

Message: Smyrna: A church in a proud community-Revelation 2: 8-11

I think will be very few of us who do not remember Mr Happy. I think his image and the slogan "Glasgow's miles better" is an interesting example both of marketing skill and the effects of increasing self confidence and pride in the city within which we live.

The City of Glasgow wanted to demonstrate to the world that the image of a grimy city with the history of being one of the greats of the Industrial Revolution, but riddled with deprivation, violence, ugliness and crime had finally to be put to rest.

It was the project of the then Provost, Dr Michael Kelly and with the help of that campaign, we began to reinvent our municipal pride in our history, our architecture, our pride in all forms of art and in tourism. And that reinvention which is still evolving to this day allows us to say - Yes Glasgow's miles better and we love living there.

In a lesser way, we in the village of Killearn have a very similar civic pride. We have pride in the beauty of the village; a desire to have the best environment, the best schooling, the best housing, even the best flower displays in the summer. And of course we are grateful to people like our community council and our local counsellors who work hard to make that possible. This is a good place to live - no doubt.

But both in the City of Glasgow and the village of Killearn we do not have to scratch the surface very deeply to see things we would rather we did not see.

In the city, some areas and particularly the outlying housing schemes created to solve social problems still have an unenviable reputation for adult unemployment, crippling poverty, dependence on drugs fuelling more crime, poor and dilapidated housing. Undoubtedly Glasgow's "no" miles better for those living there.

And in Killearn -we still have a divided community with incomers or commuters and village people thought of differently; we have such inflated house prices that only the extremely wealthy seem to be able to find housing for their children to buy here, leaving the vast majority of our young people moving away from the village, taking all their enthusiasm and skills elsewhere.

And again just beneath the surface we have intermittent problems with youth crime and vandalism. And I am sure we all know families with other problems whose public image is confident and assured but underneath they are perhaps crying out for help which the village establishment does not provide.

What is my point? Surely, Civic pride is a good thing, especially when it is pride in concrete achievements and positive attributes of a place. Such pride if it is not just part of a marketing spin campaign can indeed be a tremendous force for social good in a community or city.

The church in Smyrna was situated in a city with almost unrivalled municipal pride. Second only to Ephesus of the cities of Asia, it had many natural advantages.

Mommsen, the German Historian said that Asia Minor (the region John was writing to in Revelation) was "a paradise of municipal vanity" and Smyrna was noted for "its municipal rivalry and its local pride".

"Smyrna's miles better" --seems appropriate.

Why was it so proud? Well its position and design as a city was unique and may bring reminders of cities we know today.

It was a great trading port, situated at the end of the road which crossed Phrygia and Lydia and on to the Far East. It lay at the end of a long sheltered estuary with the harbour right at the centre of the city. The city spread out from the harbour but was backed by a hill covered with temples like a crown on the head of the city. The temples were to the full range of Greek gods and as the city prospered commercially, so did the temples which were sites of great wealth and beauty.

The city was also the epitome of good town planning in part due to an accident of history. It was in fact one of the first truly planned cities of the known world at that time. A Greek colony had been there since c1000BC but had been razed to the ground by invaders in about 400BC and left almost desolate for 400 years. A Macedonian general then rebuilt it with large, straight broad streets and rectangular blocks of buildings. The streets were all paved with stone and there was a particular street called the "Street of Gold" which ran like a necklace round the neck of the Pagos hill.

So you had the head of the city on the hill, crowned with temples and with a golden necklace. The foothills of the elegant streets was the body and the feet sat in the sheltered commercial harbour which could also be easily defended against attack. I am sure we could all almost write the "Visit Smyrna" blurb for the local travel agents.

Politically it had thrown its hand in with Rome long before the Roman empire was powerful and because of that loyalty was second only to Ephesus in the cult of Emperor worship at the time of John's writing of Revelation.

And if it was great in trade, beauty, political and religious status, it was also great in its people as Ambassadors for the city.

After I ran an international medical meeting in Glasgow a few years ago, I was involved as many of you may be in what is called the Glasgow Ambassadors program, which continues to try to attract conference and business meeting business to the city. We consider our people who speak well of our village or city as good ambassadors.

Smyrna was the same. It saw the attraction of great sporting events and had its own version of Hampden Park where athletes came from the entire known world to compete every year. Academically it had a great library, and in common with an embarrassing number of cities, it claimed to be the birthplace of Homer, perhaps reinforcing its claim by putting his name on its coins and building a grand memorial building called the Homereion. So sport and culture flourished and local Smyrnans carried the pride of their city in many aspects of life to other places.

