

Inspector's Report (Revelation 2:1-11)

What would Jesus say if he inspected our church today? We can't know for sure, but we can read his inspection report for 7 churches in the first century AD. This week we look at the first two reports and the issues that Jesus speaks to them about.

Inspections - A mug in a Renault Espace

When I was a teacher back in the last century we had an OFSTED inspection. As now such inspections were the dread of schools. The inspectors would come in for a few days, watch lessons, interview staff and pupils, and check the students work and school paperwork.

Then they would write a report, which the future of the school could depend upon. As a school governor I am aware that if anything the desire to do well in an OFSTED report is even stronger.

During my schools OFSTED report, one of the inspectors had parked his car - a Renault Espace in the school car park. Renault Espaces were popular in the nineties. They were big people carriers with a massive glass sun roof.

In one of the classrooms one child asked to go to the toilet, but being stricter perhaps than normal because of the inspection, the teacher refused to let them go. The pupil was upset and grabbed the mug on the teachers desk and hurled it out of the window.

A couple of stories below the window was the inspector's Renault Espace. The mug hit the glass sun roof smashing it completely.

After the inspection, one of my colleagues quipped that the inspection was: not so much 'a storm in a tea cup', but a 'mug in a Renault Espace'.

Whether it be OFSTED inspectors in schools, health inspectors in a restaurant or tax inspectors looking through accounts, we need to be concerned that the inspector's report will be positive and not damning and where the inspector does find problems we will be expected to make improvements.

Jesus's Inspection Reports

In chapters 2-3 of Revelation, we have what is often called the 7 letters from Jesus to the 7 churches that Revelation was originally written to.

Actually, in many ways they are more like Jesus's written report on each church.

All 7 follow a similar pattern and have key phrases that are repeated, although there are many exceptions. At a most basic level there are 4 parts to each report.

- **Who the Inspector is...**

Each report starts with a description of Jesus as the one who is sending the report. Most of these descriptions come from the vision in chapter 1 that we looked at. They remind us that Jesus is far greater than any OFSTED inspector, health inspector or tax inspector. He is the ultimate Lord of all.

But also the actual descriptions used in each letter often have a connection with the message given to the church.

So, for example for the report for the church in Ephesus, Jesus describes himself as the one who walks among the seven golden lampstands. Remember each lampstand represents a church. This reinforces the idea of Jesus inspecting the churches, which is appropriate for the first report, but also the mention of the lampstands is picked up later in the report, when Jesus threatens to remove the lampstand from Ephesus - i.e. to take away the church from that place altogether.

- **What Jesus Knows**

Next in each report, Jesus says, 'I know...'. The point is that Jesus knows what is going on in the churches. He sees what they are doing well and what they are doing badly and he understands the difficulties and pressures they are under.

Often when we face human inspections, we feel they are unfair, because they come for a brief time and have a quick look at what is going on, without really understanding the situation we are in. Jesus, however, knows. As the one walking amongst the lampstands, he really does see the truth of the situation. His report and his viewpoint will always be fair and just.

- **How the Church needs to respond**

As well as Jesus saying what he sees in the church, he tells them what they need to change, what they need to improve or how they should behave in the face of the pressures they are under. These aren't reports to be ignored, they need to be acted on, if the church is serious about truly belonging to Christ.

- **Why they should hold on to their faith**

Then finally each letter ends with an encouragement for those who are serious about holding on to their faith - no matter what changes they need to make and no matter what challenges they may face. It calls on them to be victorious in these areas, but then reminds them of the eternal reward for those who are.

Whereas the start of each report links to the vision of Jesus in chapter 1 of Revelation, the end of each report links to the vision of the end of time in the last few chapters of Revelation.

So, in the report for Ephesus, there is mention of the tree of life in paradise. This of course refers back to the tree that Adam and Eve were banished from in the Garden of Eden, but also to the picture of the tree of life in the garden city that is the new Jerusalem at the end of Revelation.

Three Key Points from these two Reports:

So, that is the pattern of the letters or reports. Each report is different, just as every church is different. Nonetheless, taken together there is much for churches around the world and down the ages to learn from Jesus's report into these churches.

I want to pick up on the three key lessons from these first two reports.

1. Hold out against False Teaching

Firstly, we need to hold out against false teaching.

This is what the church in Ephesus is commended for doing really well.

It says that when people claiming to be apostles came to the church, i.e. those who were seen as the chief authority in the early church, they checked what they were saying against what they had learnt from the original apostles and decided that they were talking rubbish. They may have claimed to be apostles, but they were nothing of the sort.

