

I was talking to a friend the other day and he mentioned that his son had a problem in his house. His neighbour had been having trouble with rats and so put down some poison and one of the rats, having eaten the poison, had crawled under the lounge floor of my friend's son's house and died. They first noticed it of course by the smell. However it wasn't clear exactly where under the floor the rat was and it would have been difficult and very expensive to rip up the whole floor. He said the smell was appalling. It was so bad that to begin with they had to stop using the room, then the downstairs and then there was the threat that they would have to leave the house completely. Eventually an expert arrived and somehow located the spot and the rat was removed and the house restored.

I tell the story because I think it helps us find our way into the next in our series as we look at the letters to the seven churches in Asia from Revelation.

Already we have seen Ephesus, a church that had lost its first love, Smyrna a faithful church and Pergamum a church that had abandoned the truth. Today we come to Thyatira and a situation where, through one woman, referred to as Jezebel, and her teaching, evil has been brought into the church, which has affected many in the church so it was no longer what it should be. So Jesus, the expert as Lord over the church, called them as it were to rip up the floorboards to get rid of the rat.

Well let's look at the passage - can you open your Bibles if you haven't. It is important that we see it for ourselves from the word of God.

### **First of all Jesus commends this church,**

v19 we see five points of commendation, can you see them in that verse, "I know your deeds, your *love* and *faith*, your *service* and *perseverance*." There are four very commendable aspects of the life of the church in Thyatira and there's more for Jesus goes on, "and that you are now doing more than you did at first." It was making progress, going forward. However, as we have become aware over these weeks, there are only two of these seven churches that Jesus doesn't speak a warning to and Thyatira is not one of those two.

### **Secondly the rebuke**

it is all there in v20, "Nevertheless, I have this against you: You tolerate that woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess. By her teaching she misleads my servants into sexual immorality and the eating of food sacrificed to idols."

OK if you are in any doubt here is the rat under the floorboards of the church in Thyatira!

### **Who was this woman?**

Jezebel may not have been her real name but more a reference back to Jezebel in the OT who undermined the people of God by establishing idolatry and that led to sexual immorality. We see something of the same here.

### **How could she affect the church?**

Well read the words carefully, "she calls herself a prophetess." She was self appointed as God's spokesman. That may have been impressive as she spoke and claimed it was from God. Further she was clearly suggesting she could lead people into a deeper understanding of God, but it was not of God but of the devil as we see from v24 Jesus described it as satanic.

It always impresses church members when someone claims to have a hotline to God but it is dangerous. It was here and it has been down the ages. Many times people have come to me and said "God has told me..." and the only way we can deal with that is to take it back to the Bible and see if it is true and even if it seems to be it may still not be what God is saying at that point in time and in that situation. This is why it is so important that we open God's word and we sit together under it and listen to God through his word and then seek to apply it either to our church or to ourselves making sure we are hearing God and not Ian Bentley or Gordon Randall.

### **What effect did she have on the church?**

Well the fact that she was not from God was shown by the effect. Her teaching was misleading the church and the result was that some members of the church were indulging in immorality and idolatry. You don't have to have been to theological college to realise those are not the signs of a godly teacher.

Thyatira was a centre for manufacturing and marketing. Trades' guilds were very strong and it is possible that in order to get or keep a job you had to belong to the trades' guild and that might have involved meals where food that had been sacrificed to an idol was eaten and where sexual immorality was rife. It's possible that this woman was teaching that if the heart was pure then what the body did was unimportant. She was teaching them to fit in with the world around them and not to worry about it.

Impurity was being brought into the church because it had been misled by wrong teaching from a woman whom they tolerated.

The rat had spread its odour through that church in Thyatira and Jezebel and her teaching was that rat.

her teaching had misled the church and toleration of that false teaching had led to an immoral and idolatrous church.

That was the problem in that church.

To change the metaphor, the church might be seen as like a boat. When it is tied to the mooring of the word of God it is secure and it fulfils its function as the church of God. But loosed from the mooring of the Bible it drifts and inevitably that drift leads it away from the will of God and opens doors to unchristian actions. It is only God's word that leads us God's way. Move away from the word of God

and our faith becomes a shipwreck.

However when the church of Jesus Christ loses its moorings then its Lord acts to bring it back and here we see that in

### **Thirdly the action of Jesus.**

Jesus was already taking action v21, he had called on this woman to repent but found her unwilling. So v22 he was about to cause her, and those who followed her, suffering and even v23 death. It may seem harsh but this was serious. Jesus was going to make an example out of her to encourage others to repent and that was what he wanted v22b "unless they repent of their ways." The application to the church in Thyatira was

#### **repent or die.**

As I say that may seem harsh but sin in the church has to be dealt with. Jesus recognised sin in the church and wanted it removed. The rat has got to be extricated from under the floorboards. So he called the church in Thyatira to repent, But of what?

Actually not of the immorality or idolatry but of accepting false teaching. That was the root of their problems. The root of their problems was accepting wrong teaching. Get the teaching right and they may well live right. The action needed in the church in Thyatira was to recognise the false teaching and stop tolerating it.

