

The Church of Christ at the junction between sleeping and waking

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Delivered Sunday Aug 22, 1943 from “*Een levende hoop*” sermon bundle Published 1953

Reading: Matthew 24:35-47

Text: Revelation 3:1-6

Psalm 65: 1,4

65: 2,3

5: 2,3,4,8

108: 1,4

119: 6,44

(note: Psalm verses have been adapted to suit the Australian/Canadian Psalm books)

Beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ,

Today I preach to you the Word as we have just read it, in the letter to the 5th congregation in Asia Minor, the letter to the Church in Sardis . And I speak to you concerning:

The Church of Christ at the crossroads between sleeping and being awake

- 1 The loss of watchfulness
- 2 The restoration of watchfulness
- 3 The promise for being watchful

1 First of all, as the habit is, a little information about the city of Sardis itself. That is not easy. Not because we know little of its history but because there is hardly anything remarkable in its history. There is very little that typifies Sardis , something that really stands out compared to other cities.

It was a city of former glory. In the past its inhabitants had distinguished themselves through bravery but that had now faded out and weakness prevailed. In later years the city had twice been taken by a surprise attack through the carelessness of its inhabitants. And all around them, in Smyrna, Thyatira and Pergamos the traders endeavoured to gain a larger slice of the market but in Sardis , well in Sardis people did not have such a program, such ideals. There was no strong push anymore to improve the town but the only pride they had was in their glorious past. And because they were zealous for nothing much at all, their actions betrayed this weakness: people went about their business but the push to expand and develop lacked.

And what was true for the city of Sardis , to a certain extent also held true for the Church in that place. When you read this letter you immediately notice the stinging criticism on the mentality of the congregation. But what makes it so hard to preach on this letter is that in fact nothing concrete is mentioned. It stays so vague and general. Ephesus was battling the Nicolaitans; Smyrna experiences problems from the agreements made between the Jews and the Romans; Pergamos is with all its idols the residence of Satan and it has the adherents to the Balaam-spirit; Thyatira has conflicts about trade guilds and unions. All concrete, specific problems

But now ask yourself what you can point to in Sardis . Then you see straight away that there was no outside oppression at all. Neither would you find false doctrine inside the church. In very general terms it is said that the church was dead, that she sleeps, but the concrete evidence of this death or this sleep is hardly mentioned.

And now you could say: A dead congregation, that is very concrete, very specific isn't it?

Yes but it all depends what you understand by a dead congregation. We tend to think then of a church where everything is done very formally and everything is a drag. Where the minister preaches because, well it is Sunday isn't it and the sermon belongs to the Sunday. And the minister is taking things easy because it will all be alright anyway. The dead church would also see the elders very properly go on their home-visits but they only make small talk or at best have become slaves to their own routines which makes them rattle off the stereotype questions; The deacons would then promote themselves more as state social workers and the members themselves would on Sunday's piously fill the pews twice but you would not see anything of that in their daily lives during the week. Nothing really upsets them ever, never a sermon that cracks like a whip, and never does an elder show any zeal for anything. In those sort of circumstances we would call it a dead church.

Dead because the minister speaks all sorts of orthodox sentences which like a waterfall happily cascade over our heads but will never wake anyone up. Dead because everyone oh so neatly behaves as is expected of them without even the remotest sign of opposition. Dead because all together they have well and truly fallen asleep. That sort of churches will probably exist indeed.

But let me straight away tell you this: Sardis was not like that at all! For if you were to come into such a dead congregation you would immediately notice it. But in Sardis that was not the case at all. In all the surrounding areas the church was well spoken of. She stood out as one of the best congregations in the Classis. Christ Himself testifies to this: "you have a name that you are alive, but you are dead." He did not say they had the appearance only, but you have the name that you are alive. The church at Sardis had an excellent reputation. The other churches in the classis were more or less jealous when they considered this church. For here everything was so well in order. The minister of Sardis had full churches for people liked listening to him. He was known as a gifted and fiery, talented speaker. And really the self-satisfied people in Sardis would not have been satisfied with anything less than a talented man. No their minister could be counted among the best. And the consistory was also held in high esteem. The elders were not just happy to let things ride along, no on their home-visits they truly had wonderfully spiritual conversations; it was really worthwhile.

But the congregation also had the name to be alive. I can imagine that the elders of other congregations were jealous. For those others were always struggling with false doctrine in their own circles: Nicolaitans, doctrine of Balaam and others. On home-visits they were always battling and if they were too slow in dealing with those people then they would receive a letter from Christ: I have this against you that you are weak in applying discipline. Being an elder there was no joy.

