

Revelation 2:18-28 A Call to Holiness The Church at Thyatira

Introduction

People can surprise us on many occasions. On 16 January 2006 there was a closing of the final chapter of an unexpected drama in Torquay, Devon. It was the occasion of the sentencing of Linda Nicholls to three years in jail for conspiring to handle stolen goods. On the surface she was a pillar of the community, a stalwart of the St Mary-Church and Babbacombe traders association, and a popular figure in the district. She cooked the food for the Millennium party in 2000 and donated valuable prizes for charity raffles. Her Upstairs Downstairs, old fashioned antiques shop in Torquay was packed with treasures and trinkets, the problem was that most of the goods had been stolen from neighbours in the town, including people who thought they were her friends and others customers of her shop. She headed up a syndicate of burglars who stole to order, but on this latter point police could not find sufficient evidence to prove it in court, except for the fact that a few of her accomplices were also jailed and with a fifty per cent drop in burglaries in the district and an end to raids on properties with valuable antiques the circumstantial evidence was compelling that this prominent and amazingly generous woman had been generous with other people's property and assets (*The Times*, 16.1.06). When Jesus judges His people and His churches there will be many surprises as He knows and sees things other people never suspected, both good and bad. The blessing is that He will not make mistakes but judge fairly.

Thyatira was located thirty-five miles south-east of Pergamum. It was a colony of Macedonia (Greece) dignified with the name of a city. The site is occupied today by the town of Akhisar, with a population of 50,000 people. It was dominated by trade guilds: bakers, bronze workers, clothiers, cobblers, weavers, tanners, dyers and potters. Its most famous citizen in N.T. times [in the Bible] was Lydia. In Acts 16:14 she is described as *a seller of purple from the city of Thyatira who worshipped God*. There is a reference to one of the trade guilds with the use of a rare word used in Rev.2:18 *fine brass* which is a reference to a special alloy of local metalworkers. Textiles were the main industry found in this city, with the guild of dyers very wealthy, especially those responsible for the purple dye. This was taken from the murex shellfish and was the only colour fast dye in the ancient world. Only the wealthy could afford it. A majority of the *purple cloth* sold was a mix of this dye with reddish dye taken from the madder plant. Unlike the grand cities of Asia Minor Thyatira was a working man's town with more basic facilities and off the tourist trail, yet the gospel of Jesus Christ had not only reached the major cities of the Roman Empire, increasingly its larger towns and some villages had also been reached by Christian Evangelists and small house congregations, primarily composed of slaves and people from the lowest classes were quietly established, to avoid the attention of suspicious local authorities. It appears ironic that the longest letter from Jesus is addressed to the least important of these seven named communities in western Turkey.

How had the gospel come to Thyatira? The honest answer is that we don't know!

1. A Description of Jesus (Revelation 2:18)

¹⁸*To the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire and whose feet are like burnished bronze.* Jesus chooses a unique description of himself in v18. The main god worshipped in Thyatira was Apollo Tyrinnos, the sun god of ancient mythology. Apollo was called 'the son of Zeus'. He appears on surviving coins from the period on horseback armed with a battle-axe and club. The most popular religious place in the town was the fortune-telling shrine, presided over by a female religious leader called Sambathe. There was certainly no threat of direct persecution from the authorities in

Thyatira. It was not a centre of Caesar worship. However, the big issue here is that the trade guilds were like 'closed shop' trades unions in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s where jobs were dependent on union membership. A Christian in Thyatira who was not a guild member would be unlikely to get a job and as a result would have a serious struggle to feed their family. Like Christians in many parts of Pakistan and India, for example, as well as in many other Muslim countries they are condemned to live as second class citizens and serious economic problems with covering the costs of their basic needs. In Thyatira, as was common in the Roman world, guild gatherings would often have been the scenes of drunken revelry and opportunities for sexual promiscuity. How should Christians witness in such a context –if they stayed out of the guilds it could be argued they had no chance of witnessing to their fellow citizens / neighbours as they might never meet them. However, in the context of highly dubious behaviour what kind of evangelistic opportunities could arise? These kinds of issues were a cause for much debate in this congregation. What does Jesus have to say in this context to a wavering church?

