

REVELATION 3:1-6
WAKEN UP!

Being busy - is that you? Eugene Peterson is an American pastor, writer and teacher. He wrote a little article called *The Unbusy Pastor* because he disliked being called "busy". Any letter he received addressed to "The busy pastor" he put straight in the bin. But, he said, pastors become busy because we want to appear important, significant, and what better way to seem to be important than to have a diary full of appointments! Heavy demands on my time prove to me and to anyone else who notices that I am important! He wrote, "If I go to see the doctor and I see through the half-open door the doctor reading a book, I wonder if he's any good. A good doctor will have people lining up waiting to see him; a good doctor will not have time to read a book...I live in a society in which crowded schedules are evidence of importance." He concludes that the pastor's proper work is to pray, preach and listen.

"The busy church is a successful Church, is a healthy church." That's way we think. The Church whose calendar is full of events and groups and meetings - that's the Church that must be healthy and growing, 'lively' we call it, because there is so much going on! I remember seeing a booklet produced by a church - though I can't remember now which church it was! - this booklet detailed all the church-based organisations and activities that went on in the Church halls; there was a secretary for this and that club and all sorts of youth organisations; the congregation had a reputation for being lively and successful. There was one thing lacking in that schedule - there was no meeting for prayer or Bible study and no space for that meeting to take place; there was no room for it in the weekly schedule; they were too busy! Is a busy church a healthy church? It might be, but it won't be healthy just by being busy. In fact, being busy may mean that some things are missing.

Sardis was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Lydia in Asia Minor; it is now the village of Sart in Western Turkey. It had been a city of great wealth; the king of Sardis called Croesus has become a byword for being rich; gold was discovered in the river and Sardis was the place where gold and silver coins were first struck. The city was built round an Acropolis some 1500 feet above the river valley, surrounded by steep and seemingly unclimbable cliffs; they set no guard on the citadel because no-one could get there, they thought, but the city fell several times to soldiers who climbed the cliffs under the cover of darkness, while the guards were asleep; once is bad enough but to let it happen some times after that is just carelessness. It was a city of past glories by the time of our reading; it had a great reputation, but now was something of faded grandeur. We know nothing about the Church in Sardis other than what is here, but it seems that the Church was like the city, asleep!

As we've seen before with these letters to young churches, there is a little pattern to them. First, there is something to commend the Church, something good; then there is a criticism and finally a remedy. These three things are there in this letter to the Church in Sardis from Jesus, but they're all a bit mixed up together. We're reminded at the start that Jesus holds His Church in His hands; Jesus is with His Church; Jesus knows His Church and is at work in His people. This is something for us to hold onto in the days when the future of the Church is so full of uncertainties - Jesus knows His Church, He holds His people in His hands and is at work to bless His people and build His Church. There is much that is good about Church still; there is much to concern us and so often these are mixed up together. Praise God for what is good and pray on!

What is good about the Church in Sardis? "*I know...*" (*Revelation 3:1*) We've heard that before and in other places Jesus has spelled out what these deeds are. Here,

there is none of that. There are just a few words to say "*I know your deeds*". We're not told what these deeds are and in fact, we're not even sure that this is entirely a compliment. It is so quickly challenged. However, there is one other piece of good news: "*You have...*" (*Revelation 3:4*) These little pictures of Church life in Revelation 2 and 3 are wonderfully put together: Sardis was famous for its garment industry, making garments, dying garments. Here, Jesus describes some of the Church as people whose clothes are good and clean, people who have remained faithful and there are some. They are described as people who will walk with Jesus and who will be worthy of His blessing. These are small blessings, but there is something to give thanks for; there are some good deeds and some faithful people.

But the deeds that Jesus sees are very quickly shown to be lacking: "*I know...*" (*Revelation 3:1*) A church living on its reputation? A Church that is asleep? We have to speculate a little, but it seems as if the Sardis church had a reputation for being an 'alive' church – a group of people whose first devotion to Jesus was strong, whose faith was vibrant, whose love for each other and for people in their city was talked about across the churches in that area and people in the city knew all about them. Their Church magazine had a list of all the Church meetings and activities and the ways in which they were taking the gospel to their community. We presume that something of this is what it meant for them to be an 'alive' Church. Just as their city had a past reputation as a great city, but the people were leaving to go elsewhere and the name of the city had gone down, so the Church is living in the past, with a sense of importance and life based on its past reputation rather than the present reality. "*You are dead*" says Jesus; there is no worse word to hear!