But compare that to Sardis! No persecution from outside.. No false doctrine from within! And after church visitation had been done the deputies would say : " what an exemplary congregation!; what a marvellous consistory!; what a life!" A gem of a minister and an excellent consistory. Also top collections for the ministry of mercy.

But it is of exactly this congregation that Christ says: You are dead; apart from a few exceptions you are all asleep. If things do not quickly change for the better, the church will disappear from here.

The churches in that classis would have stood amazed at that judgement and so would the people of Sardis themselves even more. Can you understand that? At church visitation the accolades were a plenty and the members themselves were also more than satisfied with their flourishing church life. And now this! The loud crack of the whip: You are dead!

So what was lacking? Well you do not hear much about the symptoms of that being asleep or about that being dead and yet it is very typical. In Sardis there are but few names of those who have not defiled their clothes. In Pergamos and Thyatira there were only few exceptions of *wickedness* but in the church of Sardis the *good* members could be counted *on one hand!* There are only very few members who had not soiled their clothes so to speak. A mere few persons who had not been contaminated by a sinful life. So there was a rather common lack in what we call Christian lifestyle. Now don't make the mistake of thinking of gross sinfulness here. The people in Sardis were much too correct, too civilised for that. But with most of them the sparkling white apparel was a little dull and grimy. In general terms: they lacked lustre.

But I can hear you say: " well what do you expect? There is no living soul who is perfect, is there?". The consistory in Sardis knew too that there was always room for improvement but at the same time you could not make unrealistic demands could you? Similarly with the brothers on church visitation. Were the members in Thyatira or in Pergamos perfect perhaps? Were their clothes spotlessly white? Besides, Sardis was in its walk of life no worse than the other churches.

So why then this sharp judgement of Christ: You are dead ?

Why so much praise for the works done in Thyatira and so much encouragement for the loyalty in Pergamos?

It is because in Sardis they were satisfied with what had been achieved and were happy to operate on that level but in Thyatira and Pergamos they were not. The church in Sardis had the same dreadful mentality as they had in the city: they were self satisfied; they rested on the laurels of past achievements; there was in the city no desire to develop any further. Similarly in the church there was no longer the striving for perfection.

Sardis did not have heretical doctrines. That seemed marvellous: for there were no people here who tried to justify the incompatibilities in their lives as did the Nicolaitans or the followers of Balaam. Sure that seemed very nice. But in actual fact it was very bad. It would have been marvellous if the minister in Sardis had preached so pointedly that the congregation had very consciously rejected any such false teachings. But it was bad because the minister did not preach pointedly and consequently the congregation did not live like it either.

Because of the lack of *action* in the preaching there was no *reaction* in the people. Now if the church has a clear and principled message and then there is no reaction, it is a beautiful thing for the people have already chosen consciously for the Word of God. But it is also possible that a reaction is lacking because the lack of action in the first place. That is a mortal danger and alas this is the case in Sardis . In Pergamos and other congregations false doctrines raised their heads; in those places the sermons and home visits clearly voiced the absolute demand of Christ so that many who advocated a less demanding attitude to life, were forced into a reaction of sorts.

There the church with her absolute Gospel took a firm stance. All those relativists, those who took it all with a pinch of salt, were forced into defending themselves against that absolute preaching and so were forced to make a choice, for or against.

But in Sardis that was not necessary. The free thinkers did not *need* to defend themselves because the church did not attack them. The minister's sermons were warm and spicy and everyone was full of praise for them but he never really hurt anyone with them, he never dotted the I's. The members with their dubious lifestyles liked listening to him for he had no strong sermons which preached them out of the church. The elders on their homevisits had nice homevisits and had nice things to say about spiritual life etc. Even those who ought to be put under censure, regarded it as a good homevisit: yes the brothers had spoken about Christ in such a way that the devil had not been pricked into opposition.

In Thyatira the supporters of Jezebel would be furious with the minister after the sermon because of the absolute demands he preached. Angry too with consistory because they talked about censure. But in Sardis members of similar thinking came out of church satisfied about their elders. But in actual fact it meant death to them! Nobody was forced into a reaction because the church no longer spoke in absolute terms.

And besides a dead lifestyle, the doctrine was also being deadened so to say. Don't take me wrong here. I do not mean that the minister on Sunday's treated them to chunks of dry dogmatics or only spelling out the letter of the law. He was too much of a good preacher for that, as we said before. And yet there was something amiss with the doctrine, with the confessions. Christ alludes to that towards the end when He makes the promises to the victors, that He will confess their name before the Father and His angels. And you know from the Gospel that such promises are only made to those who despite all the dangers remain faithful and confess Christ before men. The very fact that this promise is here in Sardis given only to very few, proves that the vast majority was unfaithful in confessing Christ.

