

Revelation 2:8-11

Smyrna

The city of Smyrna cascaded in sunlight down the mountainside and towards its excellent harbour on the Aegean. Aristides likened the city to a flower, a statue, or a crown for its poise and perfection. In fact the motif of a crown occurs on every listed coin before the Roman Empire took over - and sometimes three times on the same coin. The product of careful urban planning, Smyrna's streets were laid out in straight lines, paved with stone and graced by elegant porticoes. Fountains flowed with the water from civic aqueducts. A theatre on one of the highest slopes overlooked the lower town. Temples were in abundance, including one to Zeus and another to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, beauty and fertility. As in many cities, Dionysus the god of wine and joy was celebrated in a great annual festival, and in AD26 Smyrna competed successfully against eleven others to become warden of the cult of Emperor Tiberius. The city was claimed as the birthplace of Homer with a shrine in his honour, along with a library, gymnasiums, baths, and a stadium.

Yet underneath its stylish facade, so attractive to tourists and traders, was a dark and menacing malevolent force - and this is of course a phenomenon we see the world over today. Here in London, within a stone's throw of the pristine architecture of St James' Park are the Soho prostitutes, smuggled into this country and controlled often by extreme violence and blind fear. Smyrna was an affluent city, but the Christians there were poor, pitiable, and persecuted.

Trouble at' Mill

What was going on? Well the passage gives us three clues.

The first clue is at the end of v.9, the "**Synagogue of Satan.**" Satan, literally means the Accuser: i.e. the one who accuses us before God of our sins, looking for a verdict of judgement and destruction. So a possible inference of this phrase is that the traditional synagogues were accusing the Christians in some way and getting them into trouble.

The second clue is in v.10: "**I tell you , devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days.**" The accusations were cutting ice with the civic authorities. There was something the Christians were or were not doing that broke the law - and most likely that thing was non-participation in the Roman Imperial cult - in other words offering worship for and to the Emperor.

The third clue is back in v9: "**I know your afflictions and your poverty.**" Smyrna was a wealthy city but the Christians' abstinence from pagan worship marked them out as antisocial.

Indeed, the Roman historian Tacitus described them as having a “*hatred against humankind*” because they would not offer sacrifice to the gods. Inevitably this would have led to loss of trade, whilst imprisonment might lead to the appropriation of property. Again, we see exactly the same kind of thing in various parts of the world today: like the church whose houses along with their church, were looted, ransacked and torched in Kaluvenkerni, Sri Lanka, by a frenzied mob of Hindu fanatics. over thirty had to seek medical care at the local hospital.

Outside the Bible

What evidence *outside* do the Bible do we have to back these inferences?

Firstly, we know that Jewish-Christian relations could be a problem because just a few decades before, in AD49 the Emperor Claudius ordered a mass expulsion of the Jews from Rome after there were riots over one called Chrestus - almost certainly a textual corruption of “Christ”.

Secondly, we know that Roman-Christian relations could be a problem because they hit the front page in the mid-60s when Nero accused Christians of causing the great fire of Rome.

Thirdly, we know that during the late 80s, when Revelation was probably written, the Emperor Domitian had stepped up his claim to be “Lord and God” and was enforcing worship as never before.

Fourthly, we know that Jews were explicitly protected under Roman Law from having to join in this worship partly out of deference to the antiquity of the Jewish religion, and partly because the Jews were said to helped Augustus, then called Octavian, win the battle of Actium. So Jews had protection, so Christians, many of whom were Jewish in part at least, could also attempt to shelter under it. Even those Christians who were wholly Gentile could hope that belonging to a church which claimed the spiritual heritage of Israel might let them off the hook. The trouble was that the traditional synagogues didn’t want these Christians claiming their privileges. They considered it an offence. If these Christians wanted to worship this new, so-called Messiah Jesus, they would have to stand on their own two feet to do it.

Fifthly, what made matters worse was that since the 70s the Romans had begun charging a new tax on the Jews, as a punishment for the Jewish Revolt. And so the Roman Governors were very interested indeed to know who was and who was not Jewish: There are even records such as that of an old man being stripped naked in court to ascertain whether he was circumcised or not.

Sixthly, about three decades later, in Northern Turkey, the Province of Bithynia, the Roman Governor Pliny described his policy regarding Christians. He explained that three he pleaded with them to make even a small offering before the emperor’s shrine. Yet if the answer was persistently “no” then he had no option but to do his duty and execute the offending non-participant.

It was costly to be a Christian - just as it is still costly today. Worshipping Jesus cost the four congregations whose churches were burned down in Northern Nigeria last Monday. Or take Pastor Madumere - an effective evangelist among Moslems in the city of Kano - burned to death with his family in his own home.

Jesus' message

So what does the Spirit of Jesus say to people in such circumstances?

