

SCENE ONE

The Letters to the seven churches

Letter to the church in Ephesus : Apocalypse 2:1-7

Each of the seven letters is constructed according to the same pattern. To illustrate the pattern, this first letter is set out here in full, before we divide it into sections for purposes of commentary.

1. The Glorified Christ addresses the community
 - ¹To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:
These are the words of him who holds the seven stars
in his right hand,
who walks among the seven golden lampstands:
2. Christ's judgment of the community
 - ²I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance.
I know that you cannot bear evildoers; you have tested
those who claim to be apostles but are not,
and have found them to be false.
 - ³I also know that you are enduring patiently
and bearing up for the sake of my name,
and that you have not grown weary.
 - ⁴But I have this against you,
that you have abandoned the love you had at first.
3. Appeal addressed to the particular community
 - ⁵Remember then from what you have fallen;
repent, and do the works you did at first.
If not, I will come to you
and remove your lampstand from its place,
unless you repent.
 - ⁶Yet this is to your credit:
you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.
4. General appeal and promise of victory if appeal is heeded
 - ⁷Let anyone who has an ear,
listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.
To everyone who conquers
I will give permission to eat from the tree of life
that is in the paradise of God.

¹To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands:

²I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance. I know that you cannot bear evildoers; you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them to be false.

³I also know that you are enduring patiently and bearing up for the sake of my name, and that you have not grown weary.

⁴But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

⁵Remember then from what you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent. ⁶Yet this is to your credit: you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

Ephesus has already been named as the first of the seven churches to which the Apocalypse is being addressed (see 1:11). It is being addressed to 'the angel of the church', that is to say, to the Christian community as it really is, as seen by the transcendent, glorified Jesus (see 1:20), who is holding the community in his hand (1:16), and is active in its midst (1:12).

John commends them on their patient endurance, for they are determinedly opposing those of the community who are in favour of compromising their faith by fitting in with the expectations of the citizens of Ephesus and taking part in the imperial cult. These are the false apostles mentioned in verse two and the Nicolaitans mentioned in verse six. *Nikos* is Greek for victory and *laos* is Greek for people. This may be a Greek rendition of the Hebrew *Baal-am*, which has the same meaning: the people of Baal, the Canaanite god of political power. To embrace Roman culture is to embrace a false god.

Participation in the guilds and in the ordinary public life of Ephesus involved religious practices in which Rome and the Emperor were honoured as gods. The Jews had been granted official exemption from such practices. Christians, however, who were excommunicated from the synagogue, could not take advantage of this exemption. Failure to worship the Roman gods was considered antisocial, atheistic, and sporadically treated as treason. John is commending the community for not listening to those who were willing to compromise in this matter. He praises their endurance.

However, in an expression which recalls the words of Jeremiah, he accuses them of having lost their first fervour:

Thus says the Lord, I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown.

– Jeremiah 2:2. See also Ezekiel 16.

John relays to them Christ's warning that they repent and return to their earlier love. The description of Jesus with which John begins this letter speaks of him walking among the golden lampstands (1:13). If the Ephesians do not repent they are in danger of having their lampstand removed thus forfeiting their privileged place among God's chosen people.

The final section of this and the following letters is a general appeal. It opens with an expression which the Gospels indicate to have been characteristic of Jesus: 'Let anyone with ears listen' (Matthew 13:9).

Notice the introduction of the plural churches. The seven churches of Asia Minor are real communities, each, as we shall see, with its own special characteristics. But the number seven is symbolic (see 1:4), and every community is meant to take these words to heart in so far as they may apply to them. We too can learn from them. Each local church should read this letter carefully to see if it is compromising with values that come from the local culture, but that have not undergone a conversion to Christ.

The tree of life and the paradise of God are familiar to us from the narrative of the garden of Eden.¹ Scholars suggest that here and in the following letters John has chosen his language because of particular factors relevant to the community being addressed.²

The temple to Artemis (the Roman Diana) in Ephesus was one of the architectural wonders of the ancient world.³ Its central shrine was an ancient tree-sanctuary, where fugitives from the law were able to seek and find asylum. John seems to be alluding to this when he speaks of the tree of life. The Christians in Ephesus are to find asylum (salvation),⁴ not in the temple of Artemis or in any of the other institutional pillars of the dominant Roman culture, but in the cross of Jesus. Their enjoyment of divine communion is to be found, not in fitting in with the religious practices of the local citizens, but in the love of God symbolised in the cross.