You will understand now too that there was no persecution in Sardis, no martyrs to mourn for as was the case in Smyrna for example. In Sardis no one was imprisoned for the Gospels sake. Oh sure that was much easier but at the same time it was a sad sign for the congregation.

The minister preached the usual and even non church members did not mind listening to him now and then. They came together for their church services and the people of Sardis could even appreciate that. They were sympathetic towards the congregation because they had different ideas but well, it was just another religion after all. "and", so they said, "everyone has to find his own way to happiness isn't it?"

But with Paul that was a completely different story. Wherever he preached he was likely to be locked up or beaten and the whole town was in uproar against him. It was because Paul brought them an absolute Gospel and took it to the streets, making people think and decide. Paul's Gospel put as it were a knife on the throat of people and the whole city was placed in the dilemma: for or against! But never neutral compliance. Paul's Gospel was so direct and full of antithesis: it forced a choice of life or death but never could people remain untouched by it.

That was the reason Paul had been in so many prisons; the enemy would simply not tolerate him. Peter was killed for the same reasons, as well as Antipas of Smyrna and so many others.

In Ephesus they had conflicts inside as well as outside the church and the same was true for Smyrna, Pergamos and Thyatira; only in Sardis it was lovely and peaceful and safe. So the church can have the name to be alive but in the meantime be very dead.

And so we have seen the manifestation of "being dead" in walk of life and in doctrine; about that lack of radicalism so that everyone was satisfied. But still we have to dig deeper. What was behind all that? And then there is only one answer possible: In Sardis the eschatological tension has diminished because the members no longer lived and worked with their eyes focussed on the Day of Christ's return. That may seem rather a large leap but it is not really.

For you must pay attention to the name by which Christ here in Chapter 3:1 makes Himself known: "These things says He who has the seven Spirits of God and the seven stars." That is to say: The One speaking to you here is He who made Pentecost possible, the One who poured out the fullness of the Spirit. For you know it don't you, that on Pentecost they were all filled with the Holy Spirit? But this outpouring spells the beginning of the end. Peter refers to the prophet Joel who prophesied about this.

Pentecost means that by the Spirit everything is now pushed toward the end, toward the fulfilment of the ages. And because Christ at Pentecost has started this urgent push toward the end He also holds the seven stars. He calls upon the office bearers in the church and He gives some to be apostles, some to be prophets and some to be shepherds and teachers in order to perfect the saints. There you have it again: to the perfection of the saints. Together with the Spirit and in the office bearers, the powers of the end have been poured out; everything accelerates and is urged toward perfection.

That is the way then in which Christ has gone to work in Sardis. He has in this congregation unleashed the powers of the Last Day and called upon the church to also work and confess in this turbulent and tension filled end and so to strive for perfection.

But Sardis no longer remembers that, they have lost their focus on the Day of Christ's return. They have forgotten that they did not receive the Spirit for a simple, stress-less church life, not to just relax, enjoy and feel safe. No they received the Spirit to be set on fire and in turn to set the world on fire! They know the Spirit but they no longer see Him as a Storm which hurls the world on and on; they don't see Him anymore as a fire which eventually will consume the earth. Sure they have a consistory but the office bearers themselves no longer know that they have to urge the congregation on to perfection. Instead they imagine that they have come such a long way and there is no longer anyone who cracks the whip.

They think it is so nice that they have no troubles and forget that the time of compromise has long gone and a radical approach is required. It is the last hour and they do not know that they have been anointed with the Spirit by Christ in order that their confession to

the world might force the world to the end and to force those half hearted members in the church, to repentance or confirm them in their rejection.

And because they have forgotten all that, the minister also preaches badly. He starts a comfortable fire on Sundays around which they all cosily come together, but it is not the fire of the Spirit by which those half-hearted members are driven out of the church. The elders keep good track of their wards and notice little or nothing of opposition.

Christ then says: I have not found your works perfect before God. That does not mean that they are not perfect works. That was the same in the other congregations really. No it rather means there is no longer tension in them, no life, no soul; here is no longer passion for perfection, no longer that being-gripped by the Gospel like Paul was.

In Matthew 24 Christ describes the minister who preaches as one under the grip of the Last Hour. It is the man who gives food in due time; the man who keeps his eye on the clock and watches the hands slide further and further; the man who thinks: it is late, I have to take care of the food so that they can work till the end. But the minister in Sardis preaches the same this year as last year. He has timeless sermons but the congregation is dying. He does not see the clock of God, he does not think of it that the days are rolling along and that he has to equip the congregation to strive for the end. But he who builds up does not lay endless little pebbles but says: every stone is another in the building; the work advances, later I will be finished and the building will be completed. That is true preaching! Knowing that with every sermon held, the time to preach becomes shorter, every sermon brings the end closer.

