

Sermon Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> November 2018

Revelation 3:7-13

Letter to the church at Philadelphia

**“To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write:**

**These are the words of Him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What He opens no one can shut, and what He shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut. I know that you have little strength, yet you have kept my word and have not denied My name. I will make those who are of the synagogue of Satan, who claim to be Jews though they are not, but are liars – I will make them come and fall down at your feet and acknowledge that I have loved you. 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 earth to test those who live on the earth.**

**I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown. Him who overcomes, I will make a pillar in the temple of My God. Never again will he leave it. I will write on him the name of My God and the name of the city of My God, the New Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from My God; and I will also write on him My new name. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”**

**Philidelphia is situated about twenty five miles south east of Smyrna and its name literally means “one who loves his brother”. It was named by its founder Eumenes the second who named it in honour of his brother who was to succeed him. It was a reasonably sized town but was subject to constant earthquakes which ate up the town’s resources in repairing the walls. There is still a town in Turkey today called “Allahshehr” literally “the city of god” with a population of around 10,000 and some 25 Christian churches overseen by a bishop which is the modern day Philidelphia. It’s claim to fame today is liquorish production!**

**As Nik eluded to a few weeks ago it is the only church among the seven that has nothing said against it so let’s go through the text and discover why that might be.**

**The passage starts off with the author establishes His credentials:**

**“These are the words of Him who is holy and true” Jesus by His very nature is holy, and because of His holiness He is only able to speak that which is true. I think it was Tim a couple of weeks ago who said, Jesus doesn’t mess around wrapping things up in niceties He speaks the truth as He sees it and for some of the churches the truth was painful and difficult to hear although they were all given options of how they could correct their shortcomings and regain Christ’s favour in the areas of problems.**

**We are also told that He holds the key of David. This is also referred to in Isaiah 22:22 where the then man in authority Shebna is told that he will be replaced by Elakim for God “will place on his shoulder the key to the house of David.” Whoever holds the key has the authority and the “key of David” implies control of David’s domain, Jerusalem and Israel. This power and authority was promised to the Messiah in both the Old and New Testaments, in Isaiah 9:7, and Luke 1:32. Jesus**

therefore here is committing a huge blasphemy or is claiming His rightful place as the promised Messiah. To the church in Philidelphia it would have been recognised as the latter.

**“What He opens no one can shut and what He shuts no one can open.”**

Having established His credentials as the promised Messiah, Jesus makes this statement which says that He, Jesus, in His absolute authority, is the one who opens the doors of opportunity for the church, He opens the hearts of men and women to receive the good news of salvation and He opens the gates of heaven so that those who believe on Him and accept Him as Lord and Saviour will receive the promise of eternal life. We need to play our part but it is only Jesus who can do this. Similarly, He also alone can close doors against the workers of iniquity and those who turn their back on Him.

We then have the encouraging, perhaps sometimes daunting, statement, “I know your deeds”

Encouraging in that Jesus cares enough about His people that He watches us constantly and is aware of all of our actions. His love is complete and overwhelming and His passion for His people to continue on the right path is highlighted by these seven letters to the churches which are sent as by a Father to His children, full of love and compassion but also discipline where necessary in order to bring them back onto the right path. Daunting for some, in that there is a realisation that there is nowhere to hide, Psalm 139 recognises this and concludes that there is no hiding place from God or Jesus. We therefore need to be constantly on our guard against doing things against God’s will and that can be a daunting thought!

**“See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut”**

Having seen their deeds Jesus has placed an open door before the church that no one other than Jesus can shut. Does every church have an open door before it? Only God knows the answer to that!

Most commentators see two aspects to this door; firstly it is the door to salvation for those who accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour. It is a door that no man can shut and therefore we are promised eternal salvation when we accept Jesus and as it tells us in John 10:28-30

**“I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, no one can snatch them out of My Father’s hand. I and the Father are one.”**

Jesus is here acknowledging , as He goes on to say, the faithfulness of the Philidephian church, despite the fact that they are under persecution; and there is no doubting they were, as was all of the Christian church at the time, from the world outside and from false prophets within the church itself, despite all of this and the fact that they had little strength of their own they had kept God’s word and not denied Jesus name, in other words they had remained faithful to God’s and Jesus’ teaching despite what was going on in the world around them and the pressures they were being put under because of their faith.

It doesn't happen in this country, thank God, at least not yet; but imagine if you lived as a Christian in a country where the local government official came knocking on your door and asked you if it was true you were a practising Christian and believed in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Saviour? Oh, and before you answer that question, let me just say that if you answer in the affirmative you needn't bother reporting in for work at the Bank on Monday because your job will no longer be there and won't be until you renounce your Christian faith. And the place that has just been given to your son at "X" university to study law has been filled by someone else and I'm afraid there won't be any more places available until your whole family renounces the Christian faith. Oh and as you've lost your job you won't be able to pay your mortgage payments and may well end up in debtor's jail until you can, and your wife has been blacklisted in a 50 mile radius so won't be able to get a job to support you all.

So what is your answer?

