

It had not been a good day for Hermestus. From the moment his wife had kicked him out of bed to go to work it had not been good. As he walked through the dusty streets of Philadelphia on his way to his job in the vineyard he thought he felt movement under his feet. He, like the rest of the town, worried about earthquakes. The town had been devastated by them in the past and now they were living on borrowed time. Work was dull and made worse by the continual sniping of some of his colleagues. Always going on about "and how is Jesus today" and enjoying their own private jokes at his expense. He felt ostracised and shut out. Most of his colleagues belonged to the synagogue in the middle of town and he didn't. So he was a bit of an outsider. Work over he made his way home. His route took him by the temple of Dionysus and he could see people going in. The noise and the buzz made him envious. After all the church he belonged to was small, not many people went there. As he walked on he thought about it all. He'd learnt his faith from his parents but sometimes he wondered. He wanted to be accepted and part of the in group at work but his faith got in the way. He wanted the buzz and excitement of the big crowd like in the temple to Dionysus. He sometimes wondered whether he wanted to continue following Jesus.

As I tell that story perhaps some of us can identify with parts of it. Perhaps we feel shut out in certain situations because of our faith by those who are not Christians or even sometimes other Christians. We may even be worried by the world in which we live, perhaps not by the threat of earthquakes but just the nature of the world, the threat of global warming and wars in different parts of the world. Perhaps we have seen the crowds at certain temples be it Festival Place, Old Trafford, the Leisure centre, the Vue and wanted to be in those crowds rather than in the smaller situation here at Christ Church and perhaps on difficult days have wondered about continuing to follow Jesus. Are we really on the right path and, in the light of all these things, are we wanting to continue. Hermestus wasn't sure and perhaps some of us are not.

All this, I hope will help us as we look at the sixth of these seven letters to the churches in Asia. This is the letter to the church in Philadelphia.

As we look at the passage we can see that

- V8 it wasn't a strong church
- V9 it faced opposition from the Jewish group in the town and from other factors we know about
- There were many temples in the town not least that to Dionysus and
- the town was subject to earthquakes, had been severely affected by a major earthquake in AD17 and so lacked a sense of security.

It was into this situation that Jesus, Son of God and Lord of the church spoke to the small group of Christians and through them to us in Christ Church today.

His message was one of assurance and encouragement, which I think fits us today as we share with Mark Andrews in his baptism. I want to distil three things from the passage that I feel was the essential message to that church.

### 1. The right crowd

It seems likely that these Christians were being told by some of the Jews that following Jesus was not the right way. However, Jesus said to them was that they actually belonged to the right crowd. Look at v7&8, "These are the words of him who is holy and true, who holds the key of David. What he opens no one can shut, and what he shuts no one can open. I know your deeds. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut."

Basically what Jesus was saying, using a reference back to Isaiah 22, was that he was the one who holds the key, that is the authority. More, he has opened a way into heaven and no one can shut that way nor can they open up any other way than Jesus. They were right to follow him!

Jesus had opened to them a way into heaven. As he said in John 10:7 "'I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep" and he went on, "I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture."

This is what Jesus was saying to these Christians in the little church in Philadelphia. They may find themselves shut out in many ways but heaven had been opened to them and no one could deny them that. That is there in v8 when Jesus said "I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut." I know people have seen this as perhaps relating to opportunities to share the gospel, in line with Paul's use of "open door" in Col 4:3, but I think in the context here it can only mean that Jesus was assuring them that in him they were certain of heaven and should not allow anyone else to disqualify them. Indeed, as we see at the end of v9, ultimately they will be made to accept that this small Christian band was indeed the people of God.

Friends I know how hard it is for some of you to be Christians at work. I'm aware that to be known as a Christian can give you a label you don't want and even mean that you are in a way ostracised. The same can happen at school. The rejection and being shut out can be hard but we need to hear the words of Jesus and recognise that if we are following him then we are in the right crowd and no matter what heaven is open to us both now as we come to God in prayer and at the end.

So Mark you have joined the right crowd. Ramsdell cricket team may be a nice bunch of guys and following Arsenal may be glamorous but coming to faith in Jesus means for you and for all who come to him that the way to heaven is opened and no one can shut that door!

