

Revelation 3:1-6: Sardis

“Only I know the truth about me.” Have you ever heard some one say that? Maybe you’ve said it yourself. It’s a classic symptom of depression - in fact many forms of mental illness are characterised by a sense of special knowledge, or a level of perception that others simply cannot attain to. As I read this Letter to Sardis, I struggled to see what it could be about, and I then realised how powerfully it spoke to the self-delusional state, that self-imposed isolation we often find ourselves in when we are mentally or emotionally unwell. I say “we” because mild forms of depression, crises of self-esteem, and so on affect so many people in one form or another.

First of all I’m going to look through this passage and notice some of the ways in which it chimes in with the experience of mental disturbance, and then I’m going to look at what Jesus says to a person going through that experience.

Connections

Verse 1: **“You have the reputation for being alive, but you are dead.”** In my last church, in fact in the church before that and the church before that I had a reputation for being full of joy. I think it was because I played music, or because I wore a particular stripey jumper, or I was cursed with a permanent smile and up-beat nature. Sometimes I thought “If only you knew the truth. If only you knew how I really was. But you don’t - and I can never tell you.”

When we lived in Cambridge I was a star student - not the best ever, but one of the stars of my little group. Yet I went through a phase when I literally hated the praise I was getting. I felt it was ridiculous, buffoonery, foolishness. How could *I* be so good - when I *knew* I was rubbish? Then I began to sense the people around me loving me - and I wanted to reject them all the more because I thought the good things they said were simply to cheer me up rather than being objectively true. But then I hated myself for being so churlish.

Now I was lucky. That period for me was simply a dip into black-as-ink lake of depression. It only lasted a short time and somehow I emerged. But the contrast between a reputation among others and what we ourselves perceive as reality was very strong, and I find it reflected here in the Scripture: **“You have the reputation for being alive, but you are dead.”** As I stared into that black-as-ink lake I was staring at death - and it was compelling. I couldn’t look anywhere else. I was being drawn, further and further into a non-existence. And here in Revelation Jesus was speaking right into my condition: **“I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.”** Unlike what everyone else around me at that time seemed to be saying, Jesus said exactly what I knew myself to be: **“you are dead.”** Only I knew it. Except if I had read these words and applied them to myself, I might have discovered that he knew it too.

But that's not the only way in which this passage speaks directly to the experience of mental illness.

Verse 4 is very unusual. It says: **“Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.”** This verse is extremely unusual because of the way it speaks of division. Now, division itself is not an uncommon feature of these Letters to the Seven Churches. The Letter to Thyatira, for example, shows that there were some in the church who were being led astray and others who were holding on. But in all the other letters Christ speaks to all the recipients on the same level. All of them have a message to heed. All of them have something to do. Here at Sardis there seems to be a group who have reached the goal already. They **“have not soiled their clothes... they are worthy.”**

Now, when we read this in the context of the *whole* of Revelation - indeed the whole of the Bible - we realise that there is no-one who has not soiled their clothes, but that any of us have our lives cleansed in Christ and receive the worthiness he gives. But for the moment I want to just focus on this verse as we have it here.

For when we are mentally ill we often have an extreme sense of our own isolation: “No-one knows the truth.” “No-one understands me.” “No-one realises how bad I am.” And this verse 4 seems to be a perfect description of that experience. Jesus says to the reader: “You are dead... (in spite of appearances) Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. *They will walk with me, for they are worthy.*”

And these words relate directly to the experience of depression. Because as you stare transfixed in to the black-as-ink lake you are nevertheless aware of those around you. The trouble is that you only really see them as reflections in the black-as-ink lake. “*I’m rubbish,*” you say. “*They are so perfect.*” If you’ve ever known someone with post-natal depression, such feelings are very common - those around you are all such perfect parents but you are rubbish because.... whatever it is. They are perfect because they are happy. You are despicable because you are not. *They will get the reward.* **“*They will walk with me, dressed in white... for they are worthy.*”** Oh - what an idyllic scene that is! How nice for them! But not for me. They are *wanted*. I am *not wanted*. *They are worthy, I am not worthy.*

Now I’ve use words such as “depressed” or “mentally ill” but many people experience phases of life when we look at ourselves and the world in these ways and the innumerable variations on them. Your variation will be different to my variation, but some things will be the same: low self-esteem, a belief that you only you know the real truth - at least about you, and a powerful distinction between you and those around you - some of whom are so favoured and so perfect, even though it may be because they are simply not burdened with the insight and knowledge that you have about the truth.

Jesus Message

So what does Jesus say in this letter to people going through that experience?

Firstly, he says “**I know you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead.**” He knows the reality of it. He does not say, “I know you feel dead but really you should count your blessings.” He says I know the *reality* - that there is a big gap of nothingness between that smile on the outside and the little, crushed, foetally-positioned child on the inside. And as you travel across that gap of nothingness, away from your external, trivial conversations and into your internal world, you become smaller and smaller, quieter and quieter, until you reach almost non-existence. And Jesus says, “**I know...**”

Secondly, he says: “**Wake up.**” (Verse 2) He says “Wake up” because there is *work* to do. There *is* a life to be lived. Suicide is not the answer. The City of Sardis was a bit of a joke. The upper town, or Acropolis, was on a hill that towered above the valley floor. It was considered impregnable because the sides were steep and the summit could be reached only by a single path along a narrow ridge. Yet at least twice in its history, Sardis had been captured at night whilst the city was asleep. They were so confident that no-one could touch them but they needed to wake up and see that they weren’t really so isolated after all.

