

A CHURCH APPROVED BY JESUS

I am led to preach today from the first three chapters of Revelation. It is a book which is often thought difficult, and even irrelevant as far as Western congregations go. But it is much loved by our sister churches suffering persecution. I want to argue that we neglect its lessons at our peril. I cover three themes in Chapters 1-3, the image of Christ, his critical view of the churches and the attributes of a working church, as Jesus sees them. I believe this gives us an inspiring vision of how the church, and the individual members, can overcome by accepting his discipline and correction joyfully. I hope it can also be helpful as this church develops and unites around a long-term vision.

1 Christ the mighty Son of Man

John the Apostle is in chains, a prisoner for his faith. In a vision, he sees Jesus (1:12-16) “I saw 7 golden lampstands and among the lampstands was someone like a son of man dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance.” John is so afraid and awed he falls at his feet as though dead. Then (1:17-18) he placed his right hand on me and said: “Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last, I am the living one; I was dead and behold! I am alive forever. And I hold the keys to death and Hades.”

What does the passage tell us about Jesus?

First, he is a **priest**, as shown by his robe and sash. His white hair tells of dignity and wisdom, and his eyes like fire, penetrating insight.

Second, he is a **king** who will rule over all the nations - “son of man” recalls the vision that Daniel saw in the desert: From 7:13-14) “...there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven...He was given authority, glory and sovereign power...His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.” I believe that when on earth, Jesus used “Son of Man” as his own name to show his provenance and future. As Jesus himself says, he is the first and the last “The firstborn from all creation”, he who flung stars into space. And he will remain when the universe no longer is.

The text also reminds us that on earth Jesus as king did not fulfil Daniel’s vision in the way the Jews expected. Jesus also came to suffer like Isaiah’s suffering servant, and to comfort us in our frailty. He died on the cross but is alive now unlike all pagan Gods of Biblical times, and the material things we worship today. Even as he sought to encourage John, he always wants to reassure us; “do not be afraid” – how often did he say that to his disciples in his earthy ministry – and how well would John remember it! This little assurance is so important, showing Jesus’ humanity, not a remote and awesome spiritual presence that the son of man might otherwise be. He is here with us today; the living one. And he wants to communicate and judge by his word – the sharp double-edged sword from his mouth – and by his Spirit. He is in control. He knows what will take place later. He has overcome death. He is alive forever. Do not be afraid.

Third, he is a **prophet**, and we must hearken to his word, exactly as it is spoken. In 2-3 it repeatedly says “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” as it is written, but it is not enough.

Yet more important is acting on it as in the prologue (1:3) “Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near.” Prophecy (“forthtelling”) begins with Chapter 2 as letters addressed to churches. Revelation does not offer an idealised view of the church. Instead it tells us of seven real world churches. We should also note that these churches were probably not buildings but house churches, emphasising that it is the community of believers that God values. Three are “suffering or weak churches”, two are “trying hard” and two are “failing”.

Each letter to a church has the same structure. Commendation comes before criticism, as was the case for Paul – then comes encouraging advice on how to resolve the situation and promise of a reward “for those who overcome”. This alone is a lesson in itself for any of us in positions of authority at work, assessing performance; praise before blame and indicate a way forward. All of them have lessons for us, as a body and as individuals, showing us how a church can be approved by him, and what the pitfalls are – let us listen.

2 A church approved by Jesus

The church that accepts Jesus’ discipline....

This is the core subject of the letters – it is an unfashionable term today. It is of course addressed to individuals and not only to churches. But as he says (3:19) “those whom I love I rebuke and discipline”, even as in Proverbs we are told “My son, do not despise the Lord’s discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in” And Hebrews 12:8 says, “If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.” Remember who is speaking – the mighty Son of Man! Our proper attitude is one of awe and humility, as David before God (Psalm 8:4) “What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?”

To accept and act upon Jesus’ discipline is to be the church that overcomes. What is it to overcome? Surely it is to resist the world, the flesh and the devil, and to remain faithful to Jesus in all circumstances, regardless of suffering. Whereas in John 16:33 Jesus tells us he has overcome the world, here Christians must follow him in doing so, in his strength. As it says later (14:12) “This calls for patient endurance on the part of the saints who obey God’s commandments and remain faithful to Jesus.” Is it not a paradox that it seems easier to overcome when facing persecution than here in our comfort? But we should note that the need to overcome was common to all the churches, entering a period of intensifying conflict preceding Christ’s return. We are still in that period now. Even if lions and tortures are not prepared for us, we are still fighting indifference, moral laxity and the insidious temptations of the money system – the Babylon that features heavily in Revelation. And who knows what persecution could occur tomorrow?

Under his discipline, how then can a church – or indeed a house group or an individual - be approved by Jesus? We cannot be perfect and he understands that.