A Church that is asleep! Some of the other churches in the area were being persecuted for their faith by the Roman authorities. Someone described the Christians in Sardis as "a perfect model of inoffensive Christianity", they are "content with mediocrity... it was too innocuous to be worth persecuting." (GB Caird) Again, just as the city had been raided by people climbing the cliffs because the guards had been asleep, never thinking, complacently thinking they would be ok, so the church is asleep, forgetting to care. It would seem as if they'd forgotten to care about their faith and let it drift; perhaps they'd forgotten to care for one another and had let that drift as well. The city had been captured at least twice by this failure to watch; the church is in danger of losing its faith by a failure to watch, by falling asleep.

Jesus told the story of ten young women who were going to a wedding. The custom was for the bride to ready herself at home and for the groom to come to collect her and take her to his home for wedding celebrations that might last for days. These ten young women wanted to take part in their friend's wedding and were waiting outside the bride's house for the groom to come so that they could join in the celebrations. But the groom was delayed and the women fell asleep. At midnight the groom came and they all woke up, trimmed their lamps and wanted to go. Five of these women had been watchful and prepared, and had brought spare oil with them in the event of a long wait; the other five had not been so prepared and had to go to buy oil. Five joined the procession; five didn't and when they tried to join later they were turned away at the door. Jesus finished story: "*Therefore...*" (*Matthew 25:13*)

There are lots of people in our community, and some of them are members of Church, and they speak warmly about Church. They tell you how good it is that the church is here and is involved in the life of the community. They come to Church at times and will tell you how good an experience that is, how much they enjoy it or value it and there is no antagonism to the Church in their minds, only praise. But, they don't come regularly to worship and they don't get involved in the life of the congregation generally. Why? In their heads, the church is a good thing; in their

hearts they know that the community needs the church; but there is not the passion or desire in their gut to come and be involved. There is nothing that I can do to create that desire or passion; only the Spirit can create that passion and desire. There are people out there who speak well of the Church, but in some ways are asleep to faith and love for Jesus. Pray on!

"Wake..." (Revelation 3:2f) There are two remedies for the Church that is living on its past reputation and is asleep to its present needs and responsibilities. First, *"Strengthen what..." (Revelation 3:2)* It would be easy to shut up shop and go away; "Jesus thinks we're dead!" But something remains; there are still people there who believe and follow Jesus; strengthen them in their faith and the Christian life. Second, *"Remember..." (Revelation 3:3a)* What was lacking? A sense of obedience? Had they become a church that was all deeds and no foundation, froth and bubble but no depth? Then they need to begin to rediscover that depth to their faith. Obedience, repentance - these are qualities; these are qualities that come from the inside rather than deeds to see from the outside. Sardis Church had been lacking this kind of depth; waking up will mean rediscovering that depth and these qualities and will mean that the life of faith becomes a present reality, walking with Jesus, rather than just a past reputation for being lively church!

We honour the past, but we don't live there. If we were to draw a graph of the life of any congregation of the church it will have highs and lows. The lows we try to forget; the highs are places we either try to stay there or hark back to as golden days and want to repeat them. No church can live in the past; no church can base its future on its past name and reputation. We honour the past, but we live in the present reality: our challenge is to be Christians in 2014 and to be Church in and for 2014; we have to live by faith in our time; we have to obey Jesus in way we live our lives; we have to repent of our mistakes and be watchful for today as we follow Jesus. Equally, being a busy church is not the answer to everything: there was once a sitcom called *Never mind the quality, feel the width*; the church is the exact opposite! Quality matters! If church life is all froth and bubble then there is something missing; depth sustains church life! When Churches struggle or go through hard times, we are sustained by remembering the blessings of God, by the good things that God has given, by the grace and faithfulness of God; this is what we have heard and received. Remember; obey, follow. Jesus promises blessing on those who are faithful.

What would you like Juniper Green Church to be known for? People say of us that we are "a busy Church; there's a lot going on!" It bothers me when I hear that said about us, not because anything we do is wrong, but for this reason: are we building depth? Are we strengthening the faith we have? Are we living by faith? Is there a spirit of repentance and obedience in our hearts? Have we the passion and the desire to follow Jesus? Or are we asleep, is there something lacking? Will we be known for the quality and depth of our faith, for the quality and depth of our worship and preaching, for the quality and depth of our love and relationships, for the quality and depth of our service in the community? Every one of these little letters to Churches ends: *"He who..." (Revelation 3:6)* 'Lord, open our ears to hear what it is that you would say to us and what you would have us hear; may we listen to your word, learn and live!'