Firstly, as I said last week, at the head of each of these letters Jesus introduces himself with reference to the original vision in which he appeared to John on the Isle of Patmos. Here he says, **“I am the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.”**

In the midst of all the turmoil of our lives, Jesus is the one who is the beginning and the end. He holds *everything* together. He is the point of departure and the place of landing. No matter what your particular journey is; no matter what your particular challenge is; no matter whether you have to walk the high wire of a stressful work environment or the plank of direct persecution: Jesus is the beginning and the end for those who trust him.

Secondly, Jesus says once again, **“I know...” “I know your afflictions... I know the slander.”** We might say “Why does God not *do* something?” Why does he leave us in these awful situations. The complete answer may not be available, but it certainly isn't that he doesn't know. He knows the beginning and the end - he himself suffered but from death he came to life again. **“I know...”**

Thirdly, he says, **“I know your poverty - yet you are rich!”** Christians have riches in the midst of poverty - the riches of faith; the riches of the love of God which binds us together in solidarity; the wealth of the comfort of the Holy Spirit of God. It would have been easy for these Christians to think: “Look at all this wealth around us in the city of Smyrna, yet we have nothing.” Nothing would have been further from the truth! In Christ we have incalculable riches, and Christians in persecuting contexts know that - they *know* how precious their faith is - and that is why they stick by it! Do you know how precious your faith really is? Do you really *value* it. The Psalmist said, “Your commands to me are more precious than gold!” They were rich!

Fourthly, he says, **“Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer.”** Do not be afraid?! You must be joking! Someone threatens to pour petrol over me and set alight to it and you say “Don't be afraid”!? But you can choose not to be afraid. Earlier we saw a film depiction of Oscar Romero - shot as he celebrated mass in the Cathedral of San Salvador in 1980. He said, *“Because it is God's work we not fear the prophetic mission the Lord has entrusted to us. I can imagine someone saying, “So now he thinks he's a prophet!” No, It's not that I think I'm a prophet, it's that you and I are a prophetic people. Everyone baptised has received a share in Christ's*

prophetic mission.” This is the perspective that gives courage not to fear what may lie ahead.

What strikes me, however, is just how timid *we* are here in the UK where we have religious freedom, compared to our sisters and brothers in other parts of the world. We bring shame on ourselves! We’re so weak simply in letting others know about our faith. What kind of solidarity is that with those who are really suffering because they are prepared to advertise their faith? We may show solidarity in prayer - every now and then - but what about solidarity in action - in a common practice of witnessing to our faith? I look at my life and the lives of some of these Christians and they hardly seem to have any point of contact.

Fifthly, then, Jesus says **“Be faithful, even to the point of death.”** Be faithful - even as the one who called you is faithful. Here at St James’ we have quite a number of weddings. Each time I ask the bride and groom if they will “forsaking all others be faithful to him / her as long as you both shall live.” In every case (so far) they’ve said, “I will.” But are we faithful to Christ? **“Be faithful.”** It’s a choice. Time and again Christians are called to be faithful in some way great or small.

Oscar Romero was Jesuit missionary, who developed a powerful prophetic ministry as he worked among the poor and oppressed. He remained all the more faithful to that ministry when he was Archbishop. **“Be faithful, even to the point of death”** writes Jesus to the church of Smyrna. But those words were written too for Christians of San Salvador, Northern Nigeria, Christians of China, of North Korea, even Christians of the UK. It takes courage to be faithful - but that is what we are called to. It’s unlikely in this country that we ever would face death because of our beliefs - certainly in our lifetimes. Yet are we faithful in the *small* things of our Christian lives? The example of the suffering church throughout the world today is a real challenge to us - no less than the suffering church of 2000 years ago.

Sixthly, and lastly, Jesus says, **“Be faithful... and I will give you the crown of life.”** I’ve already mentioned how particularly prominent the symbol of the crown was in Smyrna - probably that’s one reason why it is used here. Crowns were used as a sign of honour bestowed by the city on some great benefactor, athlete, or other worthy. In this case however, Christians were being persecuted as *unworthy*. Jesus is saying: The world may count you as *unworthy* but *I* will give you the crown of life.

And so the question facing us is: “Where is our treasure?” Do we seek after the crowns that this world has to offer or is our heart more truly fixed on the ultimate crown that only Jesus can give? What about you? What about me? Later in this service we are going to pray for the persecuted and suffering church throughout the world. But let’s not simply pray for them: let’s pray for ourselves as well - in penitence, in sorrow, asking for forgiveness, for renewal of faith, and with a commitment to be ignited in our heart with the faith of so many sisters and brothers in other parts and throughout the centuries. Martin Luther King said, *“If a man hasn’t discovered something that he will die for, he isn’t fit to live.”* harsh words perhaps, but from someone who believed in them and lived on fire for Jesus.