

REVELATION 2:18-29
A HOLY PEOPLE?

Here's our favourite picture of Jesus: a Victorian stained-glass window picture of Jesus as the good shepherd, carrying a lamb in His arms, leading and caring for the flock of sheep; it is a picture of a kind Jesus, loving Jesus, leaning down to touch needy people, to heal the sick, to care for the poor, gently taking little children in His arms to bless them. It is a picture we love, a comfortable, comforting picture, helping us to love Jesus who loves us! Here's another picture of Jesus: an angry Jesus; His eyes are blazing with anger, He will tolerate nothing out of place; it's a very different picture of Jesus, a very different idea of Jesus; we are uncomfortable with it and are right to be uncomfortable with it; it doesn't fit with our common ideas of Jesus; but we can't throw it out. Both of these are Bible pictures of Jesus: Jesus the good shepherd, comforting His people; Jesus with the all-seeing eye, penetrating to the very heart and soul, missing absolutely nothing. How do we react to this angry Jesus?

"Tolerance": this is the watch-word of our generation and our society. It is a good word in some ways because it challenges all kinds of intolerance and discrimination; it challenges us to be accepting of people, no matter who they are and where they come from; it challenges our prejudices - why do we treat one person in a different way from another? What made Jesus angry? The things He was not prepared to tolerate! He was not prepared to tolerate bad behaviour, wrong things, immorality. Jesus is not angry just for the sake of it; this is not just a bad temper or a strop, but a genuine reaction to something that He saw that was wrong. The Bible word for this is "holy" and we're going to examine today what this word means; what does it mean for us to call God "holy"? What does Jesus want of us when He calls us a "holy" people?

Akhisar is just along the road from the town of Soma, in the news this week for a terrible mine disaster. Akhisar is the place once called Thyatira in Western Turkey, then called Asia Minor, one of seven churches in the area, with letters to them written as from the Lord Jesus. Thyatira was the smallest town of the seven on this list: it was a garrison town, a military outpost; it was famous for its trade guilds which made life hard for Christian tradesmen - to work you had to be a member of a guild, but guild membership was often allied to the worship of the god of the trade, with pagan worship. It was famous for its purple dye: Lydia whose story we read in Acts came from Thyatira, a dealer in purple cloth who became a Christian in Philippi. We know nothing about the life of the church in Thyatira other than what is here!

It is the smallest city of the seven in our list, but it has the longest letter! There is a pattern that we've seen before in these letters from Jesus to His Church: there is something good in the church to be commended; there is something they've got wrong; there is a remedy! We see that pattern here!

What is good about the Church in Thyatira? *"I know..." (Revelation 2:19)* There are six qualities of church that are good; six qualities that we'd love to see in every church we know. This is great: we see church and we see problems; others see church with new eyes perhaps and say that the greatest and best thing they've ever done is to become part of the Church. Six qualities: **Deeds**: they are doing good things in church life. **Love**: their devotion to Jesus, and their care for one another; shines out. **Faith**: they have learned to trust Jesus, to depend on Him; He is their Saviour. **Service**: they are giving of themselves to serve Jesus in their town and to serve one another and to serve people in need; the early church was good at sharing their goods with others. **Perseverance**: here is a people who are keeping going, and not giving up, even in face of lots of troubles and difficulties, outside the church and

inside. **Doing more:** this is a growing church, people who are growing in their faith, developing church life. Six qualities that we'd love to see in every church that we know.

Here's a little exercise that you can do at home: what is good about church? Most of you are part of the church family here: what is good about church life in Juniper Green Parish Church? What do you like best about our church life? If you are a visitor, you can answer that question about your visit here, if you like; but more important perhaps, you can answer that question about your home church - what is it that is good about your church? I can 99% guarantee that you will find something good about church life wherever you're looking. We're good at seeing problems, issues, questions to be resolved, but before we do that, look for what is good and celebrate that! It helps put problems and difficulties into some kind of perspective!

What kind of Jesus do we have writing to the Church in Thyatira? How would we react to this Jesus if we were confronted with Him? *"These are..." (Revelation 2:18b)* "His eyes are fire, His face is light...His name is Jesus" says a song we sometimes sing. The word that the Bible uses to describe Jesus, God, is "holy". Moses at the burning bush, confronted with God as fire, took off his sandals because he is standing on holy ground; this is nothing to do with the ground, but is everything to do with being in the presence of a holy God. Here is God who is different, set apart, and because He is different and set apart, is pure and perfect; He loves only what is pure and perfect and hates evil! This is an uncomfortable God for us; we are flawed people! We much prefer the comfortable, comforting, gracious Jesus who loves us. There are two sides to Jesus - He came full of grace and truth! This is the Jesus who misses nothing, who sees everything, who sees the good that He likes and the evil that He hates! Jesus is holy!