Don't tolerate false teaching.

This it seems to me is the message to the church in every age and in every place and so it is the message to us today.

Friends this is not an easy message for many reasons.

1. False teachers such as Jezebel are often very nice people who are plausible and what they say may seem OK
2. We may not ourselves have a great command of the Bible to see where the fault lines are in someone's thinking
3. We are told in Scripture not to judge others and so are hesitant to suggest someone is teaching falsehood
4. We don't like controversy and would rather just go along with things
5. We have a natural inclination to accept what is told us by those in authority.

I'm with you on all these things however over the years I have found myself in the very uncomfortable position of challenging Bishops and other clergy where I have felt their teaching has been inconsistent with Scripture because as we have seen that sets the church free from its moorings and results in disaster for the church.

Recently a Bishop when asked a question about the Bible said this, ""For Christians 'the word of God' is the life of Jesus. The Bible is the product of those who sought to understand the life of Jesus."

This does two things it drives a wedge between Jesus and his word and it makes the Bible the result of human thinking and therefore open to change and adaptation by humans. In other words it free us from the mooring of the Bible as our authority and therefore in the church we do what we think Jesus might want and our sinful human minds inevitably lead us astray.

Such thinking has to be countered and rejected, not for the sake of point scoring but for the sake of the church.

But also in our own church here we cannot be complacent and should never tolerate teaching which is not Biblical and which leads to immorality or idolatry, in what ever form that idolatry might be.

What Jesus was calling on that church to do was listen to what was being taught, to test it against the teaching of the Apostles and to reject what was wrong.

He would say the same to us today, listen to whoever teaches from here and test it against the Scriptures and yes reject what is not true.

Also in the wider context as we hear church leaders speak we need to be willing to do the same. Don't tolerate false teaching

I know that this is all negative. However, Jesus went further and stressed the positive and he spoke

### **Fourthly a message to true disciples**

As we look at v24 we see that the odour of the rat had not reached some rooms. Some people were not affected and the message to them was clear, v25, "Only hold on to what you have until I come." What they had was the apostles teaching and they were to stay true to that until the return of Jesus. Don't be drawn away by these "deep secrets" simply hold to what they had learnt.

Jesus encouraged them to build their lives on the rock of the word of God.

God wants us to live holy lives that please him but we will only do it if we take seriously the word of God both as the foundation for our life as a church and as individuals. As Paul wrote to Timothy, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness." (2 Tim 3:16)

That was the only expectation Jesus had of them and has of us, that we are true in heart and live according to the word of God as we have it in the Bible. I'm never happy when the application of a sermon is "read your Bible". I think it is a bit too trite and simplistic but

here that is what Jesus is saying. But not just read it but hold its truth in your heart and live it 24/7. Live it Christ Church Chineham. Live it Ian Bentley.

Hold on to the truth. It will protect them against the stench from the rat and more will allow them to live as God's holy people. That is it for us. God's word is our lifeline. That is why this letter is relevant to us today because it is the word of God we see that as we look at the one who spoke it v18, "These are the words of the Son of God". That is not there just as an introduction but along with the rest of the verse to establish the nature of the one who is speaking and why they and now we should listen. These are the words of the one who knows, who sees and understands us and speaks to us where we are. So v29 "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." It is clear that actually they were not listening for the church there died. Are we as a church and as individuals listening. It is essential that the word of God continues at the centre of what we are doing, that it is read and taught when we meet, that we are checking the whole of our church life against it and as individuals we are seeking to live our own lives according to the word of God. Is that where we are at? In our church meetings, in our groups in our homes is the word of God central so we are listening to God or has it been sidelined so we listen to some other voice?

### **Fifthly the promise of Jesus**

As in the other letters Jesus made promises to those who remained faithful and true. Here in v26, "To him who overcomes and does my will to the end, I will give authority over the nations." I wonder how we view the church in our world today? Many see it as irrelevant. It is weak. It has little voice or power. The real movers and shakers in the world by and large ignore it. But here Jesus as in so many ways turns things upside down. He speaks to John, who was a Christian in exile, a message to a small struggling church that often faced persecution and said "I will give you authority over the nations." Again it stems from who Jesus is. As he ascended he said "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me." He is the Lord and rules over all creation and his church will share in that rule. They will share in the victory of Christ and in his perfect rule when he returns. Also he will give to them the morning star which, as we see from 22:16 is Jesus himself. The faithful enjoy the presence of Jesus and share in the growing of his kingdom until that day when we rule with him in eternity.

So here is God's word to this church in Thyatira. It has been misled by the teaching of this woman known as Jezebel and loosed from its moorings of the apostles teaching was stuck on the rocks of immorality and idolatry. The dead rat was in the church and it stank.

The message of Jesus was clear don't tolerate this teaching. Turn away from the false and hold to the true. The same message is to us. Don't let's get complacent saying we have good and Biblical teaching let's make sure we are alive to the issue and let's make sure we do hold on to what we have to the apostles teaching and live it out as a church and in our own lives.