¹ Genesis 2:7; 2:9; 3:22; 3:24.

²For a more detailed analysis of the relationship between John's imagery and the situation of the churches of Asia see C.Hemer *The Letters to the Seven Churches of Asia in their Local Setting* (Uni of Sheffield, 1986).

³See Acts 19:24ff.

⁴The Greek for asylum is *sôteria*, which is used regularly in the New Testament for salvation.

Let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

To everyone who conquers I will give permission to eat from the tree of life that is in the paradise of God.

1. The glorified Christ
⁸And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: These are the words of the first and the last, who was dead and came to life:

2. Christ's judgment
⁹I know your affliction and your poverty, even though you are rich. I know the slander on the part of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.

3. Particular appeal
¹⁰Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Beware, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison so that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have affliction. Be faithful until death, and I will give you the crown of life.

4. General appeal⁵
¹¹Let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Whoever conquers will not be harmed by the second death.

Those in positions of power in the cities of Asia Minor vied with each other to obtain Roman approval. Ephesus was the seat of the proconsul. Smyrna had a temple to Roma (erected in 195BC) and a temple to Tiberius (erected in 26AD). Smyrna is Greek for myrrh, the aromatic ointment used for anointing the dead.¹ John reminds the Christians there that it is Jesus who, having died, 'is alive for ever'(1:17-18).

As noted earlier, some Jewish communities were responsible for accusing the Christians before the civil authorities and thus causing them to be persecuted. John knows what the Christians of Smyrna are going through and commends them in terms which remind us of Paul, who commended himself to the community at Corinth:

as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

– 2Corinthians 6:10

Paul speaks in similar terms of Jesus:

For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich.

– 2Corinthians 8:9

We are reminded, too, of the words of James:

Has not God chosen the poor in the world to be rich in faith and to be heirs of the kingdom that he has promised to those who love him?

– James 2:5

John declares that the Jews who are persecuting their Christian brothers and sisters are acting not as a spiritual faith-community, but as instruments of Satan (the 'accuser').

Jesus warns the Christians of Smyrna, as he warned his own disciples,² to expect persecution, and not to lose heart. They will have affliction for 'ten days'. The allusion is to the Book of Daniel.³ The number ten will recur in the Apocalypse⁴ as a symbol for something which appears to be complete, but is in fact limited.

¹ See Matthew 2:11 and John 19:39.

²John 8:37-44. ³Daniel 1:12,14,15.

⁴12:3; 13:1; 17:3; 17:7; 17:12; 17:16.

⁵See commentary on 2:7.

There seems to be no end to the difficulties and even persecution experienced by the Christians in Smyrna. They are being reminded that there is a power active among them that transcends the slander of the synagogue and the oppression of the Roman state - the power of the exalted Christ, who will see that they receive the recognition of victory achieved: the crown of life, a sharing in the life of him 'who was dead and came to life.' The image of a victory crown is especially appropriate for Smyrna, known throughout the ancient world as the jewelled crown of Asia because of its outstanding architectural beauty. We recall the words of James:

Blessed is anyone who endures temptation. Such a one has stood the test he will receive the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him.

– James 1:12

Like Christ himself they may suffer death for their faith. But like him also they will be raised to life if they remain faithful. They will not experience the 'second death' – the death beyond death: the death of eternal separation from God.¹

¹See also 20:6; 20:14; 21:8.

1. The glorified Christ

¹²And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword:

2. Christ's judgment

¹³I know where you are living, where Satan's throne is. Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

¹⁴But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel, so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practise fornication.

¹⁵So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

3. Particular appeal

¹⁶Repent, then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth.

Pergamum was the ancient religious capital of Asia Minor. The Roman governor resident in Pergamum had the right of the sword (*ius gladii*): the authority to inflict the death penalty. Real power, however, lies, not with the Roman governor, but with the glorified Jesus. It is his sword that achieves true justice, and, as we have already learned, it is the sharp two-edged sword of God's word (1:16).¹ If the Christians of Pergamum fail to repent, it is this sword which they must fear.²

In 29AD a temple dedicated to Rome and to the Emperor Augustus was erected, making Pergamum the centre of Emperor cult. Domitian was addressed in cult as 'Lord and God.' Hence John's referring to the temple as Satan's throne.

Antipas was probably a local martyr³ outstanding for his fidelity to Christ.

