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My name's Peter Turnbull. I'm the minister here at Burghead Free Church, which is in Moray in the north of Scotland.

And we're going to be looking together at Revelation chapter 3, the first six verses, which is the letter to the church in Sardis.

Revelation chapter 3, verses 1–6.

To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds: you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels. Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

There are many things currently shaking the world and the church. The impact of Covid-19, climate change, conflict, the cost of living. These things bring many challenges and many problems. Or perhaps it's better to say that they exposed problems that were already there.

But as we look at the book of Revelation, I want to suggest that there is a fifth 'C' that shakes the church. And that is Christ. That might sound a bit strange to you. Isn't Christ the comforter of his people and the Good Shepherd? Well, yes, that is wonderfully true. But there's no doubt that the risen Christ, as we meet him in John's vision, also examines the church. He speaks words of comfort, yes, but also words of warning. He is the gracious saviour who puts his hand on John and declares in chapter 1, verse 17: Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last.

But in John's vision, we also see him as the one, chapter one, verse 14, whose eyes blaze like fire. And from his mouth, verse 16, comes a sharp, double-edged sword. He speaks words of power. That's the image of the rushing waters, verse 15, words which like a sword divide and discern that which is good and righteous from that which is worthless and wicked.

So maybe it's not quite right to say that Christ shakes the church. He is our comforter and our shepherd, a warrior who fights for his people. But he is also a judge who walks amongst his churches, observing all and speaking words yes, of encouragement, but also of warning.

And we will meet both in this letter to the church in Sardis. But we're going to examine this letter and take a little journey through some other parts of the New Testament with the apostle Paul to hear something of the need, both in the time of the apostles and today in our own day, for church revitalisation.

The first thing to notice as we dive into the church in Sardis is that they have a polished reputation. It's the first thing to see, a polished reputation.

Look at chapter 3, verse 1: To the angel of the church in Sardis write: These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead. So here is a church with good PR. They have a reputation. Or more literally, they have a name for being spiritually lively.

Now, with whom do they have this reputation? Well, I guess it's not with the local pagans, who I suppose would be unconcerned about such things. Perhaps they have a reputation with other churches in the region, although it's hard to know how much of that news would travel. The most obvious place that this reputation of spiritual life exists is in the minds of the people in the church in Sardis themselves. In other words, they see themselves as being a spiritually healthy, lively church, a place of spiritual dedication.

But self-deception runs deep. Jesus say they are badly wrong. This church is not the place it once was. There is a level of spiritual health that was once present, but is now sorely lacking. We can all, I think, have a concerning capacity for self-deception about our spiritual life and health.

As you think of your church, perhaps you think, well, for years there have been bums on pews and the lights have stayed on and the heating has been moderately warm. Services continue as they always have, and it's dangerously easy to believe your own PR that everything is rosy. Just as the church in Sardis did. Dangerously easy to assume, just as the church in Sardis did, that all is well and that bums on seats does mean spiritual health. That because the church exists today, because your church exists today and mine, that they have a God-given right to always exist.

But nothing could be further from the truth. We tend to read those words of Jesus in Matthew 16, verse 18, where he says, On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. We read those words and and we comfort ourselves with that promise. That promise is that the one holy catholic and apostolic church that the global church of Jesus Christ will never be overcome by the forces of evil. And that is wonderfully true, but with a self-deceptive sleight of hand we reinterpret this promise as if it means that any one particular congregation will always be around.

But of course, Jesus promises us no such thing. In fact, in the letter to the church in Ephesus, back in chapter 2, verse 5, Jesus warns that if they do not repent, that he himself will remove their lampstand that that congregation will die. And the warning to the church in Sardis is very similar.

So what about us? Do we think of ourselves more highly than we ought? Have we polished our church reputation for spiritual health with good PR, even if only in our own minds? That is a tempting but a dangerous hobby. The church in Sardis thinks it has a polished reputation but truthfully and here's the second thing to notice, theirs was a precarious reality. We need to get our relationship right with God first before we move on to look at other things.