It all sound almost too good to be true; just as perhaps Glasgow marketing sounds almost too good to be true and that indeed was the case.

Now for those who have not been present for the earlier parts of this series on Revelation; we need to be reminded of a few scriptural points. Could I also remind any who are interested that the whole series is being published on the church website at www.killearnkirk.org.uk or you can request a printed copy from me directly.

1. It was written under direct instruction of the resurrected Jesus in a vision to John.
2. Although sections were individually addressed to each of the churches there were part of the whole. That is, they would all have read all of the individual letters. In this way the whole church in Asia Minor would receive the whole letter and see what John is writing to each other. This would be important not only in this first part of the overall letter but when John moves on to the apocalyptic part of his second vision, he is addressing all 7 churches and by implication because 7 was a number representing completeness he was writing to all churches and denominations for time immemorial. To reinforce this His vision had shown Jesus at the centre of all his churches in the image of the seven lampstands and

this means he was writing to all churches and denominations for time immemorial.

The context was that he was writing to churches under terrible, real and imminent threat from the ruling emperor of Rome who was requiring all subjects to profess Caesar as Lord, and essentially worship him as a God.

However, there was a special dispensation made for practising Jews, who had negotiated a concession as they said they could only worship one God. This put added pressure on Christians who, if they said they were no longer adhering to Jewish law, would then not be protected by that concession and would have to worship Caesar or pay the penalty of death.

Each of the messages to the churches is different in content, but exactly the same in structure.

It was like an annual Appraisal of a member of your staff.

To the church of *

- Jesus says
- I know Usually some praise
- I reprove you for
- He who hears must pay attention
- Promise of the end times

So let us now turn to a little of the detail of this short letter to Smyrna, and in particular keep in mind what relevance it has for us today.

John writes “*These are the words of Him who is first and the Last, who died and came to life again*”. Even this short sentence has particular nuances for the proud people of Smyrna.

They may have been “*the fairest of the cities of Ionia*” or as Aristedes a Greek Christian writer wrote “*the brightness which pervades every part, and reaches up to the heavens, like the glitter of the bronze armour of Homer*” but John reminds them that Jesus is the First and the Last - He is more important than any civic pride; His word carries more weight than any poet or philosopher.

We say - pride comes before a fall - Smyrna, Glasgow and Killearn are being reminded that if they put their humanly justifiable pride in their community before God, they are going to suffer. John also refers to the death and resurrection of Jesus, perhaps reminding them again that they were proud that their city had risen from the ashes of destruction to become a model of planning, but Jesus had risen from the dead, and that puts any “Grand Design” into the shade.

But having reminded of their need for humility John goes on to praise them in v9 “ I know your afflictions and your poverty - yet you are rich.” And the Greek words he uses for afflictions and poverty emphasise their degree.

The word translated as *affliction* implies crushing with a great weight. This was a church struggling against not only the weight of the Roman empire, but also the weight of the most powerful and influential Jewish group who are trying to crush them to extinction to preserve their unique relationship with Rome.

The word translated for poverty is also an extreme one - implying destitution. It was not a little tightening of the belt as the economy takes a dip. This is more than penury, this is not having any thing to eat. Like in our present society, the gulf between rich and poor had widened, and if there were shortages of food, these people were at the very end of the line.

There was another reason for this poverty. Because of the politically approved attitude of the Jews to the Christians there was a continual threat of "rent a mob" being encouraged to attack and burn down their homes and take what little they had.

What was worse was that this was unpredictable - they lived in fear but there was no guarantee when or whether any individual family would be attacked.

I was talking to someone two days ago who had visited Mozambique to support some Christian workers just at the time of the civil war there. She said it was the uncertainty of whether they were going to be attacked any night which was so awful. They knew other farms had been attacked and they expected it again. How could they sleep with that in mind any night?

We have just had a very necessary week's holiday, and as one does, I read several books from cover to cover. One was a novel about the Arc of the Covenant, I guarantee to bring into a future sermon, but the one relevant to the fate of the Christians in Smyrna was ironically a novel written about families living in Germany just before the outbreak of the second world war. We are all sadly familiar with the excesses of the Holocaust once war broke out, but this book emphasised the earlier situation where there was the constant threat of wildcat action against known Jewish homes and businesses. The authorities would turn a blind eye to these attacks even though they were not yet established in law.