There seems also to be a play on the similarity of Balaam⁴ and 'Baal-am'. As in the letter to Ephesus (2:6) the Nicolaitans are mentioned. The same kind of compromise was being suggested in Pergamum as we noted in Ephesus. Some in the community were counselling accommodation with the imperial cult in order to avoid persecution.

It was the imperial cult that held the diverse empire together. To stay away from the temple was to put oneself outside the local society which looked on the Christians as antisocial, as atheists, and as undermining the prosperity which was understood as coming from the gods. Furthermore, the temples functioned also as banks and as marketplaces. Paul also refers to the problem of eating food sacrificed to idols.⁵ 'Fornication' refers, not literally to sexual sin, but, as commonly in the Hebrew Scriptures, to playing around with false gods. They are being unfaithful to the covenant of love which they have with the glorified Jesus.

¹See 1:16. See also 19:15.

²Compare Wisdom 18:15 with reference to God's word.

³The Greek for witness is *martys*. Jesus himself is described as a 'faithful witness' in Apocalypse 1:5.

⁴For the story of Balaam, see Numbers 25:1-2 and 31:16.

⁵See 1 Corinthians 8:1-13, 10:23 - 11:1.

Christ promises the hidden manna to those who reject the false prophets and repent. He will himself assuage their deepest hunger with the nourishment of his saving grace.¹

He also promises a white stone. Judges used stones to cast their vote: a white stone meant acquittal, a black stone meant condemnation. There was also the custom of giving a token to those who placed themselves under the patronage of the god Asklepios, the god of healing, called the 'saviour'. John seems to be alluding to both these practices here. Those who are faithful to Christ will find eternal salvation and will live under his name,² experiencing his special patronage.

¹See Psalm 78:24-25. See 2 Maccabees 2:4-8 for the legend of Jeremiah hiding the tabernacle, the ark containing the manna, and the altar of incense to save them from desecration at the time of the destruction of Jerusalem.

²Compare Isaiah 62:2; 65:15.

4. General appeal

¹⁷Let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it.

1. The glorified Christ

¹⁸And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: These are the words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like brass.

2. Christ's judgment

¹⁹I know your works -your love, faith, service, and patient endurance. I know that your last works are greater than the first.

²⁰But I have this against you: you tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practise fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols. ²¹I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her fornication.

²²Beware, I am throwing her on a bed, and those who commit adultery with her I am throwing into great distress, unless they repent of her doings; ²³and I will strike her children dead. And all the churches will know that I am the onewho searches *affections* and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve.

Thyatira was an important trading centre, set in the midst of a fertile plain. It was famous for its weaving and dyeing, and also for its work-guilds, especially those attached to the local zinc mines. John picks up these local allusions in selecting from his earlier description of the risen Jesus the 'flame of fire'(see 1:14) and 'brass'(see 1:15).

The local Roman temple acclaimed the emperor Domitian as the son of God. John asserts that the Son of God is not Caesar but Christ.¹

John finds much to praise in the community, but he criticises their toleration of Jezebel. The famous Jezebel of the Bible was the wife of Ahab,² and was responsible for introducing worship of the gods of Tyre into the northern kingdom. The immorality associated with Tyre was the immorality of injustice, of wealth built up from violence. John follows the Old Testament practice of describing idolatry in terms of sexual immorality.³ To worship idols (including the idol of unjustly acquired wealth) is to be unfaithful to God's loving covenant. John is referring to those who would compromise Christianity by attaching themselves to the false values of the Roman state.

The exalted Christ who has eyes like a flame of fire 'searches affections⁴ and hearts'. He shares in the power of God to penetrate to the inner truth of human feelings and intentions.⁵ He cannot be deceived. For him it is the truth that matters, and his judgment of human behaviour is clear and accurate, giving 'to each of you as your works deserve'.⁶

¹ The theme is continued in verses 26-28.

² 1 Kings 16:21-34.

³ Compare 2:14

⁴ Greek *nephros* in the plural: literally 'kidneys' understood as the seat of the emotions.

⁵ Compare Psalm 7:10; 26:2; Jeremiah 11:20; 12:2; 17:10.

⁶ Compare Psalm 62:12; Proverbs 24:12.

The reward offered to those in the community who remain faithful is a share in the kingly power of Jesus, the ‘Son of God’ (2:18). The language echoes that of Psalm Two:

You are my son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.

– Psalm 2:7-9.