How is Jesus described here? *the Son of God, whose eyes are like blazing fire* Jesus is saying very clearly I know what has been going on behind closed doors in Thyatira by a small number of this congregation. It may be hidden from the rest of the church, but I have noticed. One look from the Lord in His life on earth made a clear and telling point. His anger at heartless attitudes by the religious authorities in Mark 3 received a clear rebuke: *Another time He went into the synagogue, and a man with a shrivelled hand was there. ²Some of them were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, so they watched Him closely to see if He would heal him on the Sabbath. ³Jesus said to the man with the shrivelled hand, "Stand up in front of everyone." ⁴Then Jesus asked them, "Which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to kill?" But they remained silent. ⁵He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. ⁶Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.* In Luke 22:60-62 we see the aftermath of Peter denying Jesus: *Peter replied, "Man, I don't know what you're talking about!" Just as he was speaking, the rooster crowed. ⁶¹The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him: "Before the cock crows today, you will disown Me three times." ⁶²And he went outside and wept bitterly.* There are times when Jesus looks at you and me –what does He think about what is going on in our lives? This point is strengthened by words of Jesus in Revelation 2:23: *I am He who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.* Only one who is God can do such a thing. We can make a good guess at what a person might be thinking on particular occasions, especially if we can see their facial impressions in a particular context. However, unlike the Lord we can never be 100% clear that we have got it correct. Motivation for human behavior is notoriously complex. Although with experience we can often predict the reactions to given circumstances of people we know well, there are still those moments of surprise. Jeremiah 17:9-10 is a revealing passage on this subject. It begins with the predicament of the sinful human heart that without Christ is in a hopeless position. It moves on to provide the solution with information on how the Lord can overcome this problem. *The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it? ¹⁰ "I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve."* This understanding of the greatness of God to sort out human problems with ultimate justice gave this Old Testament prophet much assurance as he returned to this theme a number of times in his sermons. Jeremiah 11:18-20 refers to a plot by some wicked men from his home town of Anathoth, the community that was home to many of the religious leaders who worked in Jerusalem, to assassinate him. *Because the Lord revealed their plot to me, I knew it, for at that time He showed me what they were doing. ¹⁹ I had been like a gentle lamb led to the slaughter; I did not realize that they had plotted against me, saying, "Let us destroy the tree and its fruit; let us cut him off from the land of the living, that his name be remembered no more." ²⁰ But,*

*O Lord Almighty, you who judge righteously and test the heart and mind, let me see your vengeance upon them, for to you I have committed my cause.*²¹ *"Therefore this is what the Lord says about the men of Anathoth who are seeking your life and saying, 'Do not prophesy in the name of the Lord or you will die by our hands' "*²² *therefore this is what the Lord Almighty says: 'I will punish them. Their young men will die by the sword, their sons and daughters by famine. "*²³ *Not even a remnant will be left to them, because I will bring disaster on the men of Anathoth in the year of their punishment."* God knew what they planned to do and chose to protect the life of His servant on this occasion. To be aware that God knows all that is going on in a situation can encourage us in our prayer life. David in Psalm 7:9 had this assurance: *O righteous God, who searches minds and hearts, bring to an end the violence of the wicked and make the righteous secure.* The New Testament reveals a similar picture of our Lord in His earthly ministry. Mark 2:8, in context when Jesus healed a paralysed man in Capernaum, some of the Jewish religious leaders were present and far from happy about what He was doing: *Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? There was a similar experience in Jerusalem when it appeared that many people were putting their faith in Jesus, early in His ministry. However John 2:23-24 records these searching words: Now while He was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs He was doing and believed in His name. "*²⁴ *But Jesus would not entrust Himself to them, for He knew all men. In John 21 when Jesus graciously restored Peter to fellowship with himself after His resurrection, the guilty disciple made these comments when asked a third time by Jesus if he loved Him. The third time he said to him, "Simon son of John, do you love me?" Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, "Do you love me?" He said, "**Lord, you know all things**; you know that I love you."* Jesus said, *"Feed my sheep (John 21:17).* The earthly saviour and the risen Lord knows exactly what is going on in your life and mine, as well as in every other person's life on the planet. This truth provides wonderful encouragement to us when we are doing what is right and standing up for our principles. However, if we are living a life outside of God's purposes it is a solemn warning that there is no place to hide from God in this life or the next. Psalm 139 is a meditation by David on this theme and concludes with these words: *Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. "*²⁴ *See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting (Psalm 139:23-24).* We cannot do anything that He cannot see. Today in the privacy of people's homes all kinds of material can be viewed on the internet or even on the television that years ago was only accessible in seedy shops in the backstreets of big cities. What should keep us from taking the wrong decisions with our computer mouse? The knowledge that God is watching and can see even more clearly than you or I can the material we may be contemplating looking at! Or in our interactions with other people –God sees clearly in each situation and wants to see His children reflect their Lord and Saviour in how they conduct themselves.

