



THE BOOK OF REVELATION

Chapter 3



Opening Prayer

Let us pray.

Direct, O Lord, we beseech you,
all our actions by your holy inspirations,
and carry them on by your gracious assistance,
that every prayer and work of ours
may begin always from you,
and by you be happily ended.

Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Source Material

- *Revelation*, Peter S. Williamson
- *Revelation, Sacra Pagina*, Wilfrid J. Harrington, OP
- *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Joseph Ratzinger
- *The Antichrist*, Vincent P. Miceli, SJ
- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*
- *New American Bible Revised Edition (NABRE)*
- *Douay-Rheims Bible*

To the Church in Sardis (3:1-6)

The City of Sardis

- Sardis lies about 35 miles from Thyatira and was a center of farming and trade
- It was generally prosperous, and there is no mention of persecution, which is good – but it sometimes leads to complacency, as in this case...

Description of Jesus

- “Seven spirits” and “seven stars” – from the original description in chapter 1, these represent the fullness of power and authority that Jesus has over the seven cities to whom the book is written

To the Church in Sardis (3:1-6)

“You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead”

- A staggering rebuke
- They have the appearance of a living faith, but Jesus knows their hearts, their motivations, the true state of their discipleship, which is far from what he demands
- The exact nature of their fault is not noted
 - *It may be that they were well-regarded in the wider city, that they had a good reputation for their charitable works with the poor or that they were experiencing great growth in numbers – any number of externally visible signs of faith and vitality*
 - *But Jesus sees what is inside and does not see any fruit.*
 - *Wow!!*
- Speculation - a good reputation with the pagan leaders of the city was a good thing, but not if it meant they had compromised or downplayed their faith in order to get along, which may have been the case here

To the Church in Sardis (3:1-6)

“Strengthen what is left”

- There still exists a weakened shadow of their former faith, not quite dead, but which is “going to die,” essentially meaning that the light of faith will be completely extinguished if they remain as they are
 - *Similar to the church in Ephesus, who risked losing their “lampstand” because they allowed their faith to weaken*
 - *Jesus calls on Sardis to strengthen their remaining faith, remembering how they initially accepted and heard (obeyed) the Gospel in the beginning*
 - *He calls them to keep that faith once again, to repent of how they have fallen away*

To the Church in Sardis (3:1-6)

“Like a thief”

- If they do not repent, Jesus will come like a “thief”
 - *reminiscent of Mt 24:42, the parable about the master of the house not knowing the hour when the thief was coming (Also 2 Pt 3:10)*
 - *Jesus is demonstrating once again his patience, allowing them the chance to repent and return to him, lest he allow some persecution or other calamity to befall them as a consequence of their lack of faith*
 - *Such chastisement is always understood as remedial – it is not punishment for its own sake, but in order to call them back to their original faith*
 - *Hence, this call to repentance is an act of mercy!*

To the Church in Sardis (3:1-6)

“White garments”

- Those who are in such a state of poor interior faith Jesus describes as having soiled their garments
 - *Recall the baptismal liturgy and the wearing of white clothing, symbolic of holiness, purity, faith and their new Christian dignity.*
 - *The newly baptized are exhorted to keep their new “garment” unstained by sin*
- There are a few within the community who are worthy, whose faith has remained pure, who Jesus reassures by telling them they will walk with him in their white garment
- Also, we will see the image of a white garment again later in Revelation, worn by the blessed in heaven who “washed their garments in the blood of the Lamb” and made them white (7:14)

To the Church in Sardis (3:1-6)

Comfort

- This invitation to walk with Jesus with their white garments is open to the entire community
 - *By repenting of their sins, by stirring their dead faith into flame once more, Jesus will restore the white garments of all*
 - *Words of great comfort to all of us sinners!*
- Thus dressed again in purity and holiness, they are assured of eternal life – their names will never be erased from the Book of Life.
 - *The “list” of the righteous who will inherit eternal life (Lk 10:20, Phil 4:3, Heb 12:22, Dan 12:1)*
- Furthermore, Jesus will acknowledge them before the Father, the most beautiful words we could possibly hear!
 - *Recall Mt 10:32 – “Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my heavenly Father.” (Also Mk 8:38 and Lk 9:26)*

To the Church in Sardis (3:1-6)