We don't know what these false apostles were teaching. Just as later on Jesus mentions the Nicolaitans and again we don't know what they taught. Yet, that is not important.

What mattered was that the church worked hard not to tolerate wicked people or to be fooled by false teachers.

The natural question to ask is are we able to do the same? We live in a culture that often values form over substance. It is easy to be impressed by brilliant and engaging speakers or flash YouTube presentations. But, we must be careful to check out the content. When we listen to those teaching us as Christian teachers, whether it be in church or online are we being careful to check out whether their teaching is true or false?

How can we know? By checking it out against the Bible. The more we read the Bible for ourselves and discuss it with others and listen to good Bible teachers, then the more able we will be to spot false teaching. And if you are not sure about what someone says and cannot think why it might be contradicting the Bible, then talk it over with a more mature Christian that you trust.

2. Hold on to Love as Primary

But secondly, we need to hold on to love as primary. Yes, we need to hate false teaching, but we mustn't let our lives be so dominated by hate that love is driven out.

Jesus is crystal clear on this with the church in Ephesus. Unless they regain the love they had at first, he will have to treat them as though they are no longer a church. He will come and take away their lampstand.

Love is the crucial quality needed in a church. But is it love of God or love of others? I think the answer has to be both.

Before re-appointing Peter to be apostle to the church, the resurrected Christ gave him an interview in which he asked him three questions. Each question was the same: "Do you love me?" The most important qualification needed to be a leader in Christ's church is to love Jesus. As long as you hold on to that, then everything else will fall in place.

At the same time, Jesus calls us to love our neighbour, to love one another and to love our enemies. If we claim to be followers of the God who so loved the world that he gave his only Son, then how can we do anything but a people dominated by the same kind of spiritual fix.

Church can so easily become about so many different things. It can become my comfort zone, my spiritual fix, a place where we come together to fight for the truth or campaign for what is

right. But we mustn't let these things become the heart of what it is to be church. At its centre, our life together must be dominated by a love of Christ and a love of others.

3. Hold firm in the face of Persecution

The church in Ephesus is both commended by Jesus and challenged by Jesus.

The church in Smyrna, receives encouragement from Jesus. Here what Jesus knows is not so much how well the church is doing, but the pressures they are under.

We may be worried by the description of Jews as a Synagogue as Satan. Our context today is that Jews are often the victims of persecution not the perpetrators of it. To use that sort of phrase in today's society would be to persecute Jews that would be a deep contradiction of the love Jesus calls us to.

In Smyrna, however, the situation was reversed. Jews were protected by the Roman state, but Christians, however, who although they claimed to follow a Jewish Messiah, could be portrayed as a new religion that would have been looked on with suspicion - especially in a city that prided itself in its commitment to Rome and Roman religion. It was quite easy for the Jews, who may have despised the very idea of a crucified Messiah and been jealous that people had left the Synagogue to join the church, to make life very difficult for them by accusing them before the Roman authorities.

Hence, the description, 'Synagogue of Satan'. The word Satan literally means, 'the accuser.'

The Christians in Smyrna then were facing persecution. They were probably poor, because refusing to join in with idolatry would have barred them from the trade guilds. Now Jesus says things are going to get worse. Some of them are going to be imprisoned. They may even face having to die for their faith.

But, this will only last for 10 days. It may be that the 10 days are a symbolic temporary time period. The point is, though, that they will be under pressure for their faith, but it will only be temporary.

Satan may throw them into a temporary jail, but at the end of Revelation, it is Satan who will be thrown into a permanent jail. In contrast, those who persevere will be kept safe by the one who is the first and the last, who will be there at the end of time. We may face even death for being a Christian, but in the encouragement at the end Jesus promises us, that we will be kept safe from the second death, that is the fate of all those who with Satan set themselves up as enemies of Christ.

Responding to the Report

None of us like receiving inspection reports, but good inspection reports can really help us to become better organisations, through encouraging what we're doing well and challenging the areas we need to change.

As you've listened to this talk, how do you need to change?

Perhaps you need to work harder at guarding against false teaching by getting to know your Bibles better yourself.

Perhaps you need to refocus on loving God and others.

Or perhaps you just need encouragement in the face of the difficulties that being a Christian brings.

In the years after Revelation was written Ephesus flourished as a church and was known both for its ability to spot false teaching and in its attitude of love. The lampstand remained.

Yet at some point in the 2,000 years since, the church there lost its way. There is now almost no sign of a Christian community in the area around Ephesus, which is part of Turkey. It seems that at some point Jesus did indeed take their lampstand away.

We need to keep taking seriously the words of Jesus. Let him who has ears to hear - hear.