Because king David was a shepherd, to rule is, as in this text, to shepherd. The reign of God is a reign of love and those who continue Jesus’ mission share in the work of the Good Shepherd. The image had a special appeal to the citizens of Thyatira because of their special interest in weaving and dyeing.

The morning star is the harbinger of the sun, heralding the end of the night and the dawning of a new day. Peter uses the same image:

We have the prophetic message more fully confirmed. You will do well to be attentive to this as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts. First of all you must understand this, that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, because no prophecy ever came by human will, but men and women moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God.

– 2Peter 1:19-21

The words of this prophecy, too, can be grasped only by those who are part of the Christian community that received these words, recognised them as coming from the Spirit, and so treasured and preserved them.

3. Particular appeal

²⁴But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call ‘the deep things of Satan’, to you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden;

²⁵only hold fast to what you have until I come.

4. General appeal

²⁶To everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end, I will give authority over the nations;

²⁷to shepherd them with an iron rod, as when clay pots are shattered

²⁸even as I also received authority from my Father. To the one who conquers, I will also give the morning star.

²⁹Let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

1. The glorified Christ

¹And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars:

2. Christ's judgment

I know your works; you have a name of being alive, and you are dead.

3. Particular appeal

²Rouse yourselves, stay alert, and strengthen what remains and is on the point of death, for I have not found your works perfect in the sight of my God.

³Remember and keep in mind then what you received and heard; obey it, and set about repenting. If you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come to you.

⁴Yet you have still a few persons in Sardis, who have not soiled their clothes; they will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy.

Sardis was one of the most famous cities of the ancient world, and the western capital of both the Persian and Seleucid empires.

Because the Christian community had fallen into complacency and had accommodated to the pagan values of the citizens of Sardis, John highlights the fullness of the Spirit which the glorified Jesus has and wishes to pour out upon them if only they would recognise their plight and repent.¹

Under king Croesus (6th century BC) Sardis boasted an impregnable acropolis. However it was penetrated by king Cyrus of Persia and the city captured because of the carelessness of those guarding the acropolis. They were so confident that they failed to remain vigilant. Their failure became proverbial. Hence John's warning to the Christian community of Sardis to rouse themselves before it was too late and to stay alert.

In words found also in the Gospels,² Jesus reminds them that they do not know the time of his coming. If they fail to be attentive they will miss the grace which he is offering them.

Clothes symbolise the way we are seen by others, and so the witness which we offer.³ Fortunately, there are still some of the Christian community in Sardis who are faithful to the mission of the risen Christ: they 'walk with me in white', sharing in the luminous glory of the risen Jesus.⁴

¹ For the 'seven spirits of God' see 1:4. For the 'seven stars' see 1:16,20.

² See Matthew 24:42; see also 1Thessalonians 5:2; 2Peter 3:10..

³ Compare 3:18; 4:4; 16:15; 19:13; 19:16.

⁴See 1:14.

The book of life is a common image in the Old Testament.¹ It is probable that Christians had their names struck from the register of citizens in Sardis, and also from the register in the synagogue from which they had been excommunicated. John is reassuring them that they are written in God's register. If they repent, Jesus will acknowledge them by name 'before my Father and before his angels'.²

¹Exodus 32:33; Psalm 69:28; Daniel 12:1; Malachi 3:16.

²See also Matthew 10:32.

4. General appeal

**⁵If you conquer,
you will be clothed
like them in white
robes, and I will
not blot your name
out of the book of
life; I will confess
your name before
my Father and be-
fore his angels.**

**⁶Let anyone who
has an ear listen
to what the Spirit
is saying to the
churches.**

1. The glorified Christ

⁷And to the angel of the church of Philadelphia write: The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one shall shut, who shuts and no one opens.

2. Christ's judgment

⁸I know your works. Behold, I have set before you an open door which no one is able to shut; I know that you have but little power, and yet you have kept my word and not denied my name.

⁹Behold, I will make those of the synagogue of Satan who say that they are Jews and are not, but lie - I will make them come and bow down before your feet, and learn that I have loved you.

¹⁰Because you have kept my word of patient endurance, I will keep you from the hour of trial which is coming on the whole world, to test the inhabitants of the earth.

In the opening vision, Jesus the glorified priest-king was portrayed as holding the keys of Death and of Hades (1:18). This image is developed here with the help of Isaiah:

I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open and none shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open.