Jesus says to us when we are feeling isolated: “Wake up!” There is more to your life than your own self-absorption. Jesus acknowledges that the person he is writing to is in a very real sense “dead” but he doesn’t want to leave them dead. He says to them “Wake up!” He said the same words to a little girl everyone else thought was dead: “Little girl, wake up!” And he says them to us.

“**Wake up and strengthen what remains and is about to die.**” That’s what Jesus says here. He tells us to look at the real world. So much time has been wasted through this depression. So much potential has been lost. “Okay,” says Jesus. “Write it off, and get on with the next phase!” “**Strengthen what remains...**” This is reality: live in it.

People who emerge from mental illness will often speak of a seemingly chance encounter they had with someone who both knew their truth and who was able to awaken them to a bigger truth. I remember two conversations I had with my tutors. The first was with my Old Testament tutor who had just given me a string of excellent marks for my essays. I threw the essay down and said, “How can you give me an excellent mark? This is rubbish! I’m just some bloke who’s written a few words and you say it’s excellent! That’s impossible!” He looked at me and said, “Are you telling me I don’t know my job?” (He was the head of the Divinity Faculty in the University of Cambridge!) The conversation helped me to wake up. I realised that he *did* know his job - that my work *could* be good - but also that *he* was the teacher and *I* was the pupil. I had more work to do.

The second conversation was with my personal tutor, and it was a surprising conversation because until that point I didn't think he knew me at all. But as we talked he mentioned the heavy burden of being "different". In my final report he put, "Richard has an ingrained non-conformity" and privately he said to me, "Sometimes that will seem a lot of fun to others, but to you it will sometimes be an incredible burden."

Now of course words like that *can* simply massage your ego. In reality we're *all* different and few of us conform in every detail of our lives. But because he'd said something that was spot on my experience I realised that I was not alone - ironically I was *not* so unique - and it came not from a friend trying to win me, not from one who knew me trying to comfort me, but from one scrambling about for words because he was conducting an end-of-year interview and he had to say something. And it helped me to wake up.

So that's the second thing I hear Jesus saying in this letter: **"Wake up."**

The third thing I hear him saying is about the future - that I *will* be acceptable. "Yes," he says, "Wake up, there's work to do..." but look at verse 5: **"He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white..."** Among the most significant words in that sentence are the words "like them." When we are depressed or mentally unwell in some other way, we are often quite ambivalent about our situation: for various reasons often to do with fear we really don't want to change much; but actually we're also desperate to be normal more than anything else. We look at "them" - those "others" - the "competent ones" - the "worthy" - the "perfect" and we hate them. Yet we so dearly want to be like them as well. Here Jesus says, **"He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white..."** What me? It's an amazing promise because it's spoken by one who knows all about me. But what Jesus is saying here is that there is a chance for healing. There is a chance for the resolution I am so longing for: if I overcome.

Then he makes another promise: **"I will never erase his name from the book of life..."** The word John uses for "erase" here was often used in a technical sense when the names of condemned criminals were erased from the electoral roll of a Greek city, so that they were executed as a non-person. People who are depressed often consider themselves to be non-persons. They are closing down into nothingness, crumbling to dust. But Jesus doesn't accept that assessment. He is the one who *made* us. He *knows* our true worth. He says, I will *never* erase your name from the book of life. That is *not* your destiny. But what if I *don't* overcome? you ask. Just wait a moment - I'll come to that.

Before we do, there's yet one final promise. Jesus says, **"I will never erase his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father..."** Curiously, when we're depressed, we very often simultaneously want *both* to hide away *and* to be acknowledged as the truly worthy people we are. The crucial factor is the question of *who it is* that offers this

acknowledgement. If it's someone too close you suspect that they are simply trying to cheer you up. If it's someone too far from you then they probably don't know what they're talking about. But to be acknowledged before *God the Father* - that is something else, because he knows *everything* and he's completely *true* in judgement. And to be acknowledged by *Jesus the Son* - that is something else as well, because we're not going to find ourselves in the foolish position of having been put up for something and then made to look stupid. What a fantastic future! What a truly wonderful vision! It's a calling that connects deep in our souls - to be acknowledged, not overlooked; to be acknowledged by the one who *really matters* not by some well-meaning or even foolish person; and to be acknowledged by one who *really knows*.

What if... ?

But what if I *don't* overcome? Well to some extent that's up to you. Jesus looks at things in the real world and his judgement is that you can - even though you may think otherwise. But there is one resource you cannot do without. At the beginning of the letter Jesus says, "**These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits (or seven-fold Spirit) of God...**" It's the *Spirit* that gives us life; it's the *Spirit* who warms our hearts; it's the *Spirit* who puts flesh on these dry bones; it's the *Spirit* who heals our sight to see true sober reality as opposed to our strangely distorted, depressed version; it's the *Spirit* therefore, who enables us to overcome, because it's the *Spirit* who wakes us up: gently but persistently.

Jesus comes to us with the gift of his Spirit. That's why he wrote this letter. It was written to the Church in Sardis, but it was also written for us. He wants us to change, to move forward, to live not in our own enclosed reality but in his expanded reality - and he will help us do that through the gift of his Spirit.

Will you accept the help he offers?

Let's pray.