

Revelation 3:7-13

Isaiah 22:15-24 / Mk 3:23-25

What sort of legacy would you like to leave behind on this earth? What sort of person do you think you are? On a scale of 1-100 for significance, where would you position yourself? How would you rate against George Bush – more significant or less significant? Well to some people you are certainly more significant and don't forget it! This evening the letter we're looking at was written to people who many thought were extremely insignificant. In fact, the whole city they were part of suffered from a sense of insignificance.

Living Among Earthquakes

The region of the Seven Cities of Asia was an extremely delicate earthquake zone. At any time, both the history of Philadelphia and their future could be wiped out as the ground rocked beneath them. What does that do to your sense of significance – that all your achievements wiped out without trace, and your future stolen? The First Century writer Strabo recorded tremors so frequent that cracks appeared daily in the city walls and some citizens people lived outside on the hills. Their insecurity and looming insignificance hung over them like a spell. How could they break out of the situation?

Imagine the communal psyche of a place like that. You'd wonder whether God had it in for you. You'd question what you had to do not to be punished again. You'd seek out people to blame. You'd ask whether there would ever be any hope for a different world.

What made it worse was the degree to which they were dependent on others. They were a city constantly in debt. In AD17 a massive quake levelled twelve cities in the region: Philadelphia was exempted from paying tax to the Emperor for five years in order to rebuild itself - and in recognition changed its name to Neocaesarea. In the 70s, after another battering it renamed itself again. A new dynasty was ruling Rome, and so it became "Philadelphia Flavia." It was a city unsure of its identity – perhaps unsure if it deserved an identity of its own.

Dependency brings problems – just like the issue of Third World debt today. But once a dependant relationship with their Roman overlords was established it could also bring havoc. For centuries Philadelphia had been rich in wine growing, but the Flavian Emperors decided to turn all vineyards outside Italy over to corn. But the volcanic slopes of Philadelphia aren't suited to corn. The empire which had promised so much, let them down through ultimate self-interest. In 79, when the Flavians were finally deposed, the city changed its name once again - back to Philadelphia, plain and simple.

So what is the culture of a place like that? It was *desperate* for certainty, *desperate* for stability, *desperate* for strength, *desperate* for safety, *aching* to know it had an assured future, *longing* to know a rock that wouldn't move, *wishing* it could trust those with power, but *easily* vulnerable to cynicism, yet too weak to survive alone.

Let's look at what Jesus says to the Christians of this city.

Jesus' Message

He says, **"I know that you have little strength - yet you have kept my word and not denied my name."** (v.8) Philadelphia had a history of fickleness - changing its name to suit the powers. There was a weakness in geology position, but also a weakness of character. Christians were among the weakest of the weak: ejected from the synagogues and blamed for all ills when they abstained from pagan worship. Yet in a city of *fickleness*, these Christians practised *faithfulness*. They were *weak* in society, but *strong* in character: **"I know you have little strength, yet you've kept my word and not denied my name."**

So this letter is testimony to a fantastic loyalty. Through great uncertainty, Jesus calls them to have a solid sense of who they are and a firm trust in his reliability. How can he do this? What is the basis for his call? And what is the hope he holds out for them?

Let's look *first* at what's revealed about Jesus himself. *Then* let's look at the fantastic promises he gives his followers.

"These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David." (v.7) That's a picture of great stability: **"holy and true."** He is not like some Roman Emperor who may appear to be generous but will then, in ignorance of local conditions and impose protectionist farming policies that destroy the local economy. **"Holy and true"** - these words describe someone who is sufficient in themselves and reliable for others. He's not like some pagan god of a chance lottery, who may show favour today but condemn you tomorrow.

"Holy and true" - our God is a rock. Holiness involves purity. If you are involved in scientific research it is crucial that you are able to repeat your experiments to prove the hypothesis true - and to do that you need to maintain a certain purity of conditions - otherwise your process will be unreliable and your findings won't stack up. When God says he is **"holy and true"** it means he is totally reliable. The physical ground may erupt from time to time, our lives may be thrown about from time to time, but our God is a rock - **"Holy and true."**

Secondly, we read, he **"holds the key of David. What he opens no-one can shut and what he shuts no-one can open."** Now, these words make direct reference to the prophecy of Isaiah given some 900 years previous. Isaiah speaks of that key being given to **"Eliakim son of**

Hilkiah” The background is the sacking of Shebna, a steward who proved unreliable, and the appointment of Eliakim who was held to be trustworthy. Eliakim receives the key and authority for all royal affairs.

Isaiah wasn't simply commenting on the events of his day. He *uses* Eliakim as a *type* - looking forward to the final Saviour who would have authority over God's people. 900 years later, through John, the Holy Spirit picks this prophecy up and applies it directly to Jesus: **“These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no-one can shut and what he shuts no-one can open.”** It's like a business under new management: the locks are changed, the computer passwords, or access to the bank accounts. Jesus is now the steward of God's people. He holds the key. He chooses the password. He signs the cheques. No-one else has authority.

So he is now the one who sets things in order. He decides the pecking order; he gives the honours; he sets the culture; he chooses who to have in. The whole letter is full of Jesus' actions - expressed with strength and certainty. The message is that he is in charge of this world. Is that a message you need to hear? It's certainly a truth prized by many Christians in situations of uncertainty.

So that's something of what Jesus reveals about himself. What about the promises he gives to those who love him? There are five things I want to highlight, which are held out to the weak but faithful Christians of Philadelphia.

