

ECF 22nd January 2012 Smyrna: Hope in Suffering! Revelation 2:8-11

This week I got an e-mail from Barnabas about violence against the Christian community in Syria. Since the anti-government unrest began, there have been a series of kidnappings and murders. Up to 100 Christians have been killed. And some reports have even stated that children have especially been targeted by the kidnappers.

It's so easy to be overwhelmed by the suffering of our brothers and sisters in Syria and so many other parts of the world. The suffering of our loved ones around us may not be so dramatic. It may never make the news – but it is no less a challenge to our faith in God. How can we keep going in a world of suffering?

Well in his letter to the church in Smyrna, Jesus tells us. Smyrna was a large and wealthy city with a population of about 100,000 people. It was a beautiful city. Ephesus was called the market-place of Asia because of its thriving economy. But Smyrna was called the ornament.

Rising up from the harbour, filling the lower slopes of Mount Pagus, were amazing buildings, including a temple to the Goddess of Rome and the Temple of the Emperor built in AD26 which made Smyrna a centre for worship of the Roman Emperor. These buildings on this hill produced a dramatic visual effect and was popularly known as “The Crown of Smyrna!”

But for the Christians here, Smyrna had been a difficult place to live for Christ. And Jesus did not promise them that things were going to get any easier. Instead he gave them an amazing message of hope in the middle of their suffering. Revelation 2:8-11: **“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:**

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again. ⁹I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. ¹⁰Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

¹¹He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.”

1. The Reason for Hope

a) Jesus is our Eternal Sovereign

Jesus introduces himself to this church as **“the First and the Last.”** v8 He is the first. There is no-one before him. **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”** John 1:1 Jesus is our Creator, the source of everything, of life itself!

And he is also the last. There is no-one after him. He is the goal of everything, the one **“who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.”** Revelation 1:8. Other rulers and other kingdoms may come and go, but Jesus is the eternal Son of God. This suffering church can trust in the one who is the first and the last, the beginning and the end, our Eternal Sovereign who ever reigns.

b) Jesus is our Risen Saviour

He is also the one **“who died and came to life again.”** v8. In 600BC Smyrna was completely destroyed. For 300 years it lay in ruins until it rose as it were from the dead, and was re-established on a new site. But the one who was writing this letter had experienced a much more miraculous resurrection.

At the cross the eternal Son of God died. The source of life took upon himself our death sentence. Today we're here to celebrate that **“The Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”** Galatians 2:20

But we're also here to celebrate that his death was not the end. On the third day he rose triumphantly from the grave. And so we can celebrate that: **“Death has been swallowed up in victory.”** 1 Corinthians 15:54

This awareness that Jesus is our Eternal Sovereign and he is our Risen Saviour was so crucial for this church in Smyrna to know – especially because of what they were facing!

2. The Cost of Following Jesus

The name Smyrna means bitterness and suffering. It is related to the word for Myrrh, a perfume used in the embalming of bodies. And this city was a place of terrible suffering for this church.

a) They were Persecuted

Jesus said, **“I know your afflictions.”** v9 They were being severely persecuted. Declaring that Jesus is Lord in a centre of Emperor worship was a deeply costly thing to do. To refuse to say “Caesar is Lord” and offer incense to him put their lives in danger.

But surprisingly, the persecutors that Jesus focuses are not the Roman authorities. Instead Jesus focuses on **“The slander of those who say they are Jews and are not.”** v9 These were ethnic Jews, the physical descendants of Abraham. But they are not the true people of God. They do not have faith in God. They have not accepted his Messiah. They are not part of God's family. As Paul says, **“A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly... No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly.”** Romans 2:28–29

And so Jesus says they belong to **“A synagogue of Satan.”** v9. Satan is the enemy of God's people. He is called **“the accuser of our brothers.”** Revelation 12:10 And these

Jews were accusing the Christians in this city and causing them real problems.

In many towns, those Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah were expelled from their synagogues. Perhaps some Jews took this further by denouncing the Jewish Christians before the Roman authorities for not being true Jews. This left them open to persecution as it removed them from the protection that the Jews had as an authorised religion and their exemption from involvement in the emperor worship.