### 2. The keeping power

These Christians felt weak not just in the face of the people around them but also within the world in which they lived. There was this constant threat of earthquakes but as we see from v10 worse lay ahead, "Since you have kept my command to endure patiently, I will

also keep you from the hour of trial that is going to come upon the whole world to test those who live on the earth."

What exactly the hour of trial would be is not clear. But, clearly, it would be a time of testing and trouble for the whole world and while the Christians would have to go through it God would keep and preserve them in it. Again that is not to say there would not be suffering and even martyrs but that God would keep them through it into eternity.

This is the confidence Paul wrote of to the Philippians, "being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Phil1:6)

Here is the certainty - not just the hope that they might go to heaven but that God would keep them to the end. It is confidence in the practical presence of God. The image is that of a parent taking the hand of an anxious child and that acting to reassure the child as it goes into uncertain territory.

There is no doubt that for us today life may be tough. We may lack security, perhaps not in terms of being worried by earthquakes but perhaps with global warming. In the current economic climate we may be concerned about jobs or our mortgage. Or we may be concerned about our health or overwhelmed by the failure of a relationship or the loss of a loved one. Such things can be mini-earthquakes in our lives and can upset our relationship with God. But in these situations as in every situation God is able to keep us now and into eternity.

As we take each step along the journey we put our hand in the hand of God.

### **3. The real glory**

As these Christians looked round be it at the confidence of the Jewish group or the glamour of the other religions or whatever and felt unsettled. They felt grey in comparison with the yellows, red's and golds of others. But Jesus assures them that theirs is the true glory and as he does so encourages them to hold on. So v11, "I am coming soon. Hold on to what you have, so that no one will take your crown." They will one day reign with him in heaven. The glory awaits and Jesus encourages them to hold on, which here as in 2:25 and 3:3 refers to the apostles teaching. Hold on to the truth even though the way is rough and to them will be given the victors crown.

Here is God's word to us today and to you Mark at this special point in your walk with Jesus and it is hold on even when it gets a bit bumpy.

I don't know whether you know Dawlish in South Devon. We used to go there a lot as children and later I spent a number of summers there working with the guys who owned the boats. I remember one day it was too rough to let out boats and one of the men said did I fancy a trip down to check some nets he had. So we set off in a small fibre glass boat with an outboard on the back. Up and down over the waves with plenty coming in. I didn't need to be told to hold on - I was. True I trusted the man I was with - at least I think I did - but I kept looking longingly at the shore wanting to get there.

That is the picture here for Hermestus and his friends and is often the picture for us - a bumpy journey where we may be trusting God to keep us but we are longing for some calmer waters and our final destination.

Jesus was saying his way leads to glory though at times the way may be rough. Hold on for what you have is far more precious than anything else this world can offer.

Hold on and the promise is the crown of life.

That wasn't the only promise for in v12 they are promised they will be pillars in the temple of God that is they will have a permanent place in God's kingdom, which to people living in a fragile world was important. More than that they would have a new name in fact three new names as we look at v12 of God, of the new Jerusalem, and of Jesus, that is they belong to God, have a place in his kingdom and a special relationship with Jesus. Theirs was and would be the glory because they were the true children of God.

For Hermestus and his friends there wasn't much glory following Jesus and for you and I it may be the same. We may find our life as a Christian hard. We may find people shutting us out because we follow Christ. We may worry about our world and we may think that perhaps the grass is a bit greener and more lush for those who don't follow Jesus. But God spoke and said hold on because the door is open to you and one day that crown will be yours.

But note this was written to a church, Hermestus wasn't on his own. Small as that church may have been there were others and small as we may be there are a number of us and we are to encourage each other so that we do hold on to the truth and do remain faithful to Jesus. That is part of the importance of Sunday and coming together, of the homegroups and meeting up in smaller units, of prayer partnerships or triplets. We are not in this on our own we walk the way of Christ together and we encourage each other.

So later on we will leave this place and go back into a world where at time we may feel shut out, a world that may worry and even frighten us and a world that has so many attractions that might lead us away from Jesus. As we do so his word to us is hold on and finally the crown will be ours.