

**“LETTERS FROM THE LORD – 7: PHILADELPHIA”**

***Revelation 3:7-13***

Philadelphia – what images come into your mind? Soft, white cheese practically devoid of calories or taste? The distinctive sounds of The Stylistics and The Three Degrees? A city in the United States? Probably not a small city in Asia Minor in the first century AD that needed a letter from Jesus. But that’s where we are this morning. This is the penultimate letter to the Christians meeting in that little cluster of seven cities in the west of the Roman province of Asia, and it’s sandwiched between the challenging letter to Sardis that we considered last week and the no-holds-barred rebuke to the Laodiceans that is looming on the horizon for next Sunday morning. These words that Jesus dictated to John are a welcome breath of fresh air between those other two letters.

A few people spoke to me after the service last week to say how interesting they found the background to these letters, so I make no apology for setting out some of the things that lie behind this letter this week, which might help us to set it all in some sort of context. (If you really don’t like the background stuff, speak to me afterwards and I’ll tell you who spoke to me last week and you can take it up with them.)

At the time John was writing *Revelation*, Philadelphia was one of the most recently built cities – a kind of ancient Milton Keynes, if you like. Although there had been a settlement there for as long as records had been kept, the actual city of Philadelphia was built only in 140BC. It was founded by the Greek King Attalus II and was named Philadelphia because of his great love for his brother, Eumenes II. Philadelphia comes from two Greek words, *philos* (φίλος) and *adelphos* (αδελφός), which mean “brotherly love”.

It was a city of some strategic importance, standing on the borders of three smaller provinces and on the very edge of the more barbarous parts of the Empire that Alexander the Great had built up (sound even more like Milton Keynes, doesn’t it?). It was known as “The Gateway To The East” and Attalus founded it as a missionary city for Greek civilisation and ideas. (It was from Philadelphia that chains of kebab shops stretched away towards the Orient.) The hope was that uncivilised Phrygians and other barbarians would gradually be influenced by the spread of Greek culture, which partly explains the “*open door*” that Jesus mentions here – an open door for the progress of the gospel.

It lay on the edge of a great volcanic plain known as the “Katakekaumene” or “The Burnt Land”. This was exceptionally fertile land and there were huge vineyards there which produced wonderful wine – but it was also very unstable. In AD17 the major earthquake which had hit other cities in the area, reduced the city to rubble and it was rebuilt with the help of the Emperor Tiberius, in whose honour it was renamed Neocaesarea (and, a bit later, renamed again Flavia). Frequent tremors forced people out of the city fairly regularly, due to the danger of falling masonry.

And as you would expect in a city which was so closely linked to the wine trade, there were many temples and shrines to the god of wine and orgies, Dionysius. And there were many temples to other deities as well. Those people who were good servants of the community would often have a pillar built in one of those temples with their names chiselled into it as a kind of reward – not unlike those stones you see just above the damp course in Methodist chapels with the names of worthy citizens written on them.

So there’s a bit of historical background which we shall see has some relevance to this letter – a letter written to Christians who were prepared to stick to their faith in the face of all kinds of opposition. It was a faithfulness that continued long after the time John was writing. As “The Gateway *To* The East”, Philadelphia was also “The Backdoor *From* The East”, a way into the later Holy Roman Empire, and it bore the brunt of the offensive of Islam and was the last Christian city in this area to fall (in 1392) – even then due only to the treachery of fellow Christians in Byzantium. Jesus doesn’t rebuke the Christians here as he does in most of the other letters, but he writes them a letter of praise which deals with ***Opportunity, Opposition and Obedience***. How does that address our situation today?

## 1. OPPORTUNITY

As The Gateway To The East, Philadelphia was in a unique position. The city had, as we've said, been built as a centre for the propagation of Greek ideas and culture (retzina, Ouzo, dirty plays, economic collapse – that kind of thing). But those lines of communication were now available to the messengers of the gospel. Here is the door of opportunity which is being held open by the Risen Christ, the one who is "*holy and true*". The word translated "*true*" there is the word which means genuine, the real thing. The culture of Greece and Rome was full of false gods and false ideas, humanistic philosophies and worldly experiences. The one who is "*holy and true*" comes with the reality of God's love and the only way of making sense of the world.

Just as the lines of communication that were developing within the Greek and Roman Empires could also be used to spread the message of Jesus Christ, so in each era Christians have been able to use new technology as means of communicating that message. Doors have always been opening – the invention of printing meant a massive leap forward in ways of spreading the gospel. The use of radio, then television and satellite television, with its ability to beam the gospel into areas closed to other means of mass communication, have also opened up new opportunities. And the phenomenal development of electronic media such as the Internet, social networking sites and Twitter, provides even more ways of sharing the gospel with those we know and those we don't. Whatever the down sides of such means of communication, we have the opportunity to redeem them for the use of the Kingdom of God.