John does not mince his words about the threatening Jews. "I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not but are a Synagogue of Satan " . What an insult. And I suppose when we consider what they were doing we would agree.

But wait a minute, let's be mighty careful not to overstate our case, and become truly anti-Semitic. Remember these very words were used by the developing Nazi regime in the 1930's to justify the oppression of the Jewish race.

And not just in the past. Do you know there are right wing white supremacist politicians identified with the Christian Identity movement in the USA who twist these words to say that black races are the "peoples of mud" and the Jewish race are literal offspring of Satan and Eve.

They are the real "red-necks" clutching their right to bear arms sitting on the porches of their Southern States properties, looking forward to the battle of Armageddon against the Jewish controlled government of the United States before creating the "New Jerusalem" in the USA.

This is happening now in our lifetime, in the sophisticated 21st century. And if you do not believe me, you should go visit some of these areas of the Southern USA as I have, and see the continuing abject poverty of the African Americans and the Jewish European refugees compared with the self righteous wealth of some of their white supremacist masters.

What is the lesson for us? Hopefully we like most of the USA would now repudiate such attitudes, and would see such twisting of scripture as abhorrent. But you know, too few people read their Bibles critically and prayerfully if at all.

They see a phrase and they use it to their argument's advantage rather than seeking God's

meaning first before applying it in the context of the whole Gospel of Jesus Christ.

But there are more specific questions that arise from this repudiation of the rich, powerful Jewish community who were making trouble for the Christians in Smyrna.

What is our attitude to the minority opinion in our community or in our cities? Is the establishment always right by virtue of their power, money and influence?

Have we sometimes forgotten that Jesus came humbly to earth in extreme material poverty and came to serve; to wash the feet of those whom he served.

If you & I, by virtue of our education, hard work, inheritance or just good fortune imagine that because of these material things we have the right to rule over and not serve our fellow men, we should listen very carefully to what happened to the churches of Revelation.

And if we have a wrong view of Jewish people, we should remember that they remain God's chosen people and whilst they have taken a very wrong turn by rejecting the Messiah that they continue to seek for, we should love them all the more and pray that they will turn individually or corporately to Him only, through whom we can be saved.

You will notice that Smyrna and Philadelphia are the only churches who are not chided for deficiencies yet their fates were very different. John prophesies that Smyrna is going to suffer, and we have to assume this is meant to be - suffer more than they were already suffering through poverty and affliction.

They are going to be thrown into prison - some of them anyway "to be tested (v10) ", and he prophesies that they will suffer persecution for 10 days.

Now once again we must not take these numbers literally. As we now understand the number 7 as meaning completeness, here the number 10 means "for a short time" .

And some commentators suggest that the phrase "to test you" and the duration of 10 days, reminds the reader of the passage of Daniel which was read to us earlier. It is a lovely story of confidence in the Lord but also a direct demonstration of the effect of healthy nutrition - Vegetables and water are more healthy than the rich food of the palace! Before anyone takes that out of context and use it as a call to vegetarianism can I say that --It is no such thing!

If you are tempted to think that, remember the story of Peter rejecting food carried down from heaven on the basis of religious laws, and God making it clear we have no right to reject food given by God, in whatever form it takes. However, as we will see later in the Revelation churches, a real problem that threatened them was the taking of food offered to idols which was quite a different matter.

So the Smyrna church is exhorted to be faithful, even to the point of death. And as you will hear shortly, for many of them, that was exactly what they had to face. But God would provide a reward for that faithfulness to death and it takes the form of two phrases:

V 10c - end. "The crown of life" and protection from what is called "the second death". We will consider these in reverse order.

Surely we can only die once, so what is the second death to which John refers. In the Jewish culture there was a belief that there were two deaths; a physical death which all would experience and then a second death which would be as a result of God's judgement on how they had lived according to the Law.

We as Christians also understand a physical death which to the believer leads us to be with Jesus immediately ----“today you will be with me in paradise”.

But there is also a time of judgement when we will answer for our actions in this life. This is the judgement when we, instead of answering as to how we have adhered to Jewish Law, are able to call on the saving grace of Christ Jesus to speak up on our behalf.

A second death might be a description of what would then follow for those who have rejected Christ and who will spend eternity without his loving presence.

