

True Reputation (Revelation 3:1-13)

As Jesus addresses the churches of Sardis and Philadelphia he turns to the issue of reputation. Smyrna are reliant on a good reputation, when the truth is quite different, whilst Philadelphia need to be encouraged that Jesus's reputation as the true leader of Israel and God's Kingdom is to be trusted.

Reputation

Politicians are obsessed with their reputation. In a democracy it really matters. After all, your power depends on people voting for you, and people vote on the basis of the reputation of their leaders.

The danger is of course that democratic governments can spend more time trying to control their reputation through spin doctors and manipulation of the press, rather than actually sorting out the problems with our country! In the end what matters is not so much your reputation, but what is truly happening. There can even be a danger of believing your own hype and becoming deluded!!

Revelation:

We are going through the 7 letters that Jesus sends to the churches at the start of Revelation. They are in a way reports at how the churches are doing. Each report is of course different, as each church has its strengths and weaknesses. But as we read them we see the kinds of issues that Jesus is keen to address in his churches.

In these two reports the issues revolve around the idea of 'name' or 'reputation.'

In the letter to the church in Sardis, Jesus warns them not to believe their own hype or reputation, but to worry about the name or reputation they have with Jesus.

Whilst in the letter to the church in Philadelphia, a church which in contrast to the one in Sardis feels weak and powerless, Jesus encourages them to hold on to the name that really matters - his name!

Let's look at each in turn:

It is your reputation with Christ that counts!

First of all the church in Sardis and the idea that it is your reputation with Christ that counts.

- **Jesus sees all...**

As with all the letters Jesus begins with a description of himself that links back to the vision of the heavenly Christ in chapter 1.

There we saw that the seven stars that he holds refers to the angels of the seven churches. Angels are messengers - they often bring messages from God to people, but the implication here is that they bring reports of the churches to God. This stresses that Jesus can see past any reputation to the truth of the situation in the church.

The idea of the seven spirits also makes this point. In Revelation 5:6 it says:

"Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth." (Revelation 5:6)

The implication is that as 7 represents completeness, that Jesus sees completely what is going on in the world.

We can manage our reputation with others through spin doctors, good PR or what we post on social media, but we cannot manage our reputation with Jesus. He sees what we are truly like!

- **Sardis - A Church with a Good Reputation**

And when it comes to the church in Sardis, it says the church has a reputation for being alive, but the truth that Jesus sees is that it is dead.

Now, it is not clear why the church in Sardis has a reputation for being alive. The implication is that others thought well of the church, but we are not sure what it was that impressed people.

But, we could ask what it is about churches today that might give the impression of being 'alive' to others? Certainly a church with a big congregation on a Sunday morning or fantastic music, flashy YouTube services, lots of young people, famous preachers, strong social work... I am sure you could add to the list. Indeed, perhaps these are the kinds of things that people might look for in churches when they move to a new area and are looking for a new church.

But, we need to ask ourselves, are these the kinds of things that Jesus sees as showing a church is alive? Most of them aren't mentioned in these 7 letters as positive signs in a church.

And certainly whatever it was about the church in Sardis that seemed to show it as being alive did not impress Jesus. He says, 'You're dead!' Their good reputation was a delusion. They needed to stop believing their own hype.

- **Sardis - A City with a History of Wrongly Relying on It's Reputation**

The warning to stop believing their own hype was particularly relevant to the ancient city of Sardis.

In the sixth century BC, Sardis was the proud capital of the Lydian Kingdom. It was a glorious city with a fortress that had a reputation for being impregnable. No-one had ever captured this city, it was secure on top of its hill and its occupants felt secure inside it.

Then in 546BC, Cyrus the great Persian king came and rather than a long and torturous siege, managed to find a way into the fortress for his troops and captured the city for the Persian Empire.

You might say that Cyrus had caught the city with its guard down, as they slept overly confident in its invincibility Cyrus had come like a thief in the night and stolen the city from the Lydian kingdom!

Do you see the echoes of that story in Jesus's report. He warns them that they need to wake up! Or he will come like a thief in the night. They need to be roused from the delusion that they are alive and realise that they were dead!

- **Sardis - A Dead Church**

But how was Sardis dead?

There are two hints at what was wrong with the church in Sardis:

It says their deeds were unfinished and it implies their clothes were stained.

The stained clothes image when read in the light of what comes later in Revelation is almost definitely an image of compromise with the idolatry of the world. This was a church whose members were indistinguishable from the people around them. They did not stand out as distinctive from the world in the way that Christ would want.

And perhaps this idea links with the idea that their deeds were unfinished. If we stop seeking to grow in Christ, if we stop pursuing a life where we seek to become more like Jesus through studying the Bible, prayer and meeting with other Christians then we will gradually become like the people around us in the world.