Jesus had warned his disciples of this: **“They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God.”** John 16:2

We are called to follow Christ in a world that is often hostile to him. In Smyrna it was a physical and violent threat. In many countries today, it is the same. We are called to stand them in prayer: **“Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow-prisoners.”** Hebrews 13:3

Today in County Wexford, although we’ve freedom to live for Christ – we are still part of a spiritual battle. The attacks we face are different - things like the assault of naturalism and atheism, the pressure from ridicule and apathy, the distractions of entertainment and materialism – but there is always a cost in following Jesus!

i) But they were not Alone

But the wonderful truth is that Jesus knows what we are going through. He knows about our suffering and he promises to be with us: **“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you.”** Isaiah 43:2

We might go through tough times, but Jesus promises to walk each step of the way with us. He’ll share in our struggles, feel our pain, carry our burdens and give us the strength we need. He says to us today: **“My grace is sufficient for you.”** 2 Corinthians 12:9

b) They were Poor

The persecution of the Christians in Smyrna also had a financial impact on them. Jesus said to them: **“I know... your poverty.”** v9

This means extreme poverty. Perhaps they could not get work because nobody wanted to hire a Christian. Perhaps their businesses suffered because they were unwilling to compromise their standards. Whatever the reason, the Christians were living in abject poverty. They were in desperate need.

There is no prosperity theology being taught here. In fact it was those who had rejected Christ who were living in luxury and prosperity, while God’s people were in desperate need. Following Christ does not make our lives easy or comfortable!

i) But they were Rich

But although they were financially poor, these Christians were blessed. Jesus said, **“yet you are rich!”** v9

They did not have any of the world’s riches, but from heaven’s perspective they were **“blessed... in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ.”** Ephesians 1:3. They had the priceless gifts of true forgiveness, acceptance, love, peace, joy, grace, purpose, power, security and hope.

In the world’s eyes they may look poor, but they were **“heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.”** Romans 8:17, they had **“an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-kept in heaven for you.”** 1 Peter 1:4

It is crucial that we develop this God-perspective in our lives. By the standards of this world we might not be experiencing health, wealth and happiness. But if we are trusting in Christ, then we need to see that we are rich in what really matters. Do you know how rich you are this morning? Knowing this will help us to keep going, especially as we continue to face difficult times.

3. The Challenge To Faithfulness

And this church was facing even more hardships. But Jesus had some encouraging words to say.

a) Do not be Fearful

First of all, he said **“Do not be afraid.”** v10 In some ways this seems like a strange thing to say. They had a good reason for fear.

“The devil will put some of you in prison to test you.” v10 The Romans authorities were going to throw these Christians in prison – not so much as a punishment itself but imprisonment in the Roman world was about keeping people under guard until their trial and sentence.

But Jesus sees that the source of this imprisonment is not the Roman authorities or even the Jewish leadership in the city. The enemy of God’s people is the devil. As Paul wrote: **“Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”** Ephesians 6:12 We need to see the big picture of our struggle and our suffering. It is part of God’s universal battle over evil!

“And you will suffer persecution for ten days.” v10 Smyrna was famous for its athletic games and gladiatorial contests. Inscriptions found at Smyrna announcing them called them the “Ten-day games.” It is possible that Jesus was showing that these Christians were going to be victims of the brutality of these contests.

i) Suffering is Temporary

But the reference to 10 days also shows that this persecution, although severe, is limited. Jesus knows that it will only last a short time. Yes, the devil will persecute God’s people severely, but God will limit it and restrict it. God is ultimately in control.

Paul wrote about our “Our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.” 2 Corinthians 4:17. That was not because he had an easy life. The list of things that Paul faced included starvation, shipwreck, illness, flogging, imprisonment, ridicule, false accusations, rejection, stoning. But he knew they would only last for a comparatively short time – compared with the glory that was coming. David wrote: “Weeping may remain for a night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.” Psalm 30:5

ii) Suffering is Testing

In the Bible 10 days often refer to a time of testing, and Jesus said that this persecution was a time of testing for the Christians. God was not allowing it to destroy his people, but to test and refine them. James writes these challenging words: “Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds,³ because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance... so that you may be mature and complete.” James 1:2–4

Although we struggle to understand this, and may never fully see this – our suffering is not meaningless. God is not the source of our suffering – but he wants to redeem it and use it for good in our lives! “In all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Romans 8:28

b) Be Faithful

And so Jesus calls these Christians to “Be faithful, even to the point of death.” v10 Smyrna was proud of its faithfulness to Rome. Since 133 BC, it had never wavered in its loyalty to that Empire. And so the Emperors protected it and contributed to its development. But Jesus called the believers in that city to be faithful to him, to keep following him, even if it cost them their lives.