(2) **A Commendation of Virtue** (Revelation 2:19)

I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first. Here was a growing church with people coming to faith and a wide range of activities in the community, all good things. Jesus sees these things and is pleased with this service, a commendation like Paul gave the Thessalonian church in II Thessalonians 1:3 *Dear brothers and sisters, we always thank God for you, as is right, for we are thankful that your faith is flourishing and you are all growing in love for each other.* Could things get better than this? Ephesus was commended for impeccable doctrine; here the evangelistic and social ministries of the church were excellent. What does Jesus commend *I know your deeds, your love and faith, your service and perseverance, and that you are now doing more than you did at first.* This looks very promising. First of all these Christians had a real and genuine **love** and care for one another. In my understanding of this church I would picture it as being relatively small and with very real poverty and hardship being the experience of all or almost all its

members. However, this challenge spurred them on to show genuine compassion for one another in their daily lives. They prayed for each other and when practical needs arose they were willing to share to provide for each other's needs. Then Jesus commended their **faith**. This congregation, despite seeing no end to the trials that they faced, kept firm to the faith they had received. In addition, like the believers at Smyrna, Jesus noted their perseverance under trial. Discouragements and persecution would not halt their dedication to Christ. As the years had gone by the witness in this town had become more encouraging not less so. Some individual Christians and some congregations can do so well for a number of years but then lose their focus and enthusiasm for God's work and their witness. However, the Christians in Thyatira did not follow that pathway. Instead they encouraged one another to maintain and develop the high standards they had set for the sake of the honour of following Jesus Christ. Over the years there have been some people who appeared to start out on the journey of faith, but then be distracted by other priorities and no longer be found in God's house. Peter refers to people like this in II Peter 2:20-21: *If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. ²¹It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them.* The challenge comes home to all of us –how are you and me getting on in our walk with Jesus? Are we going forward in faith or going backwards? Praise God for the positive signs of healthy spiritual growth in Thyatira (and here?). Yet Jesus saw something else.

(3) **A Condemnation of Vice** (Revelation 2:20-23)