– Isaiah 22:22

It is Christ who has the authority to determine who may enter the holy city, the sanctuary of those who enjoy divine life. The Christians are being shut out of the synagogue and excluded from certain aspects of civic life, but the time will come when those who are now excluding them will recognise that true life comes through them.

By their treatment of their brothers and sisters who have become disciples of Jesus, the members of the Jewish synagogue are demonstrating that they are acting for the great accuser, Satan.¹ It is the Christian community which has inherited the promises which they have forfeited:

All the nations you have made shall come and bow down before you, O Lord.

– Psalm 86:9

They shall come over to you [God's people] and be yours ... they shall bow down to you. They will make supplication to you, saying: 'God is with you alone, and there is no other; there is no god besides him'.

– Isaiah 45:14

The descendants of those who oppressed you shall come bending low to you; and all who despised you shall bow down at your feet; they shall call you the City of the Lord, the Zion of the Holy One of Israel.

– Isaiah 60:14

The Christians of Philadelphia have proved faithful under persecution. Here they are assured that the exalted Christ will preserve them from failing the ultimate test which everyone has to undergo. We are reminded of the words of Jesus' prayer:

Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

– Matthew 6:13

¹Compare 2:9.

Jesus' promise to come soon picks up a theme that has been present since the opening verse of the Apocalypse.¹ We are reminded of Jesus' words as recorded in the Gospel of John:

A little while and you will no longer see me, and again a little while and you will see me.

– John 16:16

Apart from the coming that happens at the death of each Christian, Jesus comes to us constantly through the gift of his Spirit. Whatever the persecution they are suffering and however Jesus may appear to delay, he is assuring the Christians of Philadelphia that he has not abandoned them. They are being tested but they will always experience his coming.

Like the community in Thyatira, they are being asked to 'hold fast to what you have' (compare 2:25), and like the community in Sardis, they are reminded of the crown that awaits them (compare 2:10). Whoever remains faithful through the persecution, will be made a pillar in the temple of Jesus' God: standing for ever as a living sign of God's presence and choice.

They will be given God's own name; that is to say, they will be claimed by God as his own.² They will belong to the holy city which is coming down from God, coming out of heaven. Heaven, throughout the Apocalypse, indicates the sphere of the divine. The holy city is the visible community on earth which is being constantly created by the divine initiative of grace. Christ also claims them as his own.³

In 17AD in gratitude for the help given by the Emperor Tiberius in restoring the city after a devastating earthquake, the citizens of Philadelphia added a new name to their city: Neocaesarea. The Christian community is the new Jerusalem, the city in which God, not the Roman emperor, reigns.

¹Compare 1:1; 2:5; 2:16; 3:3.

²Compare the last words of the prophecy of Ezekiel: 'The name of the city from that time on shall be, The Lord is There' (48:35).

³Compare 19:12.

3. Particular appeal

¹¹I am coming soon; hold fast to what you have, so that no one may seize your crown.

4. General appeal

¹²If you conquer, I will make you a pillar in the temple of my God; you will never go out of it, and I will write on you the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem that comes down from my God out of heaven, and my own new name.

¹³Let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

1. The glorified Christ

¹⁴And to the angel of the church in Laodicea write: The words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation:

In addressing his words to the angel of the church, here, as in the previous letters, John is addressing the historical community from the point of view of its relationship with the transcendent God.¹

In each of the letters we have seen that John highlights aspects of the risen Jesus that are of special significance for the particular community he is addressing. Here he introduces Christ as the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the origin of God's creation. This takes us back to chapter one verse five where he introduced Christ as 'the faithful witness', and to verse seventeen where Jesus says of himself: 'I am the first and the last'. We are reminded of the words of Isaiah:

Whoever invokes a blessing in the land shall bless by the *Amen-God*, and whoever takes an oath in the land shall swear by the *Amen-God*; because the former troubles are forgotten and are hidden from my sight. For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things shall not be remembered or come into mind. But be glad and rejoice for ever in what I am creating; for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.

– Isaiah 65:16-18

In speaking of God as the 'Amen-God' Isaiah is claiming that the God of Israel is the real God, the faithful God, the God in whom we can place our trust. We are reminded also of the statement of Paul:

For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you ... was not Yes and No; but in him it is always Yes. For in him every one of God's promises is a Yes. For this reason it is through him that we say the Amen, to the glory of God.