It’s possible that in the church of Smyrna at that time was a young man called Polycarp. He’d sat at the feet of John when he was ministering in Smyrna. Later, Polycarp himself became a famous leader of the church in Smyrna. But in AD156, when Polycarp was in his eighties, he was arrested and brought into the arena before the provincial governor.

“Have some respect for your age,” the governor said. “Swear an oath by the divinity of Caesar, repent and I will let you go. Revile your Christ.”

But unshaken, Polycarp replied: “86 years have I served him, and he has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my King and Saviour.” With that Polycarp was chained to a stake and burned to death!

We might not face the challenge of martyrdom – but we are called to be faithful in daily laying down our lives for Christ: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.” Luke 9:23

And this must be a no-matter-what kind of commitment. Be committed to Christ whether we see success or suffering, whether we experience abundance or loss, good times or grief. Habakkuk expresses this type of unconditional commitment: “Though the fig-tree does not bud and there are no grapes on the vines, though the olive crop fails and the fields produce no food, though there are no sheep in the pen and no cattle in the stalls,¹⁸ yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Saviour.” Habakkuk 3:17–18

How could these Christians stay faithful under this intense pressure? How can we keep faithful when we face difficulties of many kinds?

i) We will be saved

The reason is that we have a hope. Not a wishful-thinking kind of hope – but a sure and certain hope that death is not the end! Jesus says, “He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.” v11

The second death is the terrible punishment for all those who are outside of Christ. “The lake of fire is the second death. If anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.” Revelation 20:14-15 It is a shocking and sobering reality. On that day, rich and poor, small and great, will all stand before God and be judged justly and righteously for their sins.

But those of us who through our faith in Christ have our names written in the book of life know that this will not touch us. We have nothing to fear, even in the face of death, because nothing and no-one can separate us from the love of God.

ii) We will be crowned

In fact we have everything to look forward to. Jesus says to his faithful followers: “I will give the crown of life.” v10 The athletes that succeeded in the games in Smyrna received a crown of leaves or flowers. The citizens of that city were also proud of the crown of Smyrna that dominated the skyline. But the faithful Christians could look

forward to the day when they will receive a better crown – the crown of life: as Paul says, “[a crown that will last for ever.](#)” 1 Corinthians 9:25

But how could the Christians in Smyrna be so sure of this future life? How did they know that this hope was worth losing their lives for? It was because the one calling them to faithfulness and making this promise was the one who is “[the First and the Last](#)” v8, the one who himself died and rose again, who conquered the grave and forever freed us from the power of sin and death!

Conclusion

This church was put under intense pressure, but it overcame. Today, in modern day Turkey, in Smyrna, now called Izmir, there is still a growing fellowship of believers.

Even although our walk with Christ may involved suffering and struggle, we too can overcome. We do not need to fear. We can be faithful because we can trust in our risen and exalted Lord.

On May 21st 2008 the family of Steven Curtis Chapman experienced an unthinkable tragedy. Their 5-year old daughter Maria Sue was knocked down and killed in their own driveway by a car driven by her teenage brother. A year after, Steven released an album of songs in response to this tragedy expressing the pain of loss, but also the hope of faith. This is one of them: [See](#) Steven Curtis Chapman

Our suffering is real and difficult, but Jesus is with us in it, and we know that it is only temporary, and will one day give way to glory beyond our imagination! We can live with hope, even in suffering!

[Please note that the above file is a copy of the notes used by Andrew for his preach at Enniscorthy Christian Fellowship, Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford, Ireland on January 22nd 2012 and have been published on www.enniscorthychristianfellowship.ie as part of our service to the community. Audio recordings of this, and other preaches, are also available at the above site and anyone wishing to ask questions concerning the above preach is invited to contact Andrew either directly or through the above site. Thank you]