(i) **Jezebel** (vs20-21) *Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols. ²¹I have given her time to repent of her immorality, but she is unwilling.* Reference is made to a character like the infamous Old Testament queen. She was calling herself a 'prophetess' - not called to a post by the church, but exercising a ministry in the church unchecked despite its errors. The office of a prophet in the New Testament was subject to Church leadership (I Corinthians 14). Her vice was similar to the Nicolaitans. Why was she given so much opportunity to preach and practice falsehood? The teaching office, according to I Timothy 2:12, was restricted to spiritually-qualified men, but something else was also going on. In the list of qualities that Jesus recognized in this church one that was missing was holiness (John Stott, *What Christ thinks of the Church*, p. 71). This was a very loving church with very real practical care of one another in its ranks. They were a people of faith with a very genuine trust in God for the present and the future of their lives. Their perseverance under religious pressure was commendable, yet they had a blind spot. They were too tolerant of error in their midst –something that would never have been allowed in the Ephesus congregation. This congregation had tolerated a person, in this case a women with questionable character to promote a lifestyle that was contrary to the principles for living found in the Bible. Paul had earlier told a Greek congregation in Thessalonica: *It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality* (I Thessalonians 4:3). Holiness is the purpose for God the Father choosing us for salvation: ⁴*For He chose us in Him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in His sight* (Ephesians 1:4). It was likewise the purpose for Jesus' death in our place: *Jesus Christ, ¹⁴who gave Himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for Himself a people that are His very own, eager to do what is good* (Titus 2: 13-14). In the same way the Holy Spirit was sent by God the Father to make this a reality in our daily lives: *For God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life. Therefore, he who rejects this instruction does not reject man but God, who gives you His Holy Spirit* (I Thessalonians 4:7-8). The triune God has called us to holy living –for this purpose: ²⁹*For those God foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among*

many brothers. In answer to the question: why am I here on earth? Paul says the answer is quite simple to become increasingly like Jesus in our attitudes and mindset, together with our words and actions. This challenge was given to both Old and New Testament believers: *But just as He who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶for it is written: "Be holy, because I am holy."* (I Peter 1:15-16; and Leviticus 11:44-45: *I am the Lord your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves about on the ground. ⁴⁵ I am the Lord who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy.*). Satan will do anything he can to distract us from this goal. We need to take great care over the lyrics we allow ourselves to listen to; the films and programmes we watch in the theatre or cinema or on television; the suitability of the literature we read; the kind of jokes we find acceptable; this could mean extra work for parents or grandparents as we seek to understand what media our (grand) children wish to view. If the devil cannot destroy a church by physical violence from outside, then damaging its witness by moral failure within is equally devastating. The blind spot over paedophile activity in the Roman Catholic Church is a salutary reminder of how damaging sin can become when it is not checked and eradicated from our ranks. It is easy to point to the failure of other people to address their sins, but to then excuse our own 'weaknesses' as if we were less vulnerable to displeasing God! The Jezebel brought to mind by the Lord, in verse 20, had lived a thousand years earlier in Israel. She was the daughter of Ethbaal King of Sidon, a promoter of the native Canaanite fertility cults. This fanatical devotee of Baal worship, married Ahab King of Israel (I Kings 16:29-34) and led both him and many in the nation astray. One person left unchecked who was responsible for an incredible amount of spiritual harm in Israel. The actual name of the influential lady in the church at Thyatira who was fulfilling the 'Jezebel' role is unknown. I suspect she may have been of a higher social background than most of the congregation and having a disproportionate influence on others in the church. Given how faithful this church had been over other matters, on the surface it appears surprising that they had not sought to discipline her or exclude her from membership. What appears to be happening here is that this lady was saying was that it is okay to be a member of the trade guilds including involvement in all of their ritual activities. A few meaningless pagan religious rituals per annum and participation in the sexual activities that accompanied such events would not harm them as Christians. 'They were 'strong' in mind and would not be affected by a limited involvement in these inappropriate activities. Yet how many people who have damaged their lives, for example, by viewing pornographic images years earlier are still troubled by things they have not participated in for years. God may have forgiven and forgotten what they had done sometimes decades earlier, but the damage has been done. A thoughtless one-night stand while away on a work trip has been the catalyst for the destruction of many a happy marriage. We live in a troubled world that cannot seem to grasp the reality that all our actions have consequences good or bad. It appears that this woman has been spoken to by church leaders and by the Holy Spirit in her conscience (Rev.2:21), but she is unwilling to heed that good advice. It is not just this one person being damaged; Jesus speaks also of those who followed her bad advice and the implications for their lives as well.

