

REVELATION 2:8-11
RICH OR POOR?

What's the most valuable thing you have? Is there some part of your life that you just would not give up? This is about values! Is your Christian faith that one thing that you treasure and simply would never give up? Is your faith something worth living for? It is even something worth dying for? Values are hugely important to us. Part of the political debate that is going on is attempting to be a values debate - what will be the values of the new Scotland? There are all kinds of answers to that question. Values shape our lives, they shape the things we see as important; values shape our priorities. What are our church values? What matters most about the Church? What is there about the church is worth living and dying for? The building? Our relationships? The truth of the gospel? Have you ever been on holiday to Izmir? Izmir is Turkey's third largest city. The modern Turkish city of Izmir is the old city of Smyrna and there are still parts of the old city to be seen on your visit; there is still a Christian church there. There was a time when it seemed that the church might not survive in Smyrna at all, let alone for 2000 years, but it has and when you visit Izmir on holiday as a tourist, you can worship in the Christian Church and celebrate your faith with your fellow Christians.

That in itself is a great little insight for us into the life and future of the Church. We're going to fill that picture out a bit, but here is a very simple truth. The Church will go on. We live in a time when the future of the Church in Scotland seems to be under severe threat from a number of places: from outside when the secular society and the militant atheists seem to want to push the Church out of life altogether; many more people simply have no time for the Church, they simply don't see that it has any relevance to their lives and so they simply ignore us; churches in Scotland get smaller and smaller and the age profile rises; there are issues of money and leadership; there are divisions in the church which simply don't help. But here's a thing: life was hard for the church in Smyrna 2000 years ago and we'll see that from our reading today. But 2000 years on, there is a church in Izmir; there are Christians there who worship God and bear witness to Jesus. The light did not go out!

Smyrna competed with Ephesus for the title of 'first city of Asia'; it was one of the great cities of the region at the time. Smyrna was an ally of Rome before the Roman Empire was all-powerful and people there engaged in the worship of the emperor; they built a temple to the Roman emperor in the days of Tiberias and that was a strong part of the life of the city of Smyrna at the time of our reading. We know nothing of the early life of the Church in Smyrna other than what is in Revelation 2; we presume that the gospel arrived there at the same time as it arrived in Ephesus, perhaps through Paul's missionary journeys, but we don't know. All we do know is that here is a church, perhaps a small church, that is struggling, who see themselves as poor, but whom Jesus sees in a quite different way.

"I know..." (Revelation 2:9f) Here is a church for whom life is hard and because life is hard they see themselves as poor. What is making their life hard? There are three strands to the web of hardship:

First thread: we're in the days when the Roman Empire was beginning to persecute the Christians; Christianity was not a legally permitted religion and so the Christians were open to persecution and the stories of Christians being thrown to the lions are not made up. John, the apostle and leader of Ephesian church is in exile on the island of Patmos as he writes book of Revelation. The worship of the Roman emperor in Smyrna created all kinds of complications for the Church; more of that in a moment!

Second thread: there was a strong Jewish community in Smyrna and the Jews were hostile to the Church in a most fierce way. They could not accept the basic Christian

gospel, that Jesus crucified and raised was the Messiah; someone who died a criminal's death could never be the object of faith and worship. They probably also didn't like the fact that the Christian Church was growing and the gospel was spreading and so the Jews incited the Roman authorities to take action against the Christians. These two circumstances made life hard and gave them a sense of a poor quality of life.

There is a third strand that may well be related to others: there is a spiritual battle going on in the background, a battle for soul of the people between Jesus and the devil. The devil will do anything to subvert the Christian faith and the Church; he will go to any lengths to try to make Christians give up the faith, so life is hard for the Christians in Smyrna!

Smyrna Christians had a very poor view of themselves! When facing all of these difficulties at once, it saps the energy and undermines our confidence and leads to a poor view of ourselves and life. Christians might well also have been materially poor; it would be hard for them to make a living when they were subject to the kind of antagonism that we've already described, their goods pillaged by mob violence; Christian business men shunned by others in the city. So Christians were possibly materially poor in an otherwise wealthy city. How do you feel when you hear all the bad news that goes around the Church in Scotland 2014? In our worst moments, all the jibes, comments, criticisms do get to us; perhaps I feel it more because it is my job as well and when we take them to heart we can end up with a very poor view of the Church, a poor view of ourselves, a poor view of Christian faith, that we are a small and shrinking minority. When life is hard in other ways, that sense of being poor is simply reinforced: we see ourselves involved in a struggle, faith is a struggle, life is a struggle and we are poor! We have a poor sense of self-esteem personally and churches take on personal characteristics at times, so churches have poor sense of self-esteem.

