

Revelation 2:18-29

Arrogance Humbled

Of all the Seven Cities of Asia, Thyatira is the one about which we know the *least* in archaeological terms. However, the letter itself is the *longest* of the seven, and probably the most difficult to handle. What I want to do in this sermon is first of all to *sketch* an outline of what was going on; secondly, to *skim* through and comment on a few particular points; thirdly to *draw out* some of the *significance* of this letter for today.

What was going on in Thyatira

*So what does it seem was *going on* in this church?*

First of all it was a church that was **going places**: “**I know your deeds,**” says the Lord, “**your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.**” (v.19) It was a church that was reaching out and probably growing. But it was also a church in **danger** and a church on the brink of collapse. Why was it so fragile? Possibly because its growth was **founded on popularity** rather than pure commitment to Christ. We see from v.20 that they tolerated a false prophetess nick-named here as “**Jezebel.**” Jezebel was clearly influential in leading church members away from Christ and the fact that she was tolerated without discrimination, even though her teachings were doing such damage suggests that this church was terrified of losing ground through unpopularity.

But Jezebel’s teaching didn’t lead everyone astray, because v.24 refers to “**the rest of you who do not hold to her teaching...**” So the church was **divided**. These “non-participants” were clearly under some pressure. They probably felt dubbed as killjoys, or narrow minded - as so the church was a **hurting** church. But Jesus says to this minority: “**Only hold on to what you have until I come.**” (v.25) Judgement is imminent. Jezebel is like a balloon about to burst. Then the church will be shaken and seem to be torn apart. But those who remain faithful will become stronger. So it was **a church** with a future.

That’s a brief *sketch* of some of what was probably going on. Let’s now **skim** the passage because I want to draw your attention to a few details.

Images

Firstly, as we’ve come to notice in all these letters, the passage opens with a description of

Jesus - alluding to the original vision John saw back in Chapter 1. As with the other letters, the points highlighted in this description are relevant to the church it was addressed to.

Jesus' **“eyes like blazing fire”** suggest a penetrating knowledge and a *passion for truth*. There is something fearsome about one whose eyes are ablaze. Something is desperately important to them: And Jesus is passionate about this situation in Thyatira. Many thought it didn't matter - they *tolerated* Jezebel - but Jesus has a passionate and fiery message to bring.

Then we read, his **“feet are like burnished bronze.”** The normal Greek word for bronze is *“chalkos”* but here John uses the word *“chalkibainos”*. He is probably referring to a local Thyatiran alloy. One of the things we *do* know about this city, you see, is that it had a particularly large number of trades guilds: clothiers, bakers, tanners, potters, linen workers, wool merchants, slave traders, shoemakers, dyers, and coppersmiths. For each of them membership involved worship and dedications to pagan gods, in the workplace the temples and possibly the home. There was a *good deal of pressure* on Christians to conform. But through this picture, the Spirit says it's *Jesus* who is Lord of all - Lord of your mineral resources, Lord of your mining and refining skills, Lord of your economic situation. That's a message to apply to ourselves today.

Thirdly, this prophetess **“Jezebel”** - let's think some more about her. Queen Jezebel was one of the Israel's great anti-heroes - the one who led them astray during the time of Elijah. Immensely powerful yet gorgeously glamorous, she systematically murdered the prophets of Yahweh, and those who remained went into hiding. But more than the prophets - Jezebel effectively *murdered truth*. It's very unlikely that a woman wielding such significant influence in the church would actually be called Jezebel, through this code-name John's saying that she is destroying both the *community* of truth, and their *witness* to the truth. However, another theme of his book is the way in which truth has a habit of resurrecting itself.

Fourthly, Jesus says there will be *consequences* of her actions befitting them: **“I have given her time to repent of her immorality”** he says, **“but she is unwilling. So I will cast her on a bed of suffering and I will make those who commit adultery with her suffer intensely, unless they repent of their ways. I will strike her children dead.”** John's phrasing make this appear as a direct judgement. Nowadays we might see it simply as a consequence, but First Century people wouldn't have distinguished between the two: all things and bad were seen to come from God's hand. To me this consequence seems a perfect clinical description of sexually transmitted disease. It's not *certain*, however, that sexual immorality was the main burden of her teaching. Immorality is often used in Revelation as an image of *general* unfaithfulness to Christ. But she was certainly encouraging Christians to be *two-timing* God - indulging in a self-consumed and self-consuming lifestyle - unfaithful to the Lord.