(ii) **Her children** (vs22-23) -spiritual children not physical ones.) ²²*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 her ways. ²³I will strike her children dead. Then all the churches will know that I am He who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.* It appears likely that this group of people in the church at Thyatira were adherents of a philosophy called Gnosticism that had a devastating influence on many Christian congregations in the second and third centuries AD. One of its key teachings was a sharp dualistic division between spiritual things which were good and material things that were all evil. On this basis of this theory no matter what things you did with your body it had no impact on your spiritual state. This led many

proponents of these views into living irresponsible lives that caused real damage in Christian congregations. Gnostics wrote many of the false gospels that sensationalist TV programmes have referred to over recent years, but were documents rejected by true Christians, both at the time and in subsequent generations. Jesus wanted to point out to this lady and her followers that living irresponsible lifestyles would have a devastating effect upon them. His words may imply no more than allowing them to face the consequences of their actions, ‘reaping what we sow’ although in some specific cases there may have been some direct action of judgement from the Lord. Hebrews 12:14 warned Italian Christians *Try to live in peace with everyone, and seek to live a clean and holy life, for those who are not holy will not see the Lord*; A similar warning with respect to judgment for sin is given in I Corinthians 11:29-32: *For if you eat the bread or drink the cup unworthily, not honouring the body of Christ, you are eating and drinking God's judgment upon yourself. 30That is why many of you are weak and sick and some have even died. 31But if we examine ourselves, we will not be examined by God and judged in this way. 32But when we are judged and disciplined by the Lord, we will not be condemned with the world.* In this life it can appear that people may be getting away with wrongdoing, but Jesus lays down a marker here letting these professing Christians know that if they do not address their shortcomings now while they have the opportunity they will have to face His judgement later.

(4) **A Call to Persevere** (Revelation 2:24-29)

²⁴*Now I say to the rest of you in Thyatira, to you who do not hold to her teaching and have not learned Satan's so-called deep secrets (I will not impose any other burden on you):* ²⁵*Only hold on to what you have until I come.* ²⁶*To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations—* ²⁷*He will rule them with an iron scepter; he will dash them to pieces like pottery—just as I have received authority from my Father.* ²⁸*I will also give him the morning star.* ²⁹*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.* Then our Lord turns to the majority of the congregation who have resisted the temptation to fall into line with these errors and urges them to stand firm for biblical standards. There is an emphasis in these closing words of ‘overcoming’ / ‘persevering’, of keeping going to the end. There is nothing more glorious at the end of their life to commend at a funeral service a Christian man or woman who has honoured the Lord throughout all their days as a believer. Will you and me finish our race well on earth? **Jesus makes two promises here:** The **first** points back to Psalm 2 and speaks of the certainty of His final triumph. There is a direct quotation in Rev.2:27 from Psalm 2:9 and a reference also to Psalm 2:8 which states: *The Lord has said to Me, You are My son. Today I have begotten you. Ask of Me and I will give the nations for your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.* Were members of this congregation tempted to think that Jesus’ final triumph at the end of the world would never happen? Did they think how can a relatively small group of people ever gain influence to promote their standards and values in the nation, let alone across the whole globe? Paul addresses a similar issue in I Corinthians 6 where he challenges ungodly behaviour in the Corinthian congregation, when he makes a passing reference to Jesus’ final triumph and the blessings for those who have served Him faithfully in this life *Do you not know that the saints will judge the world?* (I Cor.6:2). In effect he was saying live now with the standards you would wish to see in God’s new creation. It is not in doubt live in the light of its certainty! The **second** promise (Rev.2:28) of sharing one day not only in Christ’s triumph but also in His glory. Revelation 22:16 explains this gift as the Lord Himself. *I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this message for the churches. I am both the source of David and the heir to his throne. I am the bright morning star.* In this life you may face horrendous trials and temptations and persecution for your faith, but keep in mind how wonderful heaven will be for eternity. Your suffering will not be forever –you will share in My glory, the wonders of life as God the Father intended it to be for all His creatures on earth. May this inspire us to stand firm in our generation also, Amen.