As Phil said a couple of weeks ago, we do not know the timing: God’s timing is not earthy timing, and whatever dimension the afterlife is in, we do not know how these sequences of death and judgement will pass.

But John like Paul is full of confidence that “if there is a second death” as described by the Jews, the embattled people of Smyrna will be spared that because of their faithfulness.

For me having lost 2 close family members in a year and perhaps yourselves in similar circumstances, the most helpful passage to keep close when all seems too much to bear is from Paul’s letter to the Romans 8: 38-39 “ *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels or demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.*”

And I think once we have embraced that conviction, we can then cope with the undoubted fact that when we have to face challenge and suffering, and when we all face death, we can trust God to look after us.

But there is another point that this promise that “He who overcomes will not be hurt” raises.

God’s will for us may seem to be almost random in its deliverance or not.

Have you like me wrestled with the fact that individual people are spared in times of war or earthquake or other natural disaster, or perhaps cured from fatal illnesses, who then speak publicly as though their own prayers to God brought about deflection of a bullet or rescue or miraculous healing.

I am certain that for every person of faith who prayed for such protection or relief with sincerity and trust, there were many thousands who prayed exactly the same prayer but were not spared.

How else could we cope with what seems to be a lack of answer to our prayers for dying relatives. Of course we would like to hang on to them; of course we would like them to be cured but we accept that it is not always God’s will that such a cure happens and we accept that.

That is not to say that I do not believe in God delivered miracles that relieve suffering or provide rescue or cure.

But what we as Christians have to do is to really pray that God’s will be done, and then trust ---as John is asking the church at Smyrna to trust that whatever happens God will overrule within His will and not within ours.

The church at Smyrna was going to suffer v10 - no doubt, yet the adjacent church at Philadelphia, also under attack is spared. ch3:10 “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.”

All we can do is to obey the command “He who has an ear, let him hear” and hang on to Christ’s promises in the midst of a tempestuous seas of life that we may overcome in the strength only he can supply.

The other reward:

Crowns of life - I suspect few of us will ever wear an earthly crown so we realise this is not referring to any attribute of Royalty.

This crown of life has several resonances. John is reminding the people of Smyrna, with its crown of temples around the Pagos hill, that the crown of reward will be far better, and certainly more long lasting than any crown made by human hands. The people who went to these temples had a habit of wearing a crown when entering the temple, emphasising their wealth and status as well as their adherence to the God of that particular temple. John is saying to us that those who serve Jesus in our earthly lives will wear a crown of reward far more beautiful and more meaningful in heaven.

This is not a kingly crown or an ostentatious fashion accessory - this is the crown of reward for achievement, the crown or the laurel leaf circlet of the victor in the games.

Romans at a banquet would also wear a crown - and John is referring to a far grander and more meaningful banquet catered for by God.

William Barclay wrote: “in this life it may be that loyalty to Jesus will bring the Christian a crown of thorns;but in the life to come it will bring the crown of glory.”

What was the end of the story for Smyrna? Were they spared the time of trial?

No - Polycarp the Bishop of Smyrna was burned at the stake on 23rd February AD155 as part of the celebration of the yearly games. A mob were set in motion and although he could have escaped he had a vision in a dream of a pillow beneath his head burning with fire, and he told his disciples the next morning that he had seen his fate.

He was pressed to recant and curse Christ and make sacrifice to Caesar, but refused the proconsul saying “Eighty and six years have I served Jesus Christ, and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me.”

Polycarp refused to be bound to the stake and prayed a great prayer as the flames burned. In part of the prayer he said: *“I bless thee that thou hast granted unto me this day and hour, that I may share among the number of the martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, for the resurrection to eternal life, both of soul and body in the immortality of the Holy Spirit. And may I today be received among them before thee, as a rich and acceptable sacrifice.”*

Tradition has it that the flames never burned him, just as the flames never burned Daniel in the fiery furnace, and in Polycarp’s case, he was finally killed by stabbing, and that his blood released extinguished the flames.

Please God, none of us have to take such a test, but whether we do or not, may you and I remember

that the promise of Revelation is that Jesus wins in the end and that whatever suffering or affliction comes to us; whatever challenge or disappointment; whatever lonely path we have to walk, Jesus is there sharing the exact same experiences in His holy body and that with Him we will truly overcome, and for that we thank God. Amen