

“LETTERS FROM THE LORD – 6: SARDIS”
Revelation 3:1-6

We're on to the fifth of these letters that Jesus dictated to John to be sent to the seven churches dotted around the west of Asia Minor towards the end of the first century – seven churches that had been in existence for forty or so years and were struggling with the pressures of life in a society that was saturated with worship of empty pagan gods and a religious allegiance to the Emperors of the totalitarian Roman Empire. So far we have heard messages warning against compromise and an unhelpful attachment to home comforts, with Jesus giving words of encouragement to the Christians in each city, but also speaking difficult words of criticism and warning.

This fifth letter is to the church gathered in Sardis and, just like the others, there are strong words that were not only for the Christians living the last decade of the first century, but also those who live in the early twenty-first century. Even if we don't hear these words as a rebuke today, we surely need to heed them as a warning. *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”*

Once again, a little historical background will help us to see why Jesus' words were so appropriate in this particular context. Sardis was a great and glorious city, standing at the intersection of five major trade routes and on the main road out of the interior of the Asian mountains towards the Aegean Sea. Therefore it was a place of great wealth and influence. Centuries before, it had been the capital city of the legendary King Croesus, who stands out in classical history as fabulously wealthy, partly because the river which ran through the centre of the city actually carried gold dust along in it. This was the city where coins were first used, so it was, effectively, the birthplace of money. It was also a centre of the textile industry and, like Thyatira, made a lot of money from dyeing.

It wasn't a centre of great religious activity, but it did have a temple of the goddess Cybele, who was believed to be able to raise the dead. Partly because of that, on the outskirts of the city, there was a necropolis – a city of the dead, an elaborate and very grandiose cemetery – which helps to explain the references in the letter to death and dying.

At the time of Croesus, the city stood on a seemingly impregnable outcrop of rock – an acropolis – but by the time this letter was written that was pretty well uninhabited and the main city was down below. However, the history of the old city was well-known and is very relevant to what Jesus has to say to the Christians there. The hilltop fortress gave the inhabitants the impression that they were unconquerable, and it was also a great deterrent to attack in times of war – enemies could see no way to attack the city without great loss of life on their side. In 549BC Cyrus of Persia (about whom we read in the book of *Daniel*), besieged the city. The Persian army on the plain below could see no way up the cliff to attack the city – and the soldiers of Sardis were totally confident of their own safety and security. One afternoon, however, a soldier up on the battlements dropped his helmet over the edge and an observant Persian soldier watched as he walked down a hidden track to retrieve the helmet and remembered the route he took. When night fell, the Persian soldiers climbed up the track and found the city undefended as the inhabitants of Sardis were so convinced of their own safety. The city fell immediately. Strangely, the same thing happened again in 218BC, when Antiochus was attacking the city: the citizens were overcome without a fight, due to their own complacency. The city of Sardis became a byword for complacency and indolence – full of great wealth and influence but, even in its heyday under King Croesus, known for decadence and slackness. The citizens thought themselves impregnable and, just as the river carried gold right into their marketplace, they expected everything to fall into their laps. The Greek historian Herodotus described the people of Sardis as *“tender-footed Lydians [that was the area in which the city stood] who can only play on the cithara, strike the guitar and sell by retail”*, which William Barclay summarises by saying that *“Sardis had become a city of amateur dance-band musicians and shopkeepers”*.

And that is the charge that Jesus lays at the door of the church in Sardis. If compromise was the problem in Pergamum and Thyatira and the danger in Smyrna, and comfortable conformity was the order of the

day in Ephesus, then complacency was the fault for which Christ rebukes the Sardians. They had a good reputation: they weren't what the world would call a dead church. There was no doubt plenty going on there and it seemed quite lively to those around. They didn't face any real threat from the followers of other religions. There was no significant Jewish population to cause them problems as in other places. There's no mention of heresy from within. There was just a very slack and flabby Christianity, a peaceful, plodding church, comfortable with its surroundings and very, very complacent. William Barclay again: "*In any church there is nothing so much to be desired as peace; but in any church there is nothing to be so much feared as the peace which is the peace of death, the peace of languorous lethargy, the peace which had descended on Sardis and its church.*" Yes, it was a church with a good reputation – like the city – but a church that was making no real progress towards spiritual maturity. As Christ says to them "*I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God*". Just like the great necropolis on the edge of town, this church was dead.

You can probably see where this is going, can't you? You wouldn't necessarily say that complacency was the problem with the Church in Western Europe today. There are plenty of problems to keep it anxious about falling numbers, creeping secularism, even persecution by those in power in some places. So get a church like ours, which is growing and has all kinds of things happening week by week, which is right in the city centre and has a good reputation within the community, and we think we're OK. Everything's fine. In Luke's gospel, Jesus is reported as saying, "Watch out when everyone's saying good things about you. That's when you need to heed the lessons of those who have gone before you and learn from their experience." It's in *Luke 6:26* if you want to check the actual words. Now, are these words a rebuke to us – or a warning? You decide – but take them seriously whatever conclusion you draw.