– 2 Corinthians 1:19-20

John is reminding the Christians in Laodicea that they can place their trust in the risen Christ. It is he who has called them into community, and he will carry out the promise he has made of sustaining them in faith and bringing them to the goal of their yearning: the full communion with God which he now enjoys. Jesus has already been described as 'the Alpha and the Omega' (1:8), and 'the first and the last' (1:17). The expression 'the origin of God's creation' reminds us of the words of the prologue to John's Gospel: 'All things came into being through him' (John 1:3).

¹See 1:20.

Communion with Jesus bears fruit in a life of love. When John expresses the profound disappointment of Jesus in the halfhearted way in which the community of Laodicea is living its Christianity, he does so in terms that have a special relevance to their situation. Laodicea's importance lay in its position at the junction of the north-south road from Sardis to the coast and the west-east road from Ephesus to the interior. It was renowned for its undrinkable water. Neighbouring Colossae had a good source of fresh water, and the citizens of Laodicea built an expensive aqueduct to make their city self-sufficient.

However Laodicea is not far from the high country of Hierapolis, which was noted for its hot and healing springs, and by the time the water from Colossae reached Laodicea it was lukewarm. The water was also renowned for causing stomach upsets: hence John's reference to their being lukewarm, and to causing the drinker to vomit.

Laodicea had a reputation for being proudly self-sufficient, even to refusing all Roman aid in the reconstruction necessary after the earthquake of 60AD. It was noted for its prosperous agriculture, famous particularly for its black wool, and its position at the crossroads of two major trading routes made it a major banking centre. The medical school at Laodicea produced and marketed widely an eye-ointment which included chemicals from the neighbouring hot springs. They produce fine clothing. They are economically prosperous.¹ They have a reputation for healing other people's eye complaints. However, they are naked, poor and blind.

¹Compare Hosea 12:7-8: 'A trader, in whose hands are false balances, he loves to oppress. Ephraim has said, Ah, I am rich, I have gained wealth for myself.'

2. Christ's judgment

¹⁵I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot.

¹⁶So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth.

¹⁷For you say, 'I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing.' You do not realise that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked.

3. Particular appeal

¹⁸Therefore I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire so that you may be rich; and white robes to clothe you and to keep the shame of your nakedness from being seen; and salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.

¹⁹I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent.

²⁰Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me.

The Christians are missing out on the wealth associated with the banks. The risen Christ offers them gold refined by fire. To grasp the significance of this, we must go back to where the symbols were first used. Gold first appeared in the portrait of the risen Christ where it symbolised divinity. The seven golden lampstands stood for the seven churches of Asia, including Laodicea, which enjoyed the divine presence in their midst. John is reminding the Laodiceans that it is this presence and this divine life which constitutes their real worth.

Fire, too, first occurred in the portrait of Jesus, whose eyes are described as a flame of fire (1:14). Fire symbolises judgment. The divine life promised to the Laodiceans is one that has gone through the purifying fire of Christ's judgment: a judgment that is in view of forgiveness and salvation, and which holds out the promise of sharing his divine life.

Instead of the black wool for which Laodicea was famous, the risen Christ offers them white robes. Clothing, as we saw earlier, symbolises the witness which they offer to others.¹ That the clothing is white shows that Jesus is offering them a participation in his own luminous sharing in divine communion.²

The letter is stern, but offered in a spirit of most profound love.³ We are left with the image of Jesus longing to share communion with them, knocking on the door, seeking entrance, but respecting their freedom to refuse him entry.⁴ Since the Apocalypse is being read out to the community assembled for the Eucharist on the first day of the week, one cannot hear these words without thinking of the Eucharist. We think of Jesus's words:

Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.

– John 6:56-57

We think also of Jesus's promise at the last supper:

Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.

– John 14:23

¹See 3:4-5. ²See 1:14

³Compare Proverbs 3:12; 1 Corinthians 11:32; Hebrews 12:5-13.

⁴Compare Isaiah 55:1-3; Song of Solomon (Song of Songs)5:1-2; Luke 12:36; 22:28-30.

This promise extends to all those who listen to the words of the risen Christ: they will sit with Christ on his Father's throne, participating in his mission of effecting God's will in the world.¹

If they are faithful to Jesus, the Christians of Laodicea, like the Christians of the other cities, will miss out on the supposed advantages that come to those who submit to Rome. They are promised the salvation that comes in the empire of God.

¹Compare 1:4 and 20:4.

4. General appeal

²¹To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne.

²²Let anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.