2 That the sin of Sardis was indeed caused by losing sight of the Last day in everyday life becomes the more clear when we pay attention to the second point: the restoration of that watchfulness.

For the minister and consistory are addressed here and so also the congregation when the command comes: "Be watchful". To be watchful in the Bible is never used to warn against one specific danger but always in context of expecting the coming Christ and to live and work every day in the expectation of the end.

Be watchful! For the minister that means: do not simply keep the congregation comfortably occupied but preach as under the grip of knowing we live in the last days and the end is coming. With every sermon that I make realise that time is pressing, it is late and I have to get them ready and work at the perfection of my congregation. I may not treat them to a nice snack but I have to feed them with solid food till they have matured in the faith and love so that they may be ready when Christ comes.

Be watchful! For the elders that means: do not try to have a pleasant spiritual conversation with that family but search diligently as to what is still lacking in their perfection and determine in what way they are not yet ready to meet the Christ. Urge and force them into an absolute and radical life. It is very likely that it may not turn into a nice conversation but still put the knife on their throats as it were and force them to a decision. Make sure that you get that family ready for the coming of Christ.

We also read in our text: strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die.

Hardly anyone is gripped any longer by striving for perfection. Many are dead and many more are at the point of dying. But wake up and wake up the others also.

Be watchful! To the whole congregation that means: no longer look for your strength within yourself and your own church services; for Christ is coming. The world has to be ready and that is done by means of everyone's tongue; Go and confess, tell the people right next door to you who Christ is. Speak about Him in public life!

Does that make for trouble? Of course it does: your cosy little life will be finished and they will start to hate you. Prison doors will open and executioners will be waiting but in doing so you are forcing the world toward the end.

How does that come about, that restoration of watchfulness? Well remember how you have received and heard the Gospel. When Paul preached in your regions and you for the first time heard the Gospel through him, your reaction was different. At that time you did not say: Now we will have nice Sundays. Oh no, his sermons gripped you and put you to work. Then you started speaking publicly about Christ and the power of the Spirit entered you. You knew well that it was the last days you live in. So remember those days and repent even to the end.

Of course you can remain asleep if you wish. That is to say you can listen to nice sermons, have large collection proceeds, and organise impressive services. You will snooze till suddenly the day of Christ's return is upon you. If you are watchful you will have a keen eye for the signs of Christ's coming. You will always be prepared and He will not surprise you. But if you remain sleeping then I will come like a thief to you and not one of you will suspect anything. Then the minister will fall straight off the pulpit into judgement and you will awake from your sleep and find yourself in hell.

3

There is a promise for watchfulness, the 3rd point

There is nothing praiseworthy in this congregation of Sardis as a whole. And yet there is a promise for those who remained faithful and who fought the sleepiness. For as we read, there were also a few members who had not soiled their garments. Naturally they were not saints but rather people with perhaps even great shortcomings. And yet their garments remained clean for they expected Christ. They were not satisfied with what had been achieved so far but chased after perfection. Every evening again they confessed their shortcomings and every morning they committed again to striving for perfection. At the coming of Christ they have nothing to fear. They are allowed to walk with Him in white robes because they are worthy. They will later on have white robes because they were here already wearing them.

They themselves will say: But Lord my clothes were stained were they not? But He will answer: your clothes are white despite your sins because the desire and striving to appear before Me as unstained, has consumed you. You are worthy of the white robes because there in Sardis you were already wearing them.

And those who now will still wake up, will also have those clothes of perfect justification. Even though such a person had been dying for a long time I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life for he let himself be woken up and started anew. He no longer said with great self satisfaction: things are going well. No he complained every day: it is still going so poorly. But his complaint was driven by the desire to be perfect. And because he started confessing My Name again in the world and by so doing drove the world toward the crisis of the end, therefore I will confess him before My Father and His angels. I will reveal him in the glory of those who are perfected.

Beloved, I have now become very frightened, very restless about me and you.

For this was a letter to a church in a city so long ago and so far away. But the Spirit carries this letter through the ages and many countries. Now it has really been driven home to *us*: hear what the Spirit says to the church here today. A beautiful congregation, a good consistory; much work is being done. But I no longer dare to boast. For it is also possible that we have the name to be alive but in the meantime are dead.

Where is with us the desire and longing for the end which drives us and urges us on?

As far as I as minister am concerned: I have to make sure I do not preach you to death.

And as for you: Make sure you will never be asleep!

Amen.