But he is also the one who "*holds the key of David*" – another references back to chapter 1, where he holds "*the keys of death and Hades*", but also to *Isaiah 22:20ff*. The person who held these keys was the only one who could grant access to the Temple sanctuary and thus to direct contact with God. So this "*open door that no-one can shut*" is not only the door of missionary opportunity, but, more wonderfully, the door to the Kingdom of God. Jesus, who described himself to his disciples in John's gospel as "*The Door*", is the only way to the Father, and he continues to hold that door open for us today.

The great thing is not only that Jesus holds open the door, but that once he has opened it, so-one can shut it. There is no-one who can successfully keep us out of the Kingdom of God. The devil may try to convince us that there are things which can ultimately keep us from Christ, but that is a lie. Look at, for example, *Romans 8:35,38,39*. The door is open, and we have access through Christ to God.

## 2. OPPOSITION

Just because no-one is ultimately able to close that door which Christ holds open doesn't mean that no-one will try. At the time John was writing, if a Jew decided to convert to Christianity, there would be a symbolic slamming of the synagogue door in his or her face, a clear sign that they were considered to be cut off from God. (Today, some Orthodox Jews will hold a funeral service for anyone who converts to another religion.) That signified real opposition to these Philadelphian Christians and Christ here uses the same phrase to describe the opponents of the gospel as he did in the letter to the church at Smyrna. They are called "*the synagogue of Satan*".

It goes without saying that we will always face some kind of opposition if we are taking our commitment to Jesus Christ seriously. Somehow or other the devil will try to get at us and knock us off our faith. Maybe it's something that we don't always take seriously enough, and something that we certainly don't mention very often in our evangelism. Following Jesus is so often presented as the answer to all our problems, without acknowledging that it can also be the reason for our encountering a whole new set of problems.

But there is encouragement here. The opposition will eventually be forced to admit its mistake. Jesus says here that he will "*make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you*" (v9). There's a great scene in Robert Duvall's film *The Apostle* (an excellent film if ever you get the

chance to see it), in which a long-time opponent of Robert Duvall's pastor character comes to acknowledge that his opposition to the gospel is wrong. There may be opposition now, but there are much better things in store for those who stick with Jesus Christ.

There will be protection from "*the time of trial*" which will eventually confront everyone. Now we could spend an awful lot of time trying to get to the bottom of the references in *Revelation* to such times of trial. People have all kinds of ideas about what it actually entails and there are whole schools of thought about it – pre-millennial, post-millennial, millennial, non-millennial and so on. Indeed, some churches, especially in the USA, choose their pastors on the basis of their beliefs about these times of trial. My view is millinerian – not sure what's going to happen, but we'll all be wearing nice hats! Actually, the first part of that is true: I'm not entirely sure what's going to happen, but what I would say is that whatever it means and whenever it happens, it's not going to be much of a picnic, so the best thing to do is to take avoiding action now, while you still can, and do what Christ asks. If you follow the words of Christ, it's clear that you will be shielded from it by him and you don't have to worry about it. Many apologies to the gatekeepers of doctrinal soundness about that, but the best thing to do is just make sure you don't have to go through it.

### **3. OBEDIENCE**

And, as we see in this short letter, the best way to avoid that time of trial, to avoid the judgement of Christ, is to do what these Philadelphian Christians are praised for – "*keep my words and do not deny my name.*" Obedience is the key to all this and part of that call to obedience is standing firm in the name of Christ whatever the opposition.

When Jesus talks here about "*keeping the word*", he seems to mean two things. We should primarily and unequivocally hold fast to the written word of God – the Bible. Whatever people around us – and other people in the wider church – might say, the basis of our faith is the revealed word of God as given in the Scriptures. There can be no other standard by which we live our lives. These figures are a couple of years old now, but I suspect they haven't improved very much, if at all. In 2007 in Britain 53% of people considered themselves to be Christians, but only 15% attend church at least once a month. Of those who went to church a Bible Society survey in 1997 showed that 16% – fewer than 1 in 5 – were in the habit of personally reading (or hearing read) something from the Bible every day, and that, including those who did read the Bible daily, only 1 in 4 (25%) read the Bible more than once a week. Overall, just over two-thirds (68%) had read at least something from the Bible during the past twelve months. However, this meant that nearly a third (32%) had either not read anything from the Bible during the twelve months preceding the survey, or had never personally read the Scriptures at any time in their lives. An ad-hoc survey conducted by a Christian publisher during a number of Church meetings in 2000 showed that, even in churches described as *sound* and *keen*, on average less than 10% of the congregation read the Bible every day, and only 30% – fewer than 1 in 3 – were reading it at all during the week.

You cannot hold to God's word if you don't know what's in it. And if you want to know what's in it, you need to read it regularly. There is no way you can call yourself a Christian, a follower of Christ, if you don't regularly and systematically read God's word. And if you are going to "*keep to my word*" as Christ puts it, you ought to get on and read it. We are looking at this letter on the second Sunday in Advent, the week when traditionally Christians have focussed on God's word, so this would be a very good time to take stock.

