

Sermon – 10/12/2006 pm

The Church at Sardis

Study Text: Revelation 3:1-6

Recently I visited a lighthouse up the coast and found two people inside keeping watch over the bay and coastal waters. They were members of the Volunteer Coast Guard. They were ready to help any small boats that got into trouble. If someone's engine failed they would send out a rescue team to bring them back to safety.

It reminded me of a story I once heard. The residents of a small village on a rugged coastline often saw boats get wrecked on the jagged rocks. They got together to set up a coast watch, and volunteer rescue team. When they spotted a stricken sailor they went to his rescue. They brought him back to the little cabin they had built. They gave him dry clothes and warm food. The little cabin was quite comfortable and the view was terrific. As time went by they found the village people liked coming to this place. They extended the cabin and put in carpets, a lounge and TV. They added a gaming table and fridge with lots of drinks. They liked it so much and had such fun there that they forget to watch out for sailors. They instituted a strict dress code so that dripping wet sailors were no longer welcome to what had become a club for members only.

The church at Sardis seems to have had a similar history to this coast guard. You *have a reputation for being alive but you are dead* said Jesus. *Remember how you have received and heard; hold fast and repent* (3:2, 3).

Works

The city of Sardis was built on the high point of a mountain ridge. From this vantage point it watched over a fertile valley and five roads leading out of the city. The city was virtually impregnable. Only twice in its history had it been invaded; both times when it was not watching for the enemies attack. The people of Sardis were wealthy and secure, even arrogant about their position and importance in the region. They lived a rather luxurious and loose life.

The message to the church at Sardis was from him who *has the seven Spirits of God and seven stars* (3:1). Seven remember, stands for complete or full. These features speak of light and life, things that the church at Sardis had lost. They had drifted into formalities in life and worship. They were going through the motions but were in fact dead. They had a form of godliness but had lost its power. They had become nominal Christians.

I know your works said Jesus. He said this to all the churches but with Sardis he said they were dead works. There is no mention of faith, love, or patience in this message. They are not commended for anything. The church was about to die. They had a name or reputation, presumably among the people of this city, but not in the eyes of the Lord. They appeared to be vibrant and alive but were in fact dead, spiritually dead.

What do you notice as being absent in Sardis compared to the other cities? There is no mention of persecution and no mention of false teaching. The church in Sardis had just sunk into spiritual apathy. Most people in this city were rich, comfortable, and secure. The

Christians joined in this way of life. The people worshiped their gods, and emperor worship was popular, but they did not seem to be troubling the church. The church was not troubling them either. 'It was a very peaceful church' writes Hendriksen 'but it was the peace of a cemetery!'

One would be hard pressed to find a better description of many churches in our city, and in the entire western world, than that of this church at Sardis. Nominalism was rife some fifty years ago. People went to church because it was the 'right thing to do'. Nowadays people just call themselves Christians saying 'we live in a Christian country', but rarely attend worship. Many like to be church members but feel no need to attend. One church in the USA is said to have over 10,000 members, an enormous church, but you will only find 40 at worship on any given day.

Even those who attend worship are focussed upon their own peace and comfort. They refuse to move out of their comfort zone. If a dishevelled drug addict ventures into their meeting they are horrified. 'She cannot come to church dressed like that' they will say. 'Look at what is written on her dirty shirt'.

Some churches today are renowned for their support of missions and charities, just like the church in Sardis. They give money to the needy but do not welcome them into their meetings. They must keep everything proper and respectable in their church. 'We are doing good work' they say 'just look at our financial statements'. 'Look at these thankyou letters from missions and charities. They say we are a wonderful organisation'. But what does the Lord see? What does Jesus say? What did Jesus say to the church at Sardis?

Watch

Wake up! *Be watchful and strengthen the things that remain, that are ready to die* (3:2). The light of the church at Sardis was dim and getting dimmer. It was beginning to flicker. If it was to glow once again and be a light to lost and weary souls they must return to the source of that light, Jesus Christ. Jesus was the reason the church existed. Without Christ they were nothing, they were just another organisation in this pagan city.

How had they received Christ (3:3)? Was it because of their works? 'Remember what you were before you heard the gospel'. Paul exhorted the Corinthians in this way (I Corinthians 6). They heard the gospel and by grace through faith they were saved. They were once without God and without hope in this world. They were lost till Jesus found them.

There is no place for boasting when Christians understand this truth. If we do not understand it then we are not saved. If we forget this then we are in danger of divine discipline. Repent said Jesus. Remember how you were saved and hold fast to him who saved you. Do not start depending on your customs, traditions, and own good works. Do not depend on your reputation before men. It is the Lord to whom you will have to give account in the end.

If you will not watch, I will come upon you as a thief, and you will not know what hour I will come upon you (3:3). Jesus spoke in this way about his second coming (I Thessalonians 5:2), but the context here points to a more particular judgment on the church itself. The city of Sardis knew the consequences of failing to keep watch – their city was attacked and destroyed. The church was in the same position. They felt comfortable and at peace but were they watching. Were they examining their own lives, and the life of their church? Jesus

warned them to repent or he would come upon them in judgment when they were least expecting.

Believers should be watching and expecting the return of Jesus at any time. They should be preparing for his return, and hastening that day. It should only be unbelievers who are taken by surprise (I Thessalonians 5:4). Are you watching? Are you ready?

White Garments

There were a faithful few in the church at Sardis. There was a remnant that had not soiled/defiled their garments (3:4). Defilement not only comes from idolatry and immorality. Pride, arrogance and complacency are just as abhorrent to the Lord. God resists the proud (Proverbs 3:34). Cleanse your hands you sinners; lament, mourn and weep, said James (James 4:7, 8). He was writing to brethren who were lusting after the things of the world, to those judging others and exploiting the weak in order to build up their investment portfolio. Sin of all types makes us dirty in the eyes of the Lord.

The few who repented and hated sin were promised a white garment by Jesus. White stands for cleanliness and purity, as we might expect. Jesus would clothe them in his righteousness and would confess their name before his father and the angels (3:5). *Whoever confesses me before men, him I will confess before my Father who is in heaven* (Matthew 10:32). Clothed in the righteousness of Christ we can enter into the presence of our Holy Father in heaven and dwell there eternally. Without this garment we will be refused entry.

Similarly, without our names written in the Book of life we will not enter into eternal life. The promise of Jesus to Christians in Sardis was in negative terms. There is no mention of the kingdom, the power and the glory found in other letters. It was simply that if they did not repent their name would be blotted out from the Book of Life (3:5).

To have ones name written in the Book of Life is everything. Do not worry about getting your name in the record books, or the history books, as so many do. Having your name in this Book that Jesus has is what matters in eternity. If you repent and believe in Jesus your name will be written in the Book of Life. *Anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire* (20:15).

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