So what's Jesus saying here then, that we need to take heed of this morning? Well, let's see what he has to say to the Christians at Sardis and consider whether that is something we should think about here as well – both personally and as a church.

1. WAKE UP

The first thing Jesus tells them to do is wake up. They need to be aware of the situation – and aware of it in time to do something about it. The soldiers defending Sardis against Croesus and Antiochus and their armies were blissfully unaware that anything was wrong. As far as they were concerned, the city was impregnable and they had nothing to worry about. Everyone knew you couldn't attack Sardis. The Christians in first century Sardis didn't realise there was really anything wrong. Everything seemed to be going well and that opinion was reinforced by the good things that everyone else said about them. They were known as a lively church. People could see their numbers and their programmes, their activities and their soundness.

But the issues were deeper than the surface success. Under the shiny exterior was a creeping death. There were no great scandals, such as those that had been influenced by Nicolaus and Jezebel in the other churches. They weren't struggling under attacks from the pagans and pressure from the state. They were slowly atrophying because their faith wasn't being deepened and their love for God wasn't growing. Somehow they needed to be made aware of that – and this letter was surely the proverbial wake-up call that they needed. Just pause and reflect whether your Christian walk is going anywhere, or whether you're just marking time, marching on the spot – doing Christian stuff but not getting any more Christ-like through it. Wake up!

2. WISE UP

OK, so there's something wrong. Jesus has grabbed their attention. All is not well in the church at Sardis. So what's to be done? Well, there's a bit of life left in them – he talks about "*what remains and*

is about to die". It's not all over yet. There's hope, so long as action is taken. Three ministers were talking at their regular get together and the subject got round to funerals (it usually does with ministers – that or baptisms which went wrong). One of them asked what they'd like to hear as the congregation filed past their coffin at their own funeral services. The Anglican said, "I'd like them to say 'He was a powerful preacher and he changed many lives'." The Roman Catholic said, "I'd like to hear people saying, 'What a great pastor! Always there for those in need just when they needed him'." The Baptist said, "I'd like to hear them saying, 'Hang on! He's moving!'" So long as there's a little life left, something can be done.

But what does Jesus want this moribund bunch of believers to do? Three things are mentioned here. Firstly, ***"Remember what you have received and heard."*** A dead person hasn't always been dead. Once he was very much alive. A dead church hasn't always been dead. Once it was very much alive – and plenty of people know that, which is why they've got the reputation they have. The Christians at Sardis need to look back to the time when they were full of the Spirit, when they were on fire for God. They need to return to the words of the Bible, the things the apostles taught them, the times when they shared their insights into God's ways. They needed to remember what it was that first attracted them to Jesus Christ, and recall his words and his ways which they committed themselves to follow. Think back to those things that Jesus said to you, to the ways in which the Holy Spirit prompted you. Reflect on the impact they had on your life and the way they filled you with enthusiasm and hope. Let's look back as a church to the vision God gave us and the eagerness we had to live it out here in the city centre.

Secondly, ***"Obey it"***. It's not enough just to think back to what you first heard, says Jesus. These Christians at Sardis had to do something with it. No doubt they could recall without too much difficulty the things that God had said to them through his Holy Spirit. But they needed to keep doing them. They needed to apply the words of Jesus, the teaching of the apostles to their own lives, and to expect it to make a difference. They would probably say that they knew the words of Jesus, that they could recall what it was all about – but they weren't allowing it to affect their lives any more, they weren't putting it into practice in the same way. They'd got into a comfortable rut and they were happy there. You know what a rut is, don't you? A grave with no end. We need to keep asking ourselves the question – are we obeying the words God has given us? We may say that we are – in which case, that's fine: but keep asking the question. Because if the answer is that we're not, we need to do the third thing, the thing which was also a command to the Christians at both Ephesus and at Pergamum.

Thirdly, ***"Repent!"*** The Christians at Sardis are told that they need to turn round and start moving in the right direction again. There needs to be a transformation in their lives. And the transformation is clearly not to do with their behaviour – after all, they seem to be doing the right things and they are seen to be working in a lively way. The transformation must, as always, begin much deeper than that, with attitudes and ideas. It's what Paul referred to in *Romans 12* as *"the renewing of your minds"* – a different perspective on life, a different way of looking at the world and at God. Those who have chosen the way of Christ must not allow the world around to influence their thinking and attitudes, their beliefs and behaviour. They – we – need to have a totally different outlook, to think as Christians, to cast a critical eye over all that we might otherwise find ourselves doing so that the world doesn't, as in J B Phillips wonderful translation of *Romans 12*, *"squeeze us into its mould"*. Stop. Take stock. Refocus your attention on Jesus. Because if you don't, there are consequences.