A church that Jesus commends. The most straightforward point is to check what Jesus praises churches for:

A church that suffers. They have pride of place. For example, to the church in Smyrna he says, (2:19) “I know your afflictions and your poverty--yet you are rich!”. Even as today the suffering church around the world is closest to Christ in its faithfulness, and we should look to them for inspiration.

A church that perseveres and acts. As regards the church at Ephesus he commends their deeds, hard work and perseverance, a practical church, which seeks to do Christ's will and not follow false teachers.

A church that seeks to make progress, showing love. As a Thyatira "I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first."

A church that is actively aware of what he criticises. Most of the seven churches have slipped into bad habits which are a warning to us to avoid these pitfalls.

Forsaking our first love. Jesus holds it against the church in Ephesus, (2:4) that "you have forsaken your first love. Remember the height from which you have fallen." Jesus reproof is that time and habit, the cares of the world, can wear away the purity with which we loved him, and at his command loved one another, and the lost when we are first becoming Christians. The church is orthodox but loveless, zeal and sound teaching is not what satisfies Jesus. As it says in 1 Corinthians 13:1, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal" I believe that baptisms have an important role in reminding us of our first love.

Being lukewarm in our Christianity. The church at Laodicea is seen as (3:6) "lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – so Jesus says he will spit them out of his mouth!" Apparently the city was down the hill from a hot healing spring, where the water was indeed lukewarm and hence also no good to drink – except as an emetic! Perhaps the church lacked all willing to help the lost, supplying neither healing for the spiritually sick (hot water), nor refreshment for the spiritually weary (cold water)? Such is the risk of a church that says in its pride (3:17) "I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing", to which Jesus verdict is that they are "wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked".

Being dead. The church at Sardis is told, (3:12) "you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead." The church, we gather, is so lacking in conviction that it is not worth persecuting, and also having insufficient enthusiasm for heresy. Pawson suggests that it may have been always starting new ventures, which are not kept up or seen through to the finish. It is not man's opinion of a church that counts, but God's. And his ways are not our ways.

Not to listen to false teachers. A common problem of the other churches was following false teachers, leading to compromise with the pagan world. Even as now, syncretism and permissiveness lead to temptation to improve and modernise Christianity, to conform to the world. The watering down of the message of scripture and disbelief in its inerrancy seem to me great dangers, not only due to pluralism but also as Pawson puts it "allowing scientific scepticism about the supernatural to undermine the authority of scripture". Also the false teachers led the churches to consider immorality a matter of little concern – again a major pressure on us today. In Hebrews 12:14 it is written "without holiness no one will see the Lord"

I think that for us the criticisms are not an issue of salvation – did Jesus not himself promise in Matthew 10:32 "Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven." It is a matter of the crown that we can cast before him in heaven. The crown is a garland or wreath for a winner of an athletic contest. "For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father's glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person for what he has done" (Matthew 16:27) He wants us to bring crowns "Hold on to what

you have, so that no one will take your crown” he says in 3:11. But there is a sobering note too. Particularly for the Jewish churches in persecution the temptation was to renounce faith in Jesus as saviour and as Matthew 10:33 went on to say “But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.” Our prayers must go to people in that situation – and that we be strong if ever we face that choice.

A church that accepts Jesus’ directions.

In each case Jesus like a supreme manager offers forgiveness and the resolution, true repentance as for Ephesus (2:5) “Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first” Sardis is told to (3:2) “Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent”

Not being self sufficient Laodicea is told to (3:18) “buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.” Note that it is only Jesus who can provide what they need (buy from me).

But Jesus has more to say for Laodicea (3:20) ““Here I am – I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me!” Notice how he is no longer speaking to the church but each person. But one person who invites Christ in can save the church as a whole. Notice how Jesus loving preserves our freedom amid his discipline! Also how individuals count within the church – they are the ones who are ultimately saved.

This passage is also relevant for individual salvation – everyone should know it who wants to help others know Jesus. Jesus knocks at the door of everyone’s heart. He never forces his way in – we must act to open by declaring faith in him. We must also have ears to hear his still small voice. He loves us and is willing to stand a long time at the door.

Jesus offers heavenly gifts for those who accept this discipline:

...and receives its reward

To be forgiven (3:5) “He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels.” We will be holy and without blemish.

To be present with God. For Philadelphia he says (3:12) “Him who overcomes I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God; and I will also write on him my new name.”

To live eternally in heaven. For Ephesus he says (2:7) “To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God” !

To be given a new name and holy food. The church at Pergamum is promised (2:17) “to him that overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it”. God will always feed his children with heavenly food and give them what they need. I believe that the new name is also symbolic of the rebirth we experience as a Christian. Is it not clear that we need a new name –

to accompany a new character? In some countries this is the case, as I know from a dear friend from Japan whose baptismal name is Julius.

To rule with him. (2:26) “To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations “ and (3:21) “To him that overcomes I will give him the right to sit with me on my throne”. How John must have remembered, as the youthful “Son of Thunder” having his mother ask that he sit on a throne and be rebuffed!

