

A Warning Message

Sunday Morning # 47

WHAT has been written is for "our learning," so Paul says, and so the Scriptures themselves show. They are "profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction in righteousness." This we find to be true. But specially profitable in those respects are the messages of the Lord Jesus to the ecclesias flourishing in the days when John was an exile in Patmos. Though sent to seven in particular, it is evident they were intended for all, from the conclusion of each message -- "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches [ecclesia]." And what was intended for all the ecclesias in A.D. 96 must be found to contain some instruction for those existing A.D. 1873. The seven were doubtless chosen as representing seven different conditions, comprising all the states in which an ecclesia could be recognized to exist, and, therefore, affording occasion for advice applicable to every age and every state.

Sardis is particularly before us in the chapter read. The One Body in the city receives first this solemn assurance: "I KNOW THY WORKS." Here, at once, is matter for wholesome reflection. Jesus, our High Priest now, and Judge to be, is not one who depends for knowledge on what he may see and hear as man sees and hears. He requires not to be told how it is with us -- he knows: he did this even in the days of his flesh, as it is written (John 2:25), "He needed not that any should testify of man, for he knew what was in man." He knows now as he knew then; he knew in his spirit (Mark 2:8) what was passing in the thoughts of the Pharisees. He is now the Lord THE SPIRIT, without a flesh veil. When he speaks, it is what the Spirit saith unto the churches [ecclesias]. He designs that all the churches [ecclesias] should know this. His words are, "All the churches [ecclesias] shall know I am he that searcheth the reins and hearts." We are no less known of Christ than we are known of the Father; he is the Father in manifestation. All things are naked and open to the eyes of him with whom we have to do. We have to do with the Lamb with seven horns and SEVEN EYES: omniscience incarnate, great but glorious mystery; none the less credible that we cannot understand it.

Jesus, then, could say to every ecclesia, "I know thy works." This is a comfort to all who are labouring with an eye to him, and a terror to such as seek only to make a fair show in the eyes of men and brethren; because Christ not only knows the real state of all cases, but in due time he will declare it. There is a day appointed when he will "bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and make manifest the counsels of the heart" (1 Cor 4:5). In that day will be fulfilled the promise made to such in Sardis as should overcome: "I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels." This promise is to all who overcome, not only in Sardis, but everywhere else. The honour of such a confession can scarcely be appreciated now. It will be seen and felt by all then, and by none more than by those who make light of it at present, as a thing not to be taken practically into account; they will, when too late, curse the infatuation that shall have cheated them of the unspeakable honour of favourable mention by the King of Glory in the audience of the Eternal One, and an angelic and all-powerful assembly of immortals.

But what did Jesus know of the Sardian ecclesia? "Thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead." Here sad thoughts arise; for if in the days of the beloved disciple -- the gifts of the Spirit still flourishing -- an ecclesia, could be dead, what may we not fear in the nineteenth century, so far removed from the apostolic fountain of the Gospel? Sardis had "a name to

live": the ecclesia would appear from this to have been in good repute among the brethren -- known and spoken about as a thriving, healthy, model ecclesia, probably because the brethren would be energetic and friendly. Yet, by infallible Wisdom, they were pronounced "dead." This suggests the wonder what the Lord's verdict would be were he to speak his mind about the ecclesias of our day. What would he say of Birmingham? We have a name to live. We are spoken well of by brethren here and there in the country as a lively thriving ecclesia. But what is the fact as discerned by the eyes of Omniscience? Well, we cannot have the answer now. We must examine our own selves. What is the criterion of "life" in the case? Is it well-attended meetings? Not necessarily. Well-attended meetings are so far a good sign; but people may come to meetings from various causes apart from spiritual life. To come to the meeting is a pleasant variation from the monotony of home; it is an agreeable stimulus to the sociable faculties; it is possibly an entertainment in some senses. Well-filled benches do not necessarily indicate a spiritually-sound condition, though it is good to see the benches well filled, especially at the appointed hour.

Is great animation and friendliness among the brethren a sign that we are not of those who have "a name to live and are dead"? Not necessarily: friendliness as such is instinctive with those who have what the phrenologists call "adhesiveness" largely developed. A man with a good stock of animal vitality and a large social brain, may be demonstratively friendly without a particle of spiritual life. As sister Lasius said in her recent article on "Union and Unity," that "spiritual life does not always flourish accompanied with a high degree of animal spirits." We are not therefore, to flatter ourselves that because we shake hands and smile and enquire cordially concerning each other's welfare, we are full of spiritual life. God forbid that I should seek to lessen our cordiality in this sense. Rather let us seek to excel in this as in every other excellence. Still, let us not mistake the manifestation of what may be but natural friendliness for that state of mind that the Lord would pronounce "life" as opposed to the death that reigned in Sardis.

Are we to find it in doctrinarian zeal and proneness to controversy in defence of the faith once for all delivered to the saints? Not necessarily. No ecclesia is in a state of spiritual life that gives place to error, or lacks courage and enterprise in that contention for the faith which is prescribed: but it is possible to argue from pugnacity and to delight in the polemics of the truth while in the very depths of spiritual death.

Where then are we to look for the indications of the real state of the ecclesia? The answer is, on the individual lives of the brethren and sisters. Let us follow them in their dispersion during the week, and ask how they act when thrown upon their own resources. What do they do with their leisure time and their surplus money? How do they transact their business or do their work? Do they continue instant in prayer, abounding therein with thanksgiving? Are they ready to every good work? Are they merciful to the poor and the penitent? Are they men of truth and honour? Have they the fear of God before their eyes? Are the commandments a law with them which they fear to break? Do they keep their promises, and are they punctual to their engagements? Are they bold to confess Christ before men, and forward to say "come" to those whom God may bring within their reach?