3. WATCH OUT

Jesus is quite clear here. If they don't get on and wake their ideas up, he's going to come and sort them out. Clearly this doesn't refer to the Second Coming of Jesus, as it is conditional on their response (v3), and we don't really know exactly how he will come and punish them. But the threat of his intervention should be enough to sort them out. And quite how Jesus might intervene in our affairs today is something we can never quite know. Maybe he will somehow put an end to our success, will allow the church to implode (which is probably what happened in Sardis, as the church no longer exists), will remove our

sense of joy and peace. Who knows? But I think the response is that we don't really want to find out! We need to get on and sort our ideas out so that we do not have to experience the celestial knock at the door, just when we are least expecting it.

4. WALK TALL

That's not the end, though. Unlike the other six letters, Jesus keeps his encouragement for the end. He's already said that there is a remnant of living tissue in the decaying corpse of the church at Sardis and here he says what that might be. There are those "*who have not soiled their clothes.*" In a city renowned for its fine fabrics, there are some who still look good, who have kept alive their enthusiasm for Jesus Christ and his ways. They are promised the opportunity to walk with Jesus "*dressed in white*". It's great, isn't it, to walk out in new clothes, to be able to walk along knowing that you're wearing the best things that you've got. And if you can walk along in your new threads at the side of someone you love and respect, or someone you really look up to, that's even better. It's what Jesus is promising here. You'll be his companion, his friend, if you are "*worthy*", if you wake up to his words and obey them.

Jesus promises, too, that those who are considered worthy, those who live as he asks them to, will have their names written in the book of life. Their names will never be erased. In Sardis, as in many other ancient cities, there was a register of all the free citizens. Once you died, your name would be wiped out and you'd be forgotten. That can be quite a sobering experience sometimes. I can think of a couple of particular occasions when I've resigned from things and it's just as if I'd never ever been part of those organisations – airbrushed out of history, as they say. But with Jesus, you can be sure your name will be there, and that Jesus will eventually acknowledge you before his Father. He says something very similar in *Matthew 10:32*.

Can you imagine that? You finally get to stand before your Creator and Judge, before the awesome majesty of God the Father, and Jesus stands beside you and says, "It's OK. He's with me." Or, "Father, let me introduce so and so – she's my friend." What an amazing prospect! But just make sure that between now and that occasion when you do stand there, you've woken up to the possibility that you might be on the verge of letting it all go. Wise up to all that you know about Jesus and his love for you by remembering his words, obeying his ways and repenting of your waywardness. Watch out that Jesus doesn't need to come and sort you out. And relish the joy of walking tall with him for now and all eternity. "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*"

Discussion notes on next page.

LETTERS FROM THE LORD

5. SARDIS

Revelation 3:1-6

This is a hard-hitting passage, which forces us to look carefully at our own situation. One of the shortest letters to the Seven Churches of Asia, it nevertheless contains a powerful message which needs addressing just as urgently at the beginning of the twenty-first century as it did at the end of the first.

Sardis was a powerful and wealthy city, which seemed to have everything going for it. It had a commanding geographical position and a long reputation that was still just about alive at the time John was writing. Due to these factors, however, it was a place of decadence, indolence and complacency. That had been made glaringly obvious on two occasions (549BC and 218BC) when the city had been attacked and defeated while the guards were arrogantly idling around. Unfortunately, that was also true of the church which met there. Without any fear of persecution and with a reputation for being rather lively, the church had become a place of slack and flabby discipleship. It was too comfortable and had lost much of its motivation.

The Risen Christ tells the Christians in Sardis to "*Wake up!*" Despite the situation the church had got itself into, there was still hope, so long as they took the message to heart and acted on it. The Christians needed to take a long, hard look at themselves and decide whether they were prepared to go all out for Christ, and thus win his approval, or continue resting on their spiritual laurels and thus risk his judgment when he came "*like a thief*".

There is, however, some encouragement in that there are some in the city (noted for its textile industry) who had not "*soiled their garments*". Some of the Christians have not allowed the attitude of complacency to spoil the purity of their walk with Christ. They will receive the white robes of holiness and have their reward as they walk with Christ.

It is great to have a good reputation as a church, but it is impossible to live on that reputation alone. We need to be open to the moving of the Holy Spirit, sent by the Risen Christ who himself governs and directs the affairs of each church (*v1*).

Questions for discussion

1. Would you say that life as a Christian in Lichfield was comfortable or uncomfortable? Why?
2. What are the dangers of comfortable Christianity?
3. How can a church be seen as alive, but actually be dead (*v1*)? To what extent might that be true of Wade Street Church?
4. How can we guard against becoming complacent and losing our edge? What should we be doing about it now?
5. The warning that Christ gives about his coming in *v3* is quite sobering, but what might it mean in practice?
6. How do you respond to this letter?