

REVELATION 3:7-13
A PEOPLE WHO BELONG

There were 2 brothers; the older brother was king, the other his right-hand man. As was the way, the king went to battle at the head of his army and the story came back home that he had been killed in battle. His brother was next in line to the throne so he assumed the throne and became king instead. But the rumour was false; the older brother, whom everyone thought was dead, was very much alive – what would happen next? His younger brother simply handed back the crown and the throne and did so quite happily and with great affection. This is a story of the first century BC and the Romans were very much the big boys in town: they went to work on the brothers because the king was proving a problem to them. They tried to persuade his younger brother to overthrow him as king and become king in his place because they thought they could manipulate him more easily. But the younger brother refused to betray his brother. Sometime during this story a city was built by the brothers and it was given a name to celebrate the younger brother's loyalty and love for his big brother and to reflect his nickname, 'Philadelphus' – the city was called Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love.

We're in Philadelphia, Asia Minor, Turkey, not the USA! The city was called the "gateway to the East", because it sat at the junction of roads leading to the high central plateau; it has the modern name of Alashehir. It was famous for its fruit growing in fertile farming country. Like most cities of its time in ancient Greece, it had lots of temples and religious festivals, as well as a Jewish community and synagogue. It also suffered from earthquakes, especially seriously in AD17 when the city was completely destroyed, to be rebuilt by Romans. We know nothing of the Church in Philadelphia other than what is here in Revelation 3; it is a church that is given nothing but praise from Jesus; there is no criticism in this letter at all, only praise and encouragement to help them through difficult times.

Size matters? When I was fairly new to ministry, I remember being in the kind of situations where ministers tell each other about their churches and what sorts of things have been happening in our churches and through our ministries. One man in particular at these meetings kept telling us about all the young people in his church and how many of them had become Christians in last year or so and wasn't it wonderful! Now, the good side of me celebrated these signs of God at work in people's lives and isn't that good. The other side of me felt depressed because I was the minister of a small congregation and we were seeing signs of people's lives being touched by ministry, but only one or two at a time, certainly nothing like this other guy was describing. Size matters? Statistics tell us everything? What do we think about small Churches? We take small churches and lump them together to make big churches; except it tends not to work. Do we see the small Church as a failed big church because it is not so big? Took me a long time (because I'm thick!) to work out with the help of a friend that a small church is not a failed big church, but is a different kind of church altogether.

What about the Philadelphia Church? Jesus said "*I know...*" (*Revelation 3:8b*) Is this a small church? Is this just a small group of people who make up the church in this city? Is this a Church that is making little impact on its city because it is small? Is this a Church that is aware of its weaknesses because the Christians are being persecuted by the local Jewish community, made to feel small and weak by that relentless pressure from their enemies? All of these are possible and for whatever reason, the church is made to feel small and to focus on its weaknesses more than anything else! Jesus says "size doesn't matter!" "*I know...*" (*Revelation 3:8b*) "What matters far more is your loyalty and love." Here is a small church, feeling weak, yet a

people who have demonstrated in some way or other, their loyalty and devotion to Jesus. How appropriate in a city called Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love, celebrating loyalty and devotion. To Jesus, it matters far more that we are loyal and devoted; to Jesus it matters far more that we keep His word and honour His name; it matters far more the quality of the people that we are than fact of our size, strength or success!

Loyalty works both ways: Jesus is faithful to His people too. *"These are..." (Revelation 3:7f)* A door stands open! Jesus has the key! A door stands open into the blessing of God, into the kingdom of God and a door stands open and no-one can shut it. A door stands open into the kingdom of God and no-one can shut that door and keep the Christians in Philadelphia out. Jesus opens the door to let them in and they will go in and be part of God's kingdom and enjoy God's blessing. Jesus talked to His disciples about being the gate: *"I am..." (John 10:9)* It is the same picture, of people coming into the blessing and the kingdom of God through Jesus; there is a sense of assurance and confidence about these pictures because Jesus makes promises that He will keep and nothing will take them away. Jesus is loyal to His people and to His promises; He does what He says He will do. A door stands open and nothing will shut that door; the Christians in Philadelphia can trust Jesus and His promise.