- *This is perhaps a hint of the nature of their failure: they are not living as true witnesses to Christ in the world. They're not really "acknowledging" him.*
- *They are believers but not in a way that testifies to their faith before others – they don't stand out enough from the pagan ways of their neighbors*
- *They have compromised their faith in order to fit it, the practice of their faith is half-hearted, etc.*

Reflection

- This is a damning criticism of Sardis that we should take seriously!
- By all exterior accounts, this church was solid and respectable, but they lacked true faith

To the Church in Sardis (3:1-6)

Reflection

- Every parish pastor should read this and wonder...
 - *On the exterior we're great, we have lots of ministries, we're growing in numbers, we meet our ABCD goal! But are we really bearing fruit?*
 - *We need to ask how our parish is different from the Rotary Club or Habitat for Humanity or the United Way – great organizations, but they are not the Church!*
- Every individual Christian needs to ask...
 - *Am I going through the motions? Am I seeking true faith and authentic conversion? Do I even know what that means?*
 - *Do my actions and faith correspond? Have I compromised with the world?*
 - *If someone followed me around for a week, would they know I am a Christian believer?*
 - *What would the Lord say to me?*

To the Church in Philadelphia (3:7-13)

The City of Philadelphia

- About 30 miles from Sardis
- Located at the intersection of two trade routes, so it was a relatively prosperous town
- Known for its local athletic competitions, in which the winner was awarded a crown of leaves (important later...)
- As he did with Smyrna, Jesus only had good things to say about this city (only 2 or 7!)
- Like Smyrna, the Philadelphians were in conflict with the local Jewish synagogue, and it appears the synagogue leaders likely kicked the Christians out

To the Church in Philadelphia (3:7-13)

Description of Jesus

- He is the “holy one,” or “holy one of Israel,” an OT term for God
- He “holds the key of David,” meaning that Jesus is the true Messiah, the prophesied descendant of David
- Note that both of these descriptive phrases emphasize the OT roots and continuity with the Christian faith, perhaps in reference to their disputes with the synagogue leaders

Commendations

- “I have left an open door...” They had been locked out of the synagogue, but because of their faith, Christ opens the door of the Kingdom that no one can close
- “Limited strength” – though they are small in numbers and of low social status because of their Christian faith, they have remained steadfast in believing and despite pressure, have not denied the Lord

To the Church in Philadelphia (3:7-13)

“Assembly of Satan”

- Probably in reference to those members of the synagogue who ousted the Christians from their midst
- They “claim to be Jews but are not” – by these actions, they show themselves as speaking falsely about being God’s people when they are rejecting his faithful followers
- They will eventually learn the truth – about Christ and about his followers, that Jesus loves them – and these synagogue leaders will come in shame before them because of their actions in rejecting them
 - *Whether this will happen soon or at the end of history is not explicitly said*
 - *It could be that Jesus is predicting that many of them will convert to the faith and join the Christians, as many had.*

To the Church in Philadelphia (3:7-13)

Exhortation

- Hold fast, remain faithful, keep doing what you're doing
- If they remain faithful, Jesus will give them a crown (not made of leaves)
- Jesus will also make them pillars in the Temple of God
 - *They were kicked out of the synagogue, now Jesus will give them a central place in the new and definitive Temple*
- Jesus will inscribe his own name upon them, showing that they are his people and belong completely to him
- Reflection
 - *We should keep our eyes always fixed on Christ and on the heavenly reward that awaits us.*
 - *Especially true in times when our faith is inconvenient, when we are excluded because of our faith, or when we must give up something (sacrifice) in order to remain faithful*

To the Church in Laodicea (3:14-22)

The City of Laodicea

- In the region of Phrygia, about 40 miles from Philadelphia, near Hieropolis and Colossae, to whom Paul preached
- A wealthy city, known as a banking center, for its textiles and for something called “Phrygian powder,” used to make a salve for eye trouble (important later...)

Description of Jesus

- Uses titles not in the original description in chapter 1
- The “Amen,” a title for God in Isaiah 65, reflecting his absolute power
- The “faithful and true witness,” whose words and judgment are reliable
- “Source of God’s creation,” recalling his presence with the Father at the beginning. “...through him all things were made.”