"Holy people" – the church is a holy people. Because we belong to Jesus, we are set apart to be His. We are already are this "set apart" people. It is also our calling to be a holy people in character, to be a people who love what is good and hate what is evil. We don't like the word because it smacks of a "holier-than-thou" attitude, that somehow we are setting ourselves up to be better than the rest and to show off about it; "we are better and we'll tell you that we're better!" How awful is that attitude! Be more like Jesus! Love the things that Jesus loves; hate the things that Jesus hates! Follow the things that Jesus wants us to follow; leave behind the things that Jesus wants us to leave behind. We get some idea of that on the day Jesus visited the temple: He hated the fact that the temple was being turned into a market and more, that these people were cheating the pilgrims come to worship, exploiting, abusing and robbing them. He turned over the tables and threw these cheats out of the temple. We see the anger burning in His eyes because God is being mocked and God's people are being exploited. There is something of that behind the story of the fig tree as well: a parable of a people, the fruitless fig tree representing a fruitless and faithless people.

What do we tolerate? The Church in Thyatira tolerated something that Jesus hated. The language is strong and we recoil from some of it, but look at what lies behind it. *"Nevertheless..." (Revelation 2:20f)* The writers agree that 'Jezebel' (the original was an Old Testament queen and synonymous with evil) represents a prominent woman in the church at Thyatira who had set herself up as a prophet and this woman is teaching the church that it is all right to indulge in sexual immorality and pagan worship. By her teaching she is misleading the Church, leading the people astray, into blind alleys and dead ends. She has been given the chance to repent, but she has refused to change her ways and Jesus speaks words of judgement on her as a

result of her sin. Nothing is hidden from Jesus: "*I am...*" (*Revelation 2:23*) and this woman will be responsible for her actions.

But, the church is somehow to blame for tolerating her. That is Jesus' criticism - "*you tolerate that woman!*" (*Revelation 2:20*) Some of you are big Monty Python fans and there was a running gag through many of their shows "no-one expects the Spanish Inquisition"; the Inquisition was an example of the church tolerating nothing, sniffing out heresy and immorality even where none existed; or another example, less brutal, but still exacting, when the elders in the North of Scotland would make people prove that they had been good people, and were worthy to take communion; they tolerated nothing out of the way of perfect goodness. We have rediscovered grace and the notion of God's love to people who don't deserve it, learn to be accepting of one another and our imperfections. Do we tolerate too much? Have we gone too far the other way? Are there things that we call Christian that are not holy? Jesus is the ultimate judge of all of that.

The remedy: "*Hold...*" (*Revelation 2:25*) Faith is too important a thing to throw it away; but we'd never deliberately throw it away, would we? Few people do that! Few churches disappear because all their members have given up the faith. On the other hand how many Christians have drifted away from faith because they have allowed other things to become more important? They have forgotten to worship? They have neglected to read the Bible? They have neglected to pass on their faith to the next generation? They have tolerated things that have served to undermine their faith? Christians have done that and churches have done that even more: we have neglected things that will make our faith stronger and faith has become weaker; we have allowed things that have undermined our Christian values and so Christian values have become weaker. "*Hold on to what you have:*" to Christian faith, to the Bible, to prayer, to Jesus, to the Church, to one another, to grace and truth. Hold on to what is important, come what may. Jesus promises blessing for His "holding-on" people. It sounds a very low goal, but it is the key to future church, that today we hold on to what matters and keep faith, love, hope, and the gospel.

Holiness was a big word for our Victorian Christian forefathers. They had a deep sense of the challenge and even the cost of Christian faith. "That which costs nothing is worth nothing." (Bishop J.C. Ryle) It is a word that has dropped out of use now; we hardly hear it; we talk about grace. There is something right about grace, because God is gracious, but somehow the danger is that we make grace cheap. There is a challenge that comes with grace: we love Jesus for His grace and compassion and we know that we should be gracious and compassionate; but the Jesus who is gracious and compassionate is also the Jesus of eyes of fire, Jesus with anger in His eyes; Jesus with zeal for all that is good, right and holy. Do we know that we should also be like Him in this? How did you react when you heard about the kidnapping of 280 girls in Nigeria? Was there sadness in your heart, a spirit of concern? Was there a sense of outrage, anger in your heart that people should do this? That's part of what it means to be holy, to love the things that Jesus loves, to hate the things that Jesus hates! Go home and work out what is good about Church; then consider how we can be like Jesus. Our God is a holy God, set apart, different; He has already made us a holy people, set apart to belong to Him; now the challenge for us is to become a people holy in character, in the way we live, believe, speak, act, and behave!