To be under his gracious protection. For faithful Philadelphia (3:10) “Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth”

3 Some attributes of Christ’s church

There is much to ponder in Christ’s discipline. I really believe accepting it joyfully is the way to for individuals mature as Christians – and for a church to be effective in doing his will. Besides accepting Jesus’ discipline, we need to accept discipline from one another, in the light of scripture, as David has been telling us. But I want to finish by assessing what Jesus considered in this passage as the attributes of a church that accepts and acts upon his discipline and the glorious inspiration this can be to us.

In 1:20 it is written “The mystery of the seven stars you saw in my right hand and of the seven golden lamp stands is this. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches and the seven lamp stands are the seven churches.” Immediately we can tell two things about a living church. It has **an angel** and it has a lamp burning. We must never count our congregation in persons alone. It is certain that the angels of the PBC hear every note we sing, and join in joyfully – “with angels and archangels and all the company of heaven, we laud and magnify your holy name”. They surely defend us against Satan’s power breaking in. They may bear us messages from God as they did for the seven churches. As Hebrews (1:14) says “Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?” and Jesus himself notes in Matthew (18:10) “See that you do not look down on one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven.”

But also crucial is **the lamp**. All the living churches bear the lamp, but it is useless without fire. They can only burn with Holy Fire; it is surely the fire of the Holy Spirit. Pawson cites cases in the Welsh revival where the fire brigade was called to a church with its roof alight. But nothing was consumed. God’s Holy Spirit rested there. Following what I said about our crowns, it is a testing fire in which we risk to have our work for Jesus (1 Cor 3:15) “burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.” It is the light of scripture: Jeremiah 23:29 “Is not my word like fire,” declares the LORD, “and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” The fire of Jesus’ passion was what lukewarm Laodicea lacked. It is the light of salvation. 1 John 1:7 “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.” But it is not just for us to hoard for ourselves; the inspiration of the Spirit is for us to save the lost, who in Ephesians 2 “without hope and without God in the world” and Luke 1:79 are “living in darkness and in the shadow of death” to whom we can be beacons of hope; Matthew 5:14-16 “You are the light of the world. . . .let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven.” The deed may not be just witnessing note, but also the ministry of reconciliation that David Chaput spoke about this morning, and social action such as inspires people to follow Jesus and enter the light.

I had a picture while praying, which led me to preach on this passage. In Pembury there was darkness like the blackness of hell, but there remained three blazing sources of light amid the blackness. The three churches. And they lit a crucifix in the middle of them. Did Jesus not say that a City on a hill cannot be hidden? And that lamps are not hidden under bowls? We are responsible for bearing that light to the world. We must be faithful to Jesus and let our lamp shine out among the lost, but evangelism and community social action. I believe the vision says it is also important that there is more than one church. Did Jesus not care for all seven? One church's light could still leave shadows, two or three would leave none. It is not at all a coincidence that David Chaput mentioned this morning reconciliation among Pembury churches. This may challenge us to care for and help our sister churches also to flourish. Note how Jesus is said to walk among the lampstands, symbolising the churches. He walked as he preached and healed. Even as the Israelites were promised in Leviticus 26:12 "I will walk among you and be your God, and you will be my people" Jesus holds that promise for us. He is walking among the lamps now in Pembury! He is with us when we witness.

There is another church in Revelation, one we have met before in Ezekiel 47, the Holy temple where **water** comes from under the threshold and becomes the river of life, reviving the desert. That church in Revelation is where God sits. 22:1 "The angel showed me the water of the river of life, flowing down from the throne of God and of the lamb...on each side of the river stood the tree of life. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations".

I believe the scripture is saying that, until the New Heaven and New Earth are established it is from the church that the water of life must come, reviving thirsty souls in a spiritual desert. The water is manifest in witness, Christ like actions of believers and their prayers. Then, through believers, the lost will hear Jesus voice as it is written in 1:15 "like the sound of rushing water". Are we not promised, if we overcome, to be pillars of God's temple? Did Jesus not say in Matthew 7:25 "Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." And with him the church invites the thirsty in Revelation 22:17 "The Spirit and the bride say....."Whoever is thirsty, let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life." Can we not be the church from which the river flows, over which the Spirit's fire burns and the angels keep vigil? What a church! I pray that such a river flow from our door and from our sister churches for the healing of this community.

Here is a way to remember the fire of the lamp and the water of the river of life, with our prayers – our relation with Jesus – at the core of it. It was a picture from God that came to me in house group when I was prayed for – and which I have taken three years to understand. Simply change from a prayer to cup the hands, and the fire burns. Then reverse the gesture and the water flows down from them.

Conclusion

The conclusion is that the church that Jesus approves is not a perfect one but one that accepts his discipline joyfully, and acts upon it. This goes for us all individually too - the churches may be disciplined, but it is individuals who are saved – we are responsible to Jesus via our prayer and repentance and word and action. We are the bride who must make ourselves ready. May we be worthy of Christ's commendation. May we overcome.