerusalem and began stoning him to death he said ‘Look, I see heaven opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God’ (Acts 7:56). John was exiled on the island of Patmos for the testimony of Jesus Christ when he had visions. In his second vision he saw a door standing open in heaven (4:1). The church at Philadelphia was told by Jesus *see I have set before you an open door and no one can shut it* (3:8).

Keys are used to open doors. This message to the church at Philadelphia came from him *who has the key of David, he who opens and no one shuts, and shuts and no one opens* (3:7). Moreover, in John’s first vision Jesus said ‘I have the keys of death and Hades’ (1:18). The one with the key is the one in authority. He is the one who says who will enter and who will not enter.

The question is who has the keys and what are the keys for? Isaiah prophesied that Shebna would be sacked and the keys to the house of David would be given to Eliakim. David was the king of Israel and the keys were to the house of the king. Isaiah went on to speak of him being a peg and of the glories of his throne ‘in that day’.

The house of David is no more. It is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Son of David *according to the flesh* but *the Son of God with power* (Romans 1). Jesus is now the one who holds the keys, not to an earthly palace but to the heavenly house of the King of kings. He has in fact delegated such authority to his church, for Jesus said to the apostle Peter *I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of heaven* (Matthew 16:19).

Some see the open door set before the church at Philadelphia as a door of opportunity to preach the gospel. Such metaphorical use is seen in other passages of Scripture (e.g. II Corinthians 2:12, Colossians 4:3). But the context of this church suggests the main focus is upon the open door in heaven. This church was suffering persecution. They were encouraged to hold on to what they had until Jesus returned. The door was open for them as it was for Stephen, and no one could shut it on them. Nothing in this world, not even death, can take away the inheritance we have in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Opposition

Philadelphia (the name means ‘brotherly love’) was a city on the frontier of Greek civilization. It may have had a ‘missionary’ role in spreading Greek culture. It was a relatively

new city and was a cultural centre. It had its temples as well as a synagogue and this small church. Like the church at Smyrna, it was the Jews who were troubling them most. Jesus called it the synagogue of Satan as he did in Smyrna.

If many of the believers were Jews we can imagine how they were pressured to turn back to the old ways. 'Look at all the privileges we have as Jews' they would say as they ridiculed this small gathering of Christians. 'Why do you persist in following Jesus Christ; he is dead. Besides he is not the true Messiah' they would say.

This happens a lot in India. Converts from Hinduism are told that they are traitors to their family and their nation. They are pressured, and even threatened with dire consequences, to return to the fold as it were. It can be the same with Roman Catholicism. Trying to leave a sect can be very difficult.

The Jews were merciless. It seems that the Christians begged them not to accuse them before the authorities. They had fallen down at their feet pleading with them – but one day Jesus promised the tables would be turned. *I will make them come and worship before your feet* (3:9). One day the Jews would know that God loves those who believe in his Son, and not those who hold to the works of the Law, those who killed his Son and persecute his followers (3:9). All those sacrifices, all that fasting and prayer, all that obedience to the Law – all of no use before the true God – whom they thought they were worshipping. They belonged to the synagogue of Satan.

At the name of Jesus every knee shall bow, of those in heaven, of those on the earth, and of those under the earth (Philippians 2:10). There will be no exceptions, not for any person born on this earth – nor for angels or those who are dead. There is no exception here for Jews. They will have to bow before Jesus like everyone else. With Jesus in his glory on that day will be the church from Philadelphia, as well as all faithful followers of Jesus. So these Jews will be in effect bowing before these Christians they persecuted. They will not be worshipping Christians directly.

Overcome

Jesus had only commendation and promises for the little church at Philadelphia. As with the church at Smyrna there is no word of condemnation; no 'but I have this against you'. This message is full of promises to those who overcome. We find here the great promise and central theme of the whole book – *Behold I come quickly* (3:11, 20:20). It is accompanied by the central exhortation of the book – *hold fast to what you have* (3:11).

Jesus knew the works of the Christians at Philadelphia. They had kept his word and not denied his name. They kept his word/command to persevere, a command based on Jesus' own perseverance unto death. Remember this when you suffer; Jesus suffered just the same, and I fact died for you. He was tempted in every way was you are, but did not sin. Jesus persevered. He did not give up, and in Jesus you can do the same.

Jesus gave promises to the church to help them persevere. We have already seen the first of these – those who persecuted them now, would one day be bowing before them. The second promise is that Jesus would keep them from the hour of trial (3:10). 'Here is distinct eschatological reference to the 'messianic woes' which are to precede the return of the Lord'. The reference is not to local judgment but a universal judgment, a time of great tribulation for

the whole world (*cf.* Matthew 24:21). The church will be persecuted as it is now, and as it has been since the beginning, but this tribulation will come on the entire world. All will be tested and will perish, except those who belong to Jesus. He will keep us safe through this time and bring us into his kingdom. The crown of life will not be taken from us.

Thirdly Jesus promised *I will write on him (the believer) the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the New Jerusalem (3:12)*. Not only are believer's names written in the Book of Life, but Jesus will write on our foreheads the name of God. Slaves were often branded with the name of their owner. This sealed them as belonging to that owner.

I recently saw a documentary about ancient China in which slaves were branded on the forehead. There is no hiding such a mark. Christians will be sealed with the name of the Father on their foreheads (14:1, 22:4) and the people of Satan will be sealed with the name of their owner (13:17). There will be no mistaking who belongs to whom on that Day. Only those who belong to Jesus, and bear his name, will enter the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven.

The final promise to those who overcome is that they will be made pillars in the temple of God. This symbol speaks of permanence. Pillars in a building are strong and immovable. David wanted to dwell in the house of the Lord forever (Psalm 7:4). He did not want to go out from this holy place. Believers at Philadelphia were promised they would have just what David desired – you *shall go out no more (3:12)*.

The church at Philadelphia had little strength. They were few in number, poor, hated and persecuted, especially by the Jews. Some would despise our little congregation. We have but little strength. One day a businessman up the road shared out plight, saying you have a big job attracting people to any sort of meeting these days. But our job is not like his. We are not about 'attracting' people as such. The message we preach is hardly attractive to sinners. But it is the message of life. It is the only way for people to be saved from death. We cannot promise riches and a trouble free life to those who come and believe in Jesus. But we do share these great and precious promises that Jesus has revealed unto us in his word.

Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon