

The letters to the seven churches, set out for us in chapters 2 and 3 of the book of Revelation. Five of the seven churches are condemned with withering words about complacency, lack of faith and immorality, but two, Philadelphia and today's letter, to the church in Smyrna, receive no condemnation, but only praise. Does it matter that the bible contains these letters to seven churches, in seven places we have barely heard of, never mind, knowing where they are? Does this not simply emphasise the bible as an irrelevant document of only vague historic interest? On the contrary, if we believe that the Lord our God is speaking, then by understanding what he is saying to the church in Smyrna, then we can also hear what he is saying to the church in Chineham, in Oxford, in England, in today's world. And the words that Christ speaks are remarkably resistant to the passage of time. It is all too easy and too simple to maintain that words which condemn a lukewarm faith, or a loss of love for Christ, or a reputation for deadness, or for immorality, apply not to us, but only to others. But there is also encouragement for us and our faith and words which help us in our daily struggle and daily life, which contain promises from God, models to follow and hope for the future. So we find with the letter to the church in Smyrna, in Revelation 2:8-11.

These verses should encourage us in our faithfulness, though they also expose much of our discipleship, including my own, as weak and complacent. In these verses we are first given assurance of who it is who speaks (v8), then follow two encouragements, two patterns really of true discipleship (v9), then three reasons not to be afraid of impending suffering and persecution (v10) and finally, in v11, the ultimate promise is given to the church, the promise of eternal life that can only come about because we have first been assured of who it is who speaks. So we will learn about what it really means to be faithful in all things and why we should be bothered. Of course, in our modern world, everything is of the immediate and little is offered whether by politicians, church leaders, media or even retailers that is of lasting value; here we will hear words of eternity, for today but also for tomorrow. Here we will hear words of true worth, worth giving our lives for, why, because as we will see in a moment, we can have confidence in who speaks and utters these words to us today as much as to the ancient city of Smyrna; the speaker is none other than God himself, through Christ. How wonderful it is to know that God speaks! Those, even in the church, who set aside Scripture as irrelevant, have failed to understand that God has spoken, made himself known to us, bringing meaning and purpose and truth to our faith and our lives.

So, then, let's start with the identity of the speaker, or writer of this letter. The characteristics of the speaker are set out in v8. We are told that he is 'the First and the Last,' and we are also told that that he is the one 'who died and came to life again.' This first of all has resonances of Revelation chapter 1, v17-18. Here John, who received the revelation, is in a trance and has a vision of this glorious figure, with eyes like blazing fire and John falls at his feet. This figure in the vision then said, 'Do not be afraid, I am the First and the Last, I am the living one.' Indeed this figure is then described as holding the keys of death. We are to be left in no illusion that this figure is Jesus Christ coming in judgement. Indeed in v8 of chapter 1, the phrase is present again, in different form, 'I am the Alpha and the Omega,' first and last letters of the Greek alphabet, and John has already declared that this book, chapter 1, verse 1, is the revelation of Jesus Christ. What we have here is divine self-identification, in a series of statements and affirmations of divine sovereignty and existence. Why is this identity important? Because it establishes the divine authority of the words that follow. First and Last, Alpha and Omega - in other words the one whose rule and command covers everything. The deity and sovereignty of this figure is further confirmed in v8 of chapter 2, with the statement, 'who died and rose again,' expanding the description back in chapter 1 as 'the Living One.' If he is living he is not dead, and so our expanded statement, the one who died and rose again. Now I may be a bit thick, I might be missing something here, but seems to me to be unassailable, that the deliverer of this message is God himself in Jesus Christ. It is Christ and him alone who holds the keys to life and death. He has tasted death and conquered, he offers life to each of us. So, we should sit up and take heed. If the message that follows is from Christ himself then who are we to discard it? Whether you are a Bishop, a Prime Minister, a head of a theological college, any follower of Jesus, if he speaks, we cannot ignore and if we do we will be held to account. So, then we have, first of all, the assurance of who it is who speaks to us.

Then we find in v10 two encouragements to this church in Smyrna, which act as patters for us of a life of discipleship. The first is the statement that despite their material poverty and suffering, they are rich in blessing from God - 'I know your afflictions and your poverty - yet you are rich.' This is a profound Christian truth, not that material riches are wrong or to be despised, but rather that true riches come from relationship with God, true riches are spiritual and not material, and what is more, it is very often when we suffer most, or are worst off materially that we experience the richest level of God's blessing. There is so much depth in this truth. First, the real encouragement that whatever hardship we face or suffer, our heavenly Father knows - 'I know your afflictions...', he cares and through them he will bless. We are to trust in Christ alone. Second, reaffirming that from suffering and persecution often flows blessing. We see that with the growth of the church in Acts under persecution, we see it on a more personal level with the apostle Paul - summarised in 2 Corinthians 12:8 - 'my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' We may yet be tested, here in this country. But remember that through suffering and persecution, God pours out his blessings.