But Jesus also communicates with us now through the agency of his Holy Spirit. His word comes to us with power and authority to reinforce what is in the Bible. Whatever you may hear from some quarters, the Holy Spirit does not bring new revelation from God on the same level as the Bible – believing that he does was the great mistake of Mohammed, Joseph Smith of the Mormons and the Revd Moon, as well as some people who are, alas, more comfortably accommodated within the wider Christian Church. But we do hear God speaking to us with great directness through his Holy Spirit as he highlights things from the

Bible, as he draws things to our attention, sometimes very forcibly, which we need to hear. And we should never ignore those promptings: we must always *“keep to his word”*. The key to obedience is a love for and an immersion in the word of God.

And for those who are obedient, once again Christ promises a reward. The rewards mentioned here for the faithful are very appropriate to the Christians of Philadelphia. They will be made into pillars of the temple of God – like those worthy citizens who had their own pillars in the pagan temples. But there is an added bonus here – *“Never again will he leave it.”* Unlike the people of Philadelphia who often had to leave the city and run out of the temples because of the danger of injury from earth tremors, and pillars which fell and were destroyed, those who hold on to what they have will be kept safe for ever in the temple of God.

What’s more, just as the city was renamed on different occasions, so the Christians will have a new name, the name not of an earthly Caesar, but of a heavenly and eternal king – they will be Christ’s people and have his name on them forever. What an encouragement to obedience – a permanent place in God’s temple and his name for ever on us, marked out as his for eternity.

The Christians in Philadelphia were able to look forward to great things because of their steadfast commitment to Christ. Are you? Are you willing to use the open door of opportunity to share the gospel with those around? Are you ready to face opposition, to hold fast to the word of God as he speaks through the Bible with the help of his Holy Spirit? Can you look forward with assurance to the eventual rewards for the faithful? *“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”*

*Discussion notes on next page.*

**LETTERS FROM THE LORD – 6: PHILADELPHIA**  
*Revelation 3:7-13*

After the powerful challenges of the previous letters, this letter comes as a breath of fresh air – an encouragement and inspiration to even greater commitment to the cause of the Gospel, based on the good things that are happening already.

Philadelphia was a fairly recently built city when John was writing. It was founded by Attalus II in 140 BC and named Philadelphia (“brotherly love”) because of his love for his brother Eumenes II. It was a city of strategic importance on the borders of Lydia, Mysia and Phrygia, at the edge of the Alexandrian Empire. It had been known as “The Gateway to the East” because it was considered to be the launching point for the spread of Greek civilisation and ideas to the more barbarous peoples of the east. The volcanic plain lying to its east was very unstable, leading to frequent earthquakes, but also very fertile and there were huge vineyards around the city. Being linked so closely to the wine trade, there were many temples to Dionysus/Bacchus, and prominent citizens would have their names chiselled on to the pillars in the temples. The city had been renamed on at least two occasions – Neocaesarea and Flavia. It was one of the cities which later bore the brunt of Islamic invasions and was the last city to fall in 1392.

**Opportunity** As the “Gateway to the East” the city was in a unique position in terms of communication and was well placed to propagate the gospel of the *“holy and true”* Christ, in contrast to the religions of the false gods of Greek culture. Christ has opened door to heaven, but also the door of opportunity – and no-one can shut it. The challenge is for the Philadelphians to make the most of the open door.

**Opposition** No-one can shut the door that Christ holds open, but there will always be those who try. Jews who converted to Christianity at this time had the synagogue door symbolically slammed in their faces. There was clearly opposition to their work from the *“synagogue of Satan”*. It goes without saying that the gospel will provoke opposition, something that unfortunately does go without saying in some churches! But there is also encouragement. Eventually the opponents will come and fall at their feet and acknowledge that Christ has loved them.

**Obedience** The key to all this is obedience – *“keep my word and don’t deny my name”*. We must hold fast to the Word of God – the basis of our faith. But we must also be alive to the ways in which the Holy Spirit highlights God’s word for us in our lives day by day. Once again, there are rewards promised for those who follow Christ’s words – a place in the Temple of God, which he will never leave, and a new name.

**Questions for discussion**

1. The Philadelphians were encouraged to make use of their position and communications to spread the gospel. What are the opportunities for us here at Wade Street Church? And how might we best use them for the Kingdom of God?
2. Where do we meet opposition today? Where might we expect to meet it in the future?
3. Do you find obedience difficult? Why/why not? Why do you think God makes it difficult for us to be obedient?
4. In what ways might we *“deny Christ’s name”*? How can we guard against it?
5. How does the Holy Spirit communicate with us today? How can we be sure it’s him speaking to us? How should we respond?