Fifthly, and finally, let's notice the reward. As we've seen before, all the seven letters end

in this way: **“To him who overcomes...”** What is the reward this time? First of all Jesus promises **“authority over the nations”** and then in v.27 he quotes from Psalm 2. It was a Psalm widely seen in the New Testament as predicting Jesus’ triumph: his victorious resurrection, his magnificent ascension, and his messianic reign. Here, therefore, it is saying that those who persevere will **share that victorious** reign with Jesus.

“I will give them the morning star.” he says. Later in Revelation Jesus himself is referred to as the Morning Star. So John is saying: “You may not have so much popularity if you hold on to the narrow truth, but you will have *Jesus* - the bright star of glory.” The section of Psalm 2 quoted is surprising: The overcomer **“will rule them with an iron sceptre; he will dash them to pieces like pottery.”** You might feel that’s rather violent. But *possibly* John chose it as a deliberate reference to some more of these trades guilds: You may feel powerless *now* in the face of these seemingly massive corporations, but when the truth is revealed you will rule in triumph over them.

Okay. So we’ve *sketched* the possible background. We’ve *skimmed* through some of the details. What about the *significance* of this letter?

Significance

What struck me about this letter was the **seriousness of the situations we tolerate** and I believe this is a highly significant message for today. Tolerance is a tricky issue: if you breed *intolerance* you soon end up with the fascist attitudes through which minorities are murdered by mob rule. Yet the *cult* of tolerance as a sophisticated lifestyle is also irresponsible. What direction does the passage point us in? At first, there seems to be conflicting evidence: On the one hand Jesus says: **“I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel.”** So here it’s *their* tolerance that’s viewed by Jesus as a negative point. Yet at the same he himself says, **“I have given her time to repent...”** In other words *he* has tolerated her. So what’s the difference?

The difference, I suspect, is that they were simply allowing her to go ahead without any **challenge.** The Greek word translated here as “tolerate” literally means “to allow” or “to release”. No-one is doing anything to stop her from destroying the church. No-one is doing anything to prevent her leading people astray. Maybe they felt they couldn’t. Maybe they felt her teaching was too clever: the **“so-called deep secrets”** (v.24). It took **courage** and boldness. Maybe they felt they would lose too many friends if they opposed her, or that their jobs would be under threat if they failed to celebrate pagan values and the local shrine. But the result was that while God says “You are doing wrong, but I am giving you time to change” the Thyatiran church was saying nothing at all. And that’s the difference between grace and tolerance.

How the church needs prophets! We need to see the **danger** of what is going on around us and we need to speak into the situation. And there *is* danger. Look at this passage!. Whether metaphorical or not, God says, **“I will cast her on a bed of suffering and I will make those who commit fornication with her suffer intensely... I will strike her children dead.”** Jezebel’s teaching leads to death. Death! People dying! People suffering intense pain! Babies being miscarried or stillborn. These things are serious. They are not just minor health risks.

What do **we** tolerate by which truth is murdered and which leads to death? What conditions do we tolerate? Let’s consider four.

You **know** the numbers of men diagnosed HIV in the UK since 1988 has nearly **doubled.** Among women it has risen by **900%!** The number of new infections is predicted to double again by 2005. AIDS among women has risen by 600%. When you look at the route of transmission, the figures are particularly revealing. Those who have been infected through drug use in the UK have gone **down** by nearly 60%. Those infected through homosexual intercourse has **risen** by 18%. Those infected by heterosexual intercourse has risen by **more** than 1200%.

At the same time syphilis among homosexual men has risen dramatically in the last year, and across all people has risen by **870%** since 1996, **chlamydia** by 139% and **gonorrhoea** by 106%. Now there are all sorts of reasons for this, but just consider the conditions we tolerate that murder truth and contribute to these figures:

We tolerate TV programme after TV programme promoting and celebrating the attempts foolish people to have one-night stands in Ibiza. We tolerate lifestyle images that are increasingly sexualised being pushed at young girls through magazines and comics. We tolerate the “common sense” teaching of sex outside marriage, even though relationships without marriage are far more likely to break up, leading to an increasing number of sexual partners. We *blame* it on lack of safe-sex awareness, but it goes so much deeper than that.

As Christians, it’s essential that we *don’t* make distinctions about who we accept and who we reject. Jesus welcomed *all* people who came to him. But at the *same time* we must *not* simply tolerate the teachings of a culture that lead people to self-destruction. As Christians we need to be *counter-cultural* - and that was exactly the challenge they were running away from at Thyatira.

It was the challenge facing the **German** church of the 1930s. During 1930s Hitler rose on a **wave of fascism** that spread across Europe. It took a particular hold in Germany because of the humiliation suffered after WW1. People rejoiced at this new messiah. He **mobilised the youth** into purposeful progressive units. The church, like the vast majority of the people, were thrilled - the church supported Hitler - except people like **Dietrich Bonhoeffer.** Bonhoeffer opposed Nazism from the start because he could see where its anti-semitic teachings would end. He said

such easy tolerance being shown by the church was simply “cheap grace” because it undersold the challenge of living God’s way. Eventually he was imprisoned and executed for his involvement in a plot against Hitler.

Many people couldn’t see where Hitler’s philosophy would lead. Many knew what was happening but simply couldn’t see how awful it was. Hitler was good. Yes - there were rumours that mentally ill people were being routinely gassed in groups of 60. And after objections were made they were simply injected instead. Hitler brought prosperity. A programme I was watching on this called it euthanasia: How important do *you* think the euthanasia debate is nowadays? Not even the German church of the 1930s could see it - except for Bonhoeffer and his colleagues.

But by 1942 Hitler’s final solution - the extermination of the Jews - was openly printed in the news. In Warsaw the rations given to the Jewish ghettos were a tenth of what was given to Germans. It was **deliberate starvation.** Then came the deportations, the Jewish communities of towns and villages taken to the sand dunes, woods, or even the streets, forced to strip and **shot**.

By then it was becoming harder and harder to resist. The evil had been tolerated too far and Germany was embroiled in war. The moment had past. German Resistance could no longer be open. But it could still be open in places like Hungary - and my family had to eventually flee because of the stand they took. Hitler gave hope and happiness. Yet only a little further down the road were the **death camps.** Bonhoeffer could see it. He wouldn’t tolerate it. What do we tolerate in our culture? Teachings and philosophies we allow to become deeply bound to us - yet they lead to death.

Here’s an example: Earlier this evening, Chris interviewed Sarah about her trip to the Philippines. We tolerate cultural norms where **the rich** get richer and the poor get poorer. We tolerate a global economy where the highest premium is placed on price. We tolerate **child slavery** and sweatshops. We tolerate the practices of multi-national branding clothes manufacturers. We *want* them to keep costs down so that their huge **advertising** budgets can entertain us. It’s not a matter of necessity for us - merely our entertainment - our growing collection of the latest fashions. Yet someone else is literally on the street. In places like Manila people are forced out of work at gunpoint if they try to form unions. Companies making millions out of exports will not even pay their workers half the Filipino minimum wage. We tolerate this unthinkingly.

And what of **advertising?** How many lives and livelihoods did that last “entertaining” high-budget advert cost? How much poverty did it induce yet we made no protest? And what about the effect on us?

The images of the media are so powerful yet they distort the ways in which we view

ourselves and one another so painfully - and we tolerate it. *This* counter-cultural poster was part of a campaign by "Ad-busters" - it makes makes a connection between the media imagery foisted on men, and their male inadequacy, promiscuity and aggression. *This* poster makes a similar connection between media imagery and serious eating disorders. Do we have to *tolerate* such philosophies that lead to death, or can we too counter them in our conversations, life-styles, habits and attitudes?

Finally, how about *drugs*? Have you ever had to say "no" to drugs? Perhaps you said "yes". We've heard the teaching - *what's wrong* with marijuana, the occasional line of coke or *e* Now the jury might still be out on exactly how the legalisation of Cannabis might affect patterns of Heroin use, but what is insidious is the shared cultural philosophy that it doesn't really matter. *People die* painful deaths; people live horrible lives - the world over - because of addictions and the drug trade. We know the squalor of heroin addiction; so *how do we respond* to the drug culture of night-clubs? How can we simply tolerate a philosophy - without making a *single* objection or taking a *single* stand? *These things* lead to death. They are all connected - and so is our tolerant silence.

What do *we* tolerate? And why? What's the *pay-off* for us? *Why don't we* find ways of objecting, of correcting, of re-teaching, of re-modeling, or re-building the culture we live in? That's what Jesus wanted in the church Thyatira, and I believe that's what he wants in *our* church world-wide today. So what can we do about it? *Here are some final thoughts:*

We need to seek informed awareness;

We need to pray for prophetic inspiration;

We need to count the cost of changing lifestyles;

We need to face the discomfort of counter-cultural conversations;

We need to commit to projects of educational and practical change.

Let's pray now!!!