Or, instead of being servants of Christ, are they servants of themselves, - having a name to live, and are dead? Do they work only that their business may prosper and their private resources increase? Do they think only of their houses and their families? Do their sympathies never go beyond their own door? Does the Word of God go neglected in their houses while they bestow all their energies on business or work, or friends or family, or

pleasure? Do they never practise thanksgiving? Do they cast prayer behind their back? Do they never put their hand to disinterested work -- work for the good of others or pleasing of God? Do they do as other people do in business, acting as if they had no Master in heaven who will bring them to account? Are they destitute of faith absorbed with the question, "What shall we eat, what shall we drink? Is their enthusiasm dead to everything but questions of personal advantage? Have they no likeness to Christ, who came not to be ministered unto but to minister? Do they show no likeness to the Elder Brother, whose meat was to do the will of the Father? Do they, unlike him, resist evil, resent injuries, go to law, and take part in the world's politics and social devices? Do they never realize that they are strangers and pilgrims, and stewards of the goodness of God, and that that stewardship relates to their private selves and their private affairs? And that if they are not found faithful in these "least" things, they will not be accounted worthy of that calling with which they have been called?

These are some of the questions that would determine whereabouts an ecclesia stands in the matter of having a name to live and being dead. Let us try ourselves by them. They constitute the measure by which the Lord will measure the work of every man when the day of decision comes. If we apply it now, our work will have the better chance of passing then. If we find the work short, let us seek to rectify it. The message to Sardis gives good encouragement in this direction: "Be watchful, and strengthen the things that remain, that are ready to die." Christ is not an austere and unjust judge. Like the Father, with whom he is one, he is long-suffering and slow to anger. He is patient with the erring, and gives them "space to repent," and exhortation too. His relation to us all may be taken as illustrated in his own parable of the fig tree (Luke 13:6). Three years the proprietor of the vineyard sought fruit on it, and then gave orders that it should be cut down as a cumberer of the ground. The dresser of the vineyard said. "Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: and if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down." A fair chance for every fig tree! Let us look round and be watchful, and strengthen the things that remain. This is Christ's exhortation to every one that "hath an ear to bear." If any have lost their first ardour, or been entangled in sin, or have been discouraged by the evil of the times, let them take heart again at the comforting counsel of the Lord. "Be watchful, and strengthen the things that remain, that are ready to die." It may be that the "things that remain" will take root again and recover the life that is ready to die. What even if that is applicable to us that he says to Sardis: "I have not found thy works perfect before God"; let us listen again: "Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent." This is the Spirit's counsel, and it is for "him that hath ears to hear." There is no good to be done by giving in to failure. Some fall and incline to lie where they fall. This is a mistake. Let them get up and try again. We do not stand where Adam stood. One offence brought ruin on him; he had no High Priest; we have, and we are invited to make confession of our failures and trespasses and try again. Obtaining forgiveness, we are to "hold fast and repent," not losing hope, yet putting ourselves on a strict guard, for, with this, Christ is well pleased. If, on the contrary, we abandon hope and give ourselves up to the world, we seal our own doom; for hear what was said to Sardis: "If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee"; that is, Christ, working in what are called the ways of Providence, would invisibly compass their destruction, if they did not take up that position of anxious vigilance which the situation, in all respects, called for. He would cut down the barren fig tree. This is a lesson to us. If we diligently and anxiously improve our standing in the things of the Spirit, "doing justly, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God," we shall be assisted from behind the veil in ways not visible to man. Blessing will attend us in our spiritual concerns, even though it take the shape sometimes of chastening evil; all things will work together for good. But if we are like Sardis, and desert our watchfulness, and become

enamoured of ourselves and our doings, and forgetful of the spirit of the calling, which is a spirit of gratitude and humility before God, they will work against us spiritually, and work out our destruction. This is true of individuals and communities bearing the name of Christ. The seven messages show it. Wisdom quickly points the lesson.

"Thou hast a few names even in Sardis that have not defiled their garments." The ecclesia in Sardis was, probably, a large community, and each member in it would be satisfied with his membership, as giving him a good standing in Christ; yet here is the Lord's declaration that only a few among them were well pleasing to him. If it was so with Sardis, may it not be so with us? Undoubtedly it may, and probably is so. Let us realize the idea, and ask ourselves, what class of believers is he pleased with? In Sardis, it was those who had not defiled their garments. In Birmingham it will be no different. This is, of course, the language of figure, but the figure is plain. Garment, as a figure, represents character. To keep ourselves unspotted from the world is to keep our garments clean. Fine linen, clean and white, is the righteousness of saints (Rev. 19:8). Those in Sardis, who were pronounced "worthy," were those who walked in the truth, filled with it, governed by it, conformed to it in their entire "walk and conversation"; men who walked with God, not living to themselves, but to him who died for them - passing the time of their sojourning in fear, in the world but not of it, having here no continuing city, but looking for one to come. Those in every place who belong to this Sardian "few" will join them in the great day of muster, and walk with them in white, for "he that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment" -- the symbol of the new and clean nature imparted to all who are made the subject of the promised transformation by the Spirit. If some from Birmingham are found in the company it will be because they have made the word their portion, and imitated the few in Sardis, in keeping clean their garments from the surrounding pollution. God grant there may be many such from all parts of the country. Let us be watchful and strengthen the things that remain.