Revelation 3, verse 1 and 2, says,

You have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of God.

Now, look. Spiritual life has not gone all together from this congregation. There is something which remains, which can be strengthened. It's clear as well from verse 4 that that a proportion, at least, of the church in Sardis are still walking faithfully with the Lord. Verse 4:

Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life, but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels.

So some have endured faithfully, some haven't soiled themselves morally: their witness has continued to burn brightly. They haven't been seduced by the pagan world around them into soft-peddalling their devotion to Jesus. There's also an interesting play on words here that pushes home this point. It centres on that word, name. So back in verse 1, the church has a misplaced reputation for being alive, or more literally, they have a name for being alive. And then in verse 4, Yet I have a few people is more literally a few names. And then on into verse 5, they who walk with Jesus will never have their names blotted out from the book of life. Instead, again, verse 5, Jesus will acknowledge their names before his Father. But those who are proudly deceived into thinking they have a name for spiritual health. well, they're in danger. On the other hand, those who are concerned for the name of Christ will find their names written in his book and acknowledged before his Father.

All of which gives us cause to examine our hearts. Has our witness our living and speaking for Jesus has it burned out? Has our devotion to him grown cold? Has our accommodation of the world increased? Have we soiled our clothes, to use the language that John does? In these ways are we deceiving ourselves? Believing that we, ourselves and the churches to which we belong, are really fine when perhaps they're not?

Now, look, this should also be a cause for thankfulness. I'm sure we can all think of those encouraging people in our congregations whose devotion to Jesus and to his church and to evangelism all shine brightly. Those people who do walk with Jesus dressed in white, they're a real encouragement.

But look, as you hear the challenges of this passage, maybe you just think, Oh, come on, this feels a bit disturbing and depressing. Well, if that's how you feel, just remember, Jesus is not speaking to the church in Sardis to entertain them, but to warn them.

Remember, though, that God's warnings are never cruel, but always kind. You warn your children not because you don't care for them, but because you do. That's the next thing to notice. This is a gracious warning. Jesus says, verse 2, Wake up! Wake up! Which does bring the encouraging news that for the church in Sardis, it's not yet too late. There is still time for spiritual reawakening. Jesus says, again verse 2, Strengthen what remains. Which brings the encouraging news that that's some remnants of a healthy church do remain here and that it is possible for them to be strengthened. Jesus tells them to remember and to repent, verse 3, which tells them that there is still time and still opportunity to come back to the Lord to find his grace and to reawaken their former love for him. I guess many of us are in congregations that are in need of revitalisation. Most of us are in churches where strengthening what remains or regaining our first love or re-energising ourselves for the witness and the work of Christ are desperately needed.

The need for revitalisation is not unique to the church in Sardis. Instead, it is a present reality. I always think it's striking that in the Old Testament, Nehemiah, who the Lord uses to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, which are broken down, and the people in disgrace in exile, Nehemiah begins that mission by asking for and receiving the unvarnished truth about the grim reality on the ground in Jerusalem. I think there's a similar candour in these letters in Revelation, and we need that today.

Pre-pandemic, churches were closing in the UK, and very sadly, the pandemic has only served to speed those closures up. And tragically, that means that the vast majority of people in our nation today who know nothing of the saving news of Jesus and who are heading to a lost eternity facing his righteous judgement, are less likely than ever to live within striking distance of a biblical church which will proclaim the gospel. Many people have perhaps been happy to put their heads in the sand about this for decades. But if we have, the evidence all around us

tells us we can no longer do that and we shouldn't want to do that either.

The crucial first step for Nehemiah when it came to rebuilding for the kingdom of God was to know the facts, to face the unvarnished truth. It was the same in Sardis, and we must do the same in our day and age. All of which is just to say, if you weren't convinced already that there is a desperate need for new life, for strengthening what remains in our own hearts, in our congregations, there is a desperate need for revitalisation and renewal in the church.

But be encouraged that such renewal and revitalisation is close to God's heart and is clearly a priority in scripture. That's the next point: a priority of scripture. So the church in Sardis is called to strengthen what remains.