Sounds like a work of fiction doesn't it to our western ears, but we had a guy called Dave drop in on our evening service the other week, he was an American from Origen and for the last fifteen years has been a missionary in India, where he met and married his Indian wife. His visa was due for renewal in October and he applied as usual but upon a totally spurious pretext the authorities refused his visa and effectively kicked himself, his wife and three children out of the country. He was working in a remote region of India where the local authorities have closed down 25 churches in the last eighteen months and true stories, like the one I've just related, are common place and the police turn a blind eye to any breaches of the law that the authorities may be committing, and any press interest is suppressed.

So, in those circumstances, what would your answer have been?

So, to say that the church of Philadelphia had kept Jesus word and not denied His name sort of takes on a whole new meaning when you realise what sacrifices they had to make in order to do that when they were suffering similar persecutions from the world for their faith and false prophets within the church were condemning them for holding to what they said was a false doctrine.

Having commended them for their faithfulness, Jesus then goes on to encourage them by showing that He is very much aware of those claiming to be Jews, who are speaking into their lives, and here again He does not mince His words, but are in fact "of the synagogue of Satan" and liars; and that He will speak into their hearts as only He can and bring them to a place of repentance such that they will come before the church, acknowledging that they, the church, are loved by Jesus, and by their faith and actions they can see Jesus at work in their lives. Only Jesus can do that in people's hearts!

The next bit is a line which I know I struggle with and I know from conversations with some of you it's a line you'd rather wasn't there as well!

" Since you have kept my command to endure PATIENTLY"

Note it's not a request, it's not a perhaps you'd like to, or even an option; it's a COMMAND

In almost every reference in the Bible we are told to “patiently endure” or wait with “patient endurance” neither of which are traits that I and, may I dare to say, most of us are not that well endowed with and I can really struggle sometimes with either or both, so for Jesus to commend the Philadelphians for having endured patiently especially under persecution and the teaching of false prophets is quite a compliment. They were a faithful people and Jesus commends them for it.

Because of their faithfulness Jesus promises to “keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world. Their faithfulness is recognised by Jesus and He promises because of this He will spare them the trial which is to come. Jesus rewards a faithful people.

Jesus then repeats His promise that He will be returning soon to take His own unto himself and encourages them to hold on to what they already have, that is a sure and steadfast faith which has been pleasing in His sight, in order that no one can deny them their rightful place. We all need encouragement from time to time and Jesus is here encouraging them to persevere in their faithfulness and gives them a glimpse of the reward that awaits them in heaven.

A recognition of their faithful service to Jesus in that He will write on them, figuratively presumably but who knows? The name of My God, God the Father, the creator and sustainer of all things; the name of the city of My God, “the new Jerusalem” which as we are told in Revelation 21:2

“I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.”

And I will also write on him “My new Name” so that no one will be in any doubt that this is a child of God who has been faithful, patient and enduring in their faith and is receiving their just reward. And finally the best reward of all, having remained faithful and true, and having been brought into God and Jesus’ presence in the “New Jerusalem” they are promised “Never again will he leave it,” he will dwell in the presence of the God Almighty and His Son for ever. AMEN!

Remember I said a while ago there were two thoughts on what this “open door” was? The first, as we have seen, was salvation, the second is an opportunity to witness, through our lifestyles, our actions and our words, the love of Christ Jesus to those around us.

Jesus has, I believe, opened a door of opportunity for us here in NCF on this estate and in the surrounding area as these new estates explode with growth around us. There seems to be more and more springing up every time you drive down Eastborough Way. We have started by delivering leaflets to some of them, but I am sure over the coming months God wants us to listen to Him for ways in which He wants us to develop NCF for Him. I do not believe that it is any coincidence that as this opportunity arises God has raised up a new face to lead NCF forward into these exciting times. But it is not just John who needs to hear from God it says at the end of each of these letters, does it not:

“He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”

It doesn’t say, John Stephenson, I need you to hear what the Spirit says to the churches, although, of course God will expect John to listen! But says, he who has an ear, that means each and every one of us should be listening. We all, as far as I know, although I’m told mine isn’t as good as it

was, have ears to hear with, and God isn't exclusive in revealing His plans to the church, so part of our responsibility to God, to NCF and to John over the coming weeks is to seek God for his plans for the church and if we receive anything then to bring it to the leadership for weighing.

We have an excellent reputation on this estate because of the work which we do with the various community groups that meet here and indeed people have come into the church by being gently introduced from those groups into church life. I look forward to that continuing and developing.

As John is inducted into the role of lead minister in January I believe with all my heart that just as Elijah passed on the mantle of responsibility to Elisha then God will lift the mantle of responsibility for NCF's spiritual, emotional and physical well being from my shoulders and place it around John's. He will also continue to develop John's ministry as He did mine and we will see him grow and mature as he is faithful to God's leading on his life. It has been a huge privilege for me and for Lynne to serve you over the last thirteen years and we look forward to supporting John & Gill in their ministry to you. It will be exciting times and we need to hold them in our prayers continuously and help and encourage them in any way that we can.