To the Church in Laodicea (3:14-22)

“Spit you out of my mouth”

- Literally to vomit them out, as if to say they made Jesus sick by their lack of faith. A stunning and graphic rebuke!
- They think they are rich and self-sufficient (and perhaps they are, in the worldly sense), but in their lukewarmness, Jesus sees them as “wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.”
 - *Not even the Pharisees received such a rebuke as this!*
 - *The opposite of the Church in Smyrna, who were physically poor, but Jesus regarded them as rich because of their faith*
 - *Imagine how this message must have been received in that Church!*

To the Church in Laodicea (3:14-22)

Why this rebuke?

- Probably because, although they were Christians, they lived their faith in a moderate (lukewarm) way, one that kept them respectable in the eyes of the wider community and didn't offend anyone
- Their faith did not materially change the way they lived, the things they did, their priorities in life, etc.
 - *Perhaps by observing them, no one outside the faith would have known they were Christians!*

"Repent"

- Jesus actually reveals his love for them in calling them to repent, telling them, "those whom I love, I reprove and chastise."
 - *All of his rebukes and exhortations to the churches (and to us!) are motivated by his love and his desire that we return to him*

To the Church in Laodicea (3:14-22)

”Repent”

- Jesus tells them to “buy” three things from him, revealing a delicious irony
 - *“Gold refined by fire,” symbolizing true faith that has been purified by endurance*
 - *“White garments,” as we saw before, symbolizing purity of faith and conduct*
 - *“Ointment to smear on your eyes,” symbolizing the anointing of the Holy Spirit, that they may “see” and pursue the things of God*
- It’s all beautifully ironic because Laodicea was known for its banking (refined gold), textiles (white garments) and eye salve (ointment to smear on their eyes).
 - *The very things they think they have in abundance they actually lack and must get them from Jesus.*

To the Church in Laodicea (3:14-22)

”Behold, I stand at the door and knock”

- In his grace, Jesus comes to them, even in their sins, and seeks entrance into their hearts
- “Anyone” can receive him – it is a universal call of salvation open to whoever “hears my voice and opens the door”
- “I will enter and dine with him” - a touching and intimate image of closeness.
 - *To allow Jesus to enter means that one repents of his sins. Jesus forgives them, enters in and ‘makes himself at home’ within the soul as one’s closest companion and friend*
- “The right to sit with him on his throne”
 - *A powerful image and an unbelievable offer*
 - *The depth of Christ’s forgiveness and the heights to which he raises the repentant is staggering. We achieve this through faith, sharing in the “victory” of Christ and sitting with him on his throne.*

To the Church in Laodicea (3:14-22)

Reflection

- Why do you think lukewarmness of faith is worse than cold?
 - *A "hot" faith is best of course, but you would think lukewarm is better than cold.*
 - *Why would God wish the Laodiceans were either hot or cold?*
- Because to be lukewarm means that one knows what the faith demands and puts on the outward appearance of faith, yet refuses to truly believe it or carry it out, or is half-hearted in their love of Christ
- To be ignorant of the faith or to reject it outright (being cold) at least means you aren't giving a poor witness to the faith. But to be lukewarm is to say you believe but don't fully embrace in one's actions what that belief entails.
 - *Not one person in the history of the world was ever converted by the lukewarm example of another Christian*

Summary of the Seven Cities

- Only the most hard-hearted and self-righteous person can read chapters 2-3 and not feel moved in some way – feel the weight of their failures, lack of faith, lukewarmness, sinfulness and a sense of how far they are from where Christ calls us to be.
- This is good!
 - *Knowledge of one's sinfulness, as revealed by God, is a great grace that should lead us all to repentance and deeper conversion*
 - *Why tell them their sins if there was no hope for forgiveness? Indeed, he calls each city to repent, that they too might become the "victors" like him.*
- These chapters should also remind us that God's love is behind all his actions – that a guilty conscience is supposed to lead us back to him
- We can all stand to meditate more on these two chapters, decide to live as true disciples of Jesus Christ and beg his help to be the people and witnesses he call us to be

End of Chapter 3

- Next class in three weeks - January 6
- Shift in focus beginning with chapter 4, from the present state of things to the future
 - *Vision of God and heavenly worship around his throne*
 - *The Lamb*
 - *The seven seals, seven trumpets and seven bowls*
 - *The Woman and St. Michael*
 - *The dragon, the beast, the false prophet, the whore Babylon*
 - *The persecution of the faithful*
 - *The climactic battle, the lake of fire and the final victory of God*
 - *The new heavens and new earth*

End of Chapter 3

- Next class in three weeks - January 6
- Merry Christmas!!!!
- Glory be to the Father, and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end. Amen.