Jesus' Promises

Firstly, he places before them *a certain right of entry*. Have you ever been somewhere where there are bouncers on the doors? It makes you feel a bit nervous! But Jesus says, (v.8), **“See, I have placed before you an open door that no-one can shut.”** The door of welcome is open. Your membership within God's people is assured.

All sorts of people feel excluded from God's people. Many people feel excluded from the whole world. For some it's because of what they've *done*. For others it's because of who they *are*. Many feel they're not *clean* enough. Some feel they're not *clever* enough. Countless feel they don't *pray* enough. But Jesus says to all who love him, **“See, I have placed before you an open door that no-one can shut.”** No-one! Not the church, not society, not our own inner issues, not our fears or failures, because in Jesus there is a certain right of entry. **“I have placed before you an open door that *no-one* can shut.”**

Secondly, he gives them *an honoured and permanent place* within God's people. Who do you think will have front row seats in heaven? Pope John Paul? Martin Luther King? The Earl of

Shaftsbury? John Calvin? Saint Francis? Saint Paul? Saint Peter? Here in this letter Jesus is speaking to *little* people of *no account* and about whom no history or biography was ever written. And he says, **“Him who overcomes I will make a *pillar* in the temple of my God.”**

You know what pillar means? It means without you the building falls down! It is a position of highest importance! Pillars are made from stone. They're solid - firm - strong. And Jesus says to these weak-looking Philadelphian Christians: “You may appear weak on the *outside*; you may even appear weak on the *inside*; but in your faithfulness I judge you to be a *pillar* - because you are one of spiritual reliability.” What an amazing honour! What an astonishing accolade!

“Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it.” You may think you blow hot and cold as a Christian. You may see yourself as one who flits in and out, or who is on the margins. Maybe you *wish* you could be more central and less peripheral. Maybe you sometimes feel of little consequence, or as if your presence doesn't count. Jesus says, “That's not *my* plan for you. Take your place! You have a place! Get involved! **“Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it.”** He gives them an honoured and permanent place at the centre of God's people.

Thirdly, Jesus gives the Philadelphians *an indelible identity* in God. **“I will write on him the name of my God.”** I referred earlier to the Philadelphian propensity for changing their name according to which Roman dynasty was in power. But Jesus says “Receive your true and permanent identity - the name of God, ruler from eternity, beginning and end.”

Roman Emperors called themselves “divine” but they came and went like anyone else - in fact more often than many because they were so frequently assassinated. These days people are named after film stars or sports stars - but they will also come and go. How do you see yourself? It may be in a particular relationship, a particular job, or as part of a particular social or ethnic group. But all these things will pass. All that will remain is whether you are lovingly inscribed with the name of God. And that is the gift of Jesus to those who love him.

Fourthly, Jesus gives the Philadelphians *a growing future*. He says, **“I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, coming down from heaven.”** Now, this city isn't the *place* where God's people dwell - actually it's the *people themselves*. But what I notice here is the city is **“coming down”**. God is bringing it into being *now*. God *himself* is calling the people together - the new Jerusalem is **“coming down from heaven”** as by his Spirit he calls people of no account and little worldly means to be his people. God has *always* chosen the weak and foolish to shame the wise and the strong - and he continues to do so today. Will you rejoice in that? Yes - let's. This season of Advent is a time for rejoicing that God chooses the weak.

Finally, Jesus gives the Philadelphians a fresh revelation. Jesus says, “**And I will also write on him a new name.**” It seems there are three names given: the name of God - the Ancient and holy one; the name of God’s people - revered in history; but also a new name, which we discover in Chapter 14 is the name of the Lamb - “Jesus”. It’s a new thing. A new way. A new message. A new strip - although you can’t buy it at the club shop. You can only receive it if you come without money, without price, but with a humble openness to love that name, to cherish it, to wear it joyfully and proudly - unashamedly. St Paul wrote, “**All creation is straining - standing on tiptoe - to see the children of God as they are revealed.**” Something *new* is taking place. A different way of being has entered the world. It’s a way in which people of no account are given fantastic honour and dignity. It’s a way through which the Son of God offers himself as a sacrificial Lamb - and through which the Lamb, once slain, is now revered in the centre of the throne of heaven. It’s the way of Jesus.

Us too

But listen: Listen to the end of the letter: “**He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.**” This is a message for *us*. It’s not just for the Philadelphian Church - it’s *for* all Christians, *all* who love Jesus, all who, no matter how weak and feeble, “**hold on**” to what we have “**so that no-one will take your crown.**” Jesus said, “**In this world you will have trouble. But fear not: I have overcome the world.**” And we too can be overcomers of all things in Jesus. Let’s rejoice. Let’s praise him. Let’s glorify his name. Let’s give thanks that he turns the things of this world upside down, and that the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of the Lord.

Two weeks ago BBC’s Question Time had the usual debate on who should be awarded national honours and on what basis. But the greatest honours are those given by Jesus. And they’re given *not* because of someone’s haircut, *nor* because of their skills, *nor* their popularity, *nor* their wealth, *nor* for political reasons - but simply for faithfulness in a love relationship with Jesus.

So how about us? I think tonight is a time to

thank Jesus for his faithfulness to us, to
trust him for his promises to us, and to
recommit ourselves afresh in faithful living for him.

Because Jesus is the rock on which we will withstand

every earthquake we can be subject to.