But that's not unique. I want to invite you to consider the wider witness of the New Testament for a moment. Think, for example, about Paul's missionary journeys. Now, of course, we tend to think of these as being trips on which churches were planted, not strengthened or revitalised. And of course, yes, on his missionary journeys, Paul and his companions, they did share the gospel, which did lead to the planting of new churches. But what we often fail to notice is that once planted, Paul spends considerable time going back through places he's visited to strengthen those churches, to teach them, correct them, renew them.

Listen, for example, to Acts chapter 15, verse 36, where Paul says to Barnabas, Let us go back and visit the believers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing. Later in verse 41, Paul takes Silas and went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches. Or what about the church of Ephesus, where the apostle Paul spent so much time? Even that church needed revitalisation and strengthening. So much so that Paul sent his crack pastor-teacher-church-revitaliser Timothy, to tackle that task and gave him the handbook on church revitalisation we now call 1 Timothy.

I reckon that most of the New Testament epistles could be considered church revitalisation documents. Many of them were written to iron out problems in churches, including in churches where those problems had become very severe. Think of the church in Corinth,

for example, which was wracked with divisions and difficulties and idolatries and sexual immoralities.

And yet Paul's approach was not just to fold up the church and start something new. He doesn't say, Let's close the thing and plant something new, no. He writes to strengthen and encourage what is good and to challenge, rebuke, correct, that which is wrong. So the renewal of his people, this strengthening what remains, church revitalisation, whatever you want to call it, it's close to God's heart. And it's clearly a priority of scripture.

But what does it mean to do that? What does it look like? What's the pattern of revitalisation? That's our final point.

Well, here are some principles, just a few, from this letter to the church in Sardis. Remember, repent and recover.

Firstly, remember, remember from where we have fallen. Chapter 3, verse 3: Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. So we need to remember the gospel that we have received, as true for you if you're a church leader of some kind or a church member. It is easy, isn't it? In all the the pressure and the busyness of life and church ministry, it's easy to lose our sense of joy and our sense of wonder in Christ and in all he's done for us in the gospel. And in the task he's given us in the gospel. Jesus is clear. The way into his kingdom is by repentance and faith. As people hear the gospel. Have we lost our nerve on the gospel as a church? Have we stopped knowing it and loving it and calling other people to receive it, to recognise their sin, to see their desperate need for a saviour and to bow their knee to Christ as that Saviour and their Lord? We need to remember the gospel we've received and hold fast to it, to rediscover the joy of it and the urgency of it. The desperate need to make Christ known in a world that is heading to hell without him. So remember.

But more than that, here's the uncomfortable part. Repent. You may say, Look, I feel demoralised. My church is exhausted. There aren't many of us left. We feel disillusioned and and you're telling us to repent. And yet that is the call to the church in Sardis. There are many reasons for the church decline all around us, and some of them are outside the church and way beyond our control. And yet in Sardis, and I suspect for us, some of the reasons for the weak spiritual state of the church are in here, in our own hearts, in our own churches.

Do we need to repent of our coldness at times to those around us who are without Christ for our lack of prayerfulness, for our compromise with the world?

So remember, repent. And then lastly, return. Return to old habits. Habits of worship and God's word and witness and work. You get the sense, don't you, that the church in Sardis had fallen from where it once was, that the people there need to rediscover both the gospel and their response to the gospel that they had at first.

So what habits do we need to recover to see the spiritual renewal of our hearts and the revitalisation of our churches? Well, it strikes me, especially in this post-pandemic era, although in truth, these things may have been neglected long before that, it strikes me that we need to discover or rediscover those simple Christian disciplines of worship, being together as God's people as an absolute priority for his worship, his praise, the encouragement of his people, worship.

But also word. His word, the Bible. What place does it have in our lives? And then witness. Are we shining brightly and sharing the gospel in deed and in word to those around us?

Finally work. How are we responding to the gospel? Having God's priorities as our priorities. So, strengthen what remains. Let's recover these habits of worship, word, witness and work.

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