We can never truly finish growing in Christ-likeness, but if we think we have got there. If we think we have done enough as a Christian, then our work is left uncomplete and we will slide into a life of compromise with the world.

And my fear is that for much of the church in the UK that is the truth. Before Covid, on average people's church attendance was becoming less regular, their personal Bible study less frequent and their prayer life more sporadic.

The influences on our thinking are often driven more by what the newspaper's say, what our friends say on Facebook or what we watch on TV. The result is that the church is dying. Sadly that can even be true in churches that seem to have a good reputation.

- **Action Needed: Wake Up!**

Christianity may have a reputation of surviving in this country. But we cannot take that reputation for granted. We need to wake up. Otherwise Jesus might come like a thief in the night and declare the church in our country is no more.

So will you be one of the Christians who wakes up? Will you watch yourself so that you remain distinctive from the world, where Jesus calls us to be distinctive. Will you take seriously the need to pursue your own personal growth in Christ, through personal prayer and Bible study.

Put simply, will you wake up spiritually?

- **Promise Given: Name in the book of life...**

And this is an important question to ask, because it is to do with our place in God's kingdom.

Jesus acknowledges that not everyone in the church in Sardis is failing to be distinctive. Some have clothes that are not stained. For them and for those who heed his call, he has a promise. Their name will certainly not be blotted from the book of life.

In ancient times cities used to keep a record of names of their citizens. The image of the 'Book of Life' that appears a number of times in Revelation is a record of those whose place is in the New Jerusalem, the heavenly city. It is an assurance of eternal life with God forever more.

This is where you want your name to be acknowledged - not in the eyes of other human beings who are easily fooled, but in the eyes of Christ who sees us as we truly are and who can commend us before God himself.

It is holding on to Christ's name that counts!

In fact it is this idea of Christ as the one who truly does get to decide who is in and out of God's eternal Kingdom, that comes the fore in the next letter to the church in Philadelphia.

And the point of what Jesus is saying to the church in Philadelphia is that they need to hold on to the truth of what they have in Jesus and not believe in the false propoganda of others. It is holding on to Christ's name that counts.

- **Who gives access to God's Kingdom?**

The description of Christ at the start of this letter emphasises that Jesus is the true Israelite leader, the one who is God's appointed over the people of God. He is holy and true and he holds the key of David, the most famous and most important of Israel's king.

This seems to be contrasted with what Jesus labels as the 'Synagogue of Satan', those who claim to be Jews, but who are not, but are liars.

In other words the debate here is who truly has the right to claim that they hold on to the heritage of the Old Testament and its promises and as a result hold the power to decide who is in God's Kingdom and who is not.

For the Christians in Philadelphia this was a big issue, because they were probably a small minority in the city, whilst the Jews were a wealthy and powerful group. Hence, Jesus's comment that the church has little strength.

It may be that many of the Christians had been Jews and members of the Synagogue, but because of their faith in Christ they had been kicked out of the Synagogue and told by the Jews that they were thus no longer part of God's people. Their would have been immense pressure to deny Christ and rejoin their old friends in the Synagogue.

But Jesus says he has the keys of David. This is a quote from Isaiah 22, where the administrator of the king's palace, Shebna - a king who would be descended from David is to be removed by God and replaced by Eliakim, who will thus be given the key to the palace of David, to almost to have power to control who comes in and out and has true access to the king.

Jesus is saying that he has the power to give access to God's Kingdom - not the leaders of the local Jewish synagogue. The name they claim for themselves is false - Jesus is the one who is Holy and True, don't believe their false propoganda, hold on to Christ, so you do not lose your crown. Don't lose your place in the heavenly Jerusalem for the sake of a place in the earthly synagogue.

And for us today, we may be told that holding on to the name of Christ is the wrong thing to do. We may be told that being a Christian will mean we will be shut out from different opportunities and prospects in life. But we need to remember that no matter how much following Christ may leave us shut out. Holding on to him ensure we will be let into the place that really matters.

- **Promise - To have Christ's name and a place in His Kingdom**

And that is the promise at the end of the letter.

If we hold on to Christ's name. We will be in the new Jerusalem that comes down from heaven, we will have the name of Christ written on us to show us that we truly belong in God's Kingdom,
and we will be solidly there - we will be a pillar in the temple of God!

We may miss out on belonging to something in this world, because we follow Christ, but we certainly won't miss out on belonging to the place that really matters - not just now, but in eternity.

What name will you seek?

So, what name will you seek? Will you seek a good reputation in the world or will you be more concerned with your reputation with Christ.

And will you believe the propaganda of the world, or will you hold firm to the one who is holy and true?