Everything about this little letter to a small church is about belonging and assurance. *"Him who..." (Revelation 3:12)* The phrase "pillar of the church" is well-used to talk about people who are at the heart of the church's life and have given lots of their time and energy to the work of the Church, a reliable person. Here it means something different: Christians are permanently in the presence of God; the pillar in the temple is a picture of something strong and unmoving, immovable; the loyal Christian will be immovable, will have a permanent place in God's kingdom, and will belong forever. The idea of a new name is the same: the name is about belonging and character. Having a new name and the name of God and Jesus written on the Christian tells the world that we belong to Jesus and nothing can shift that, nothing can take that name away from us. Do parents still use name tabs on your children's school clothes, to show whose jumper this is? This is the same picture: we have a new name, the name of our God and of Jesus written on is in invisible ink, but with indelible ink to show that we belong to Him. Pillar and name are pictures of people who belong to Jesus; they are His people and will be His people forever. The crown will not be taken away and even their enemies will one day acknowledge that the Christians are the people of God.

Here is a city that had been destroyed by an earthquake and that lived in the earthquake zone. The elderly people of the Church might just remember the great earthquake of AD17, or at least will have heard the stories of people being forced to live in tents because the whole city was destroyed by that great earthquake. As is the nature of these places, there was still volcanic activity and hot springs, reminding the people that another earthquake could be just around the corner. Here is a people living with permanent uncertainty. Coupled with that, here is a Church that is being persecuted by the Jews; we have no idea what form that persecution took, but we know from elsewhere that the Jews tried to persuade the Roman authorities that these Christians could not be trusted and should be dealt with. Stories would have come from other places: Pergamum is not a long way off, and they will have heard about Antipas the martyr and might well be afraid that the same campaign of persecution would come here too. They live with fear and uncertainty. But all of this letter is about loyalty, belonging, security and assurance!

So many forces are at work to disturb our peace. Personal circumstances disturb us so often: how many of us are having to deal with difficult things in our lives, or questions about the future, or exam results, and the effect of these difficult things is to disturb our equilibrium; we try to find answers, but often there are none, other than that bad things happen! We live in a culture where so many people and influences challenge our Christian faith or tell us that religious faith is a bad thing or unnecessary; when people tell us that often enough, we start to believe it and it shakes our sense of equilibrium even more; things that we once felt were unchallengeable or certain have become a new set of uncertainties. The future of the Church leaves us with more questions than answers: there are lots of Christians in Edinburgh who are concerned about the future of their congregation and what always seemed as if it would always be there in form that we've always known it – that is no longer the case and we are facing up to these changes and these are always risky and disturbing. Our peace and our sense of equilibrium are disturbed.

What is the Bible's answer today? 2 things, something to know and something to do. **Something to know:** we are a people who belong to Jesus and nothing will take that away from us. Here's confidence for us. We're not good at confidence; we're not good at swagger, which is just as well perhaps. This is not confidence that we make up for ourselves, but confidence and assurance based on Jesus. All of the pictures in the letter to the church in Philadelphia are about belonging and assurance: a door stands open and Jesus has the key and the door will not be shut; Christians are pillars in the temple, permanent fittings in the kingdom of God; we bear a new name and the name of God and Jesus are written on us to show that we belong. The door stands open to God's presence for our prayers; the door stands open to salvation for faith; the door stands open into the kingdom of God and the door will still stand open; no personal circumstances, no church circumstances, no secular culture, no atheist propaganda will shut that door because Jesus has the key! The blessing, the kingdom, the salvation of God – nothing will take these away from us. We belong to God; we are His people; His name is written on us to show that we belong and nothing can take that away from us. Here is something to know, to give us confidence, assurance and this not of our making, but is the gift of grace from God.

Something to do: *"Hold..." (Revelation 3:11)* We have our Christian faith; we are loved by Jesus; we have the Bible; we have prayer; we have the church; we have each other; we have God with us. These are valuable; let's not throw them away, but hold on to them and keep holding on to them. Not many people throw Christian faith away in one deliberate moment, but lots of Christians drift away from faith and church gradually, by a series of steps that simply neglect good things and before they know it, it has gone and they have lost something valuable. Hold on to what we have and not let it drift and not neglect good things. Nurture your faith, allow your faith to grow, give it the conditions in which it will grow and become stronger. Hold on to what you have and if you have a sense of looking for faith, then find it in Jesus.

We are people who belong. We belong to Jesus and nothing can take that away from us. He is the loyal brother who keeps His promises and stands by His people. The challenge for us is to be loyal back, to be loyal and devoted to Jesus, keeping faith. Know who we are! That's the key to so much when life is uncertain; know who we are in Christ! The door stands open for us into the presence and blessing of God; a new Name is written on us: these show that we belong! This is who we are; nothing can take this away from us; let us hold on to what we have with loyalty and devotion to Jesus. A small Church? A weak Church? No matter! We are Jesus' Church!