The Church is Smyrna poor. But says Jesus "*I know...*" (*Revelation 2:9a*) Rich? Really? The Beatitudes are powerful set of eight sayings, eight qualities of the Christian, eight descriptions of the one group of people. They all begin in the same way: "*Blessed are...*". Some versions have the first word as "happy" but that misses Jesus' point. These are not about a happy life; these qualities are about a rich life, a life rich with God's blessing. When look at the qualities Jesus lists, these are not qualities that the world values: "poor in spirit", "those who mourn", "the meek"; even the last one says "*Blessed are...*" (*Matthew 5:10*) But these are qualities that make us rich with God's blessing; the poor in spirit are promised a kingdom; the meek will inherit the earth; the pure in heart will see God; the persecuted will also inherit a kingdom. These blessings are ours for faith; they don't depend on our circumstances; they don't depend on whether we have money or not; we are a people greatly blessed by God. We could look at other Bible pieces that tell us the same things, that list ways in which God has blessed us; they say the same things, we are rich!

Nothing will take that blessing away! It doesn't always 'feel' that we are a people greatly blessed; we don't always see that perspective on our life; but that's the unchanged and unchanging reality of the life of faith with Jesus - we are rich! There is a great piece of psychology in this little letter to Smyrna: Jesus does not give them a row for missing the point; this is one letter where there is no complaint about the Church. This is not a church that has failed! He simply inspires them! "You are rich!". Are you a bottle half-full, or half-empty person? I heard someone say recently that it doesn't matter whether we see life as half-full or half-empty, but that we see who is holding the bottle! Jesus is holding the bottle that is our life and in Him we are rich with the blessing of God and nothing will take that blessing away - not our feelings, not our circumstances, not our money, not our job or lack of it. Nothing will take away the blessing of God; we are rich. This is who and what we are; if we say it often

enough we might get some notion that this is serious. This is why the Christian faith and the Church is such a good thing.

"Do not..." (Revelation 2:10) "Be faithful" – that's easier to say than to do. Polycarp was famous as the bishop of Smyrna later than this, about 155AD, but he may well have lived in Smyrna at the time of this letter. The Roman authorities wanted to put Polycarp to death, as an example to others, to stamp out the Christian faith and the Christian Church; he went into hiding, but one of his servants gave him away under torture. Polycarp was brought to the stadium and the Roman proconsul said: "swear by the genius of Caesar... what harm is it to say Caesar is Lord, to sacrifice and be saved?" But Polycarp was adamant: only Jesus is Lord. "86 years have I served Him and He has done me no wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" He would not give up his Christian faith, even when his life was in danger; later that day he died as a Christian martyr, faithful to Jesus rather than give up his Christian faith.

The message of the whole book of Revelation is that Jesus is Lord. Jesus has the whole world in His hands; Jesus has our times in His hands. *"You will..." (Revelation 2:10)* is not the best, most encouraging message for Christians to hear, but there would come an eleventh day! There would be a day when that persecution would come to an end and a day when the Christians would be able to live in peace and prosperity again. Jesus is King and Lord; our life and times personally, the church – all things are in His hands, not in the hands of the Roman emperor, not in the hands of militant atheists, not under the control or influence of our circumstances! *"These are..." (Revelation 2:8)* This is our Jesus, this is Jesus our Lord. He is the First and the Last - He is the A to Z of everything, the One who knows the end from the beginning and who is changeless and here is a reason to be encouraged. But that's not enough; there's another reason to be encouraged - *"who died..."* Jesus who suffered and died at the hands of cruel persecutors; Jesus who defeated death and who always lives; this Jesus is Lord! Jesus knows their suffering from the inside; He knows what they are going through; He knows what they are facing. He has overcome and will help His people to do the same.

"Be faithful." That's not the same as being full of energy or full of enthusiasm; it's not the same as being successful and famous; it's not the same as having all the answers to all the questions; it's not the same as doing the same job in the Church for 40 years. Stickability! Staying with Jesus even when life is hard. None of us will be asked to be martyrs for our faith; it's not going to cost us our lives; but sometimes the challenge seems just as big and just as difficult. Stick with Jesus; stick with faith; stick with Him even when life is a struggle, even when faith is struggle. Perseverance is a great quality to have: this is the quality that allows people to run marathons when every part of their body is crying out to stop; this is the quality that allows people to keep on believing when everything about life and faith is hard.

Be inspired by being rich! "You are rich!" This is why Polycarp gave his life for Jesus, because he saw that faith made him a rich man; it was something worth dying for! This is what inspires us to be faithful, to stick with Jesus and with faith - faith makes us rich. We are rich with the blessing of God; God has done great things for us; God has given us many good gifts and graces; the focus of that wealth is Jesus. We are not driven to being faithful by all-demanding God, or for fear of letting God down; we are drawn to being faithful by God who has loved us and who always loves us, by God who has blessed us, by God who has made us rich and who has promised. *"Be faithful..." (Revelation 2:10)* It is a huge challenge for us, being Christians in increasingly hostile or dismissive society; being Christians when life is hard; we feel poor and life is poor. *"I know..." (Revelation 2:9)*