

“Do Not Fear What You Are About to Suffer”

In the name of the first and the last, who died and came to life, dear friends in Christ: last week when we began these meditations on the letters of the Lord Jesus to the seven churches of Revelation, we saw that they contain words of encouragement and also of rebuke that have direct application to all Christian churches today. We heard about the church at Ephesus, and how the Lord said that they were in danger of losing their first love – that they had fallen into attitudes of legalism that threatened to destroy their faith in the Gospel message; and that how they should repent, and return to their original understanding of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in the sacrificial death of Jesus for our sin. That truth must remain the first and foremost love of the church for from it flows our love for one another.

Tonight we’ve come to the letter to church at Smyrna, a city located about 35 miles northwest of Ephesus. The name “Smyrna” means “myrrh”, which is a costly aromatic resin used make perfumes and lotions. It was one of the gifts presented to the infant Jesus by the Magi. It was used especially in preparing bodies for burial. The shrubby trees from which myrrh is taken were found in abundance around the city – hence its name.

The first church there was probably planted by people evangelized and trained by St. Paul or St. John, and so it belonged to what might be called the second generation of churches – those not directly founded by an apostle of the Lord. And, to make things difficult, there were a couple of extraordinary circumstances in Smyrna that militated against the planting and growth of a church there. The first was that the city was an important center for the imperial cult of Rome. I don’t mean the worship of Roman gods like Jupiter, Mars, and Mercury; I mean the worship of the Roman *Emperors*. The Roman Senate had proclaimed Caesar Augustus a god after his death. They dedicated temples to him and decreed that sacrifices should be offered to him throughout the empire. They did the same with his successor, Tiberius. Augustus and Tiberius were the two Emperors who reigned during the life and ministry of Jesus. The next Emperor, Gaius (who was called Caligula), claimed to have become a god while still living among us mortals and demanded to be worshipped as such. The Roman Senate obliged. After that they got into the habit of making all their emperors gods while they lived.

Now, most places in the empire, folks were used to the idea of having lots of gods, so the addition of a few more was no big deal to them. When the Senate announced a new god in the person of the emperor (either living or dead), people throughout the empire did what was required to make their Roman conquerors happy. Anything less would have been viewed as treasonous. But some cities, *like Smyrna*, eager to show their enthusiastic support of Rome (and hoping to win points with their conquerors) would go all out. The Romans would sometimes grant special favors or privileges to a city, like a reduction in taxes, or, what was most coveted, the rights of Roman citizenship. In hope of securing such favors, some cities would really kiss up, so to speak. That’s what the citizens of Smyrna did. They built magnificent temples and performed lavish rituals to honor these so-called emperor gods in the hopes that the Romans would see their great devotion and reward them.

But, of course, the Christians refused to recognize or worship any god except the Lord. That refusal made others think of them as traitors. Add the fact that they were said to worship a man who had been condemned and crucified by the Romans for the crime of claiming to be a king in opposition to Caesar, and you can see how they were vulnerable to all kinds of

slandorous accusations. So, while Christians – even though they were good, law abiding citizens – were getting a bad name for failing to worship the emperor, the citizens of Smyrna thought they could earn extra points by persecuting these terrible outlaws. They thought the Romans would smile on them all the more when they saw how zealously they punished anyone who would dare insult their emperor god.

On top of this, there was in Smyrna a fairly large Jewish population. In the first century, the Jews, in general, hated Christ, the Gospel, and all Christians. They did everything they could to stamp them out. But outside of Judea, they usually didn't have a clout because they only made up a small percentage of the population. But in Smyrna, when the pagan citizens started persecuting the Christians, the Jews threw fuel on the fire by making outrageous accusations against them. Like everyone else, they denounced them for being disloyal to Rome for not worshipping the emperor, which was ironic because the Jews also refused to – the difference was that they had special permission dating back to the days of Augustus that allowed them to get away with it. But the Jews made other accusations. For example, because they heard that the Christians had a ritual in which they consumed the body and blood of the Lord, they spread the lie that Christians were cannibals, which made people hate and persecute them all the more.

So Smyrna was a very tough place to be a Christian. The followers of Christ were imprisoned. Their property was confiscated. At times they suffered attacks from angry mobs who beat them and destroyed their homes. When such attacks occurred, the faithful could get no help or protection from local authorities. When things were *really* bad, the Christians were tortured, torn by wild animals in the city stadium, and some were even nailed to posts, surrounded by piles of bundled sticks, and burned alive.

It's no wonder then that when the Lord Jesus dictates the letter to this beleaguered church, that he describes himself as the one who has overcome death. It's an important reminder to these hard-pressed people that before them, he too was maligned, arrested, beaten, made to suffer unjustly, and was tortured to death for the sake of the truth—*but that wasn't the end*. It was the path that led to life and eternal joy, not only for himself, but also for everyone who would place their hope and trust in him.

He tells these Christians, "I know your tribulations and poverty—*yet you are rich!*" No, certainly not rich in the eyes of the world, not with the sorts of things that people try to acquire to bring short-lived security and happiness in this life; but fabulously wealthy with the unseen lasting treasures given by the Holy Spirit: faith, forgiveness, eternal life, and the peace of God that passes all understanding. They had riches that would endure forever and that no one could take from them.

And then, in what is certainly the least severe word of rebuke contained in any of the seven letters, Jesus tells them, "Do not fear what you are about to suffer." He then foretells "ten days" of persecution that they will suffer at Satan's hands. And consistent with the apocalyptic nature of the Revelation, we need to understand that these ten days are symbolic: they are not ten *literal* days, but refer to an unspecified but relatively short period of intense affliction. The point is that the Lord himself has set its duration and determined its end. We find this is historically true: whenever and wherever the church has suffered periods of extreme persecution, they tend to be brief. And what's amazing is that it's usually the patient suffering and great faith shown by persecuted Christians that eventually leads their tormentors to stop their attacks. They begin to admire the calm acceptance and steadfastness displayed by faithful Christians when facing death and torture – some, even to the point of wanting to learn more

about a faith so strong that it could lead people to behave so. Before long the attackers stop; and we even find that the church often grows when it's under the most pressure. An early church father remarked that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church – which is all the more reason for us to heed the Lord's command not to fear – especially in times of persecution.

Fear, understand, is caused by lack of trust in God's promises. Fear is a symptom of unbelief. It comes by focusing on the present earthly danger or discomfort (the things that are seen and experienced) rather than looking at Christ and ahead to the glorious goal (the things that are unseen). Think of St. Peter walking on the water. He was fine as long as he looked at Jesus. He started to sink when he turned his attention to the wind and waves – that's when he began to doubt and fear. And it's in our fear that Satan finds one of his most powerful allies in his attack on the church of Jesus Christ.

First, because fear causes the church to surrender its clear confession of the truth. Faith, *true faith*, always leads to the *confession* of the faith, as we heard from St. Paul in 2 Corinthians: "I believed, and so I spoke." The same Spirit that creates faith in us also compels us to speak our faith. We want to announce it to the world. We want to share its life-giving message. But when fear enters in, we become afraid to speak. We become worried that the message might offend or cause confrontation or division, so fear silences the Gospel. Or in an effort to make the Gospel message more agreeable, fear may cause us to alter its message. It may cause us to eliminate the scandal of the cross, disavow the exclusivity of salvation in Christ alone, or allow for some measure of human merit in the plan of salvation. Whatever it is, the church stops proclaiming the whole truth – and if you're only feeding Christians part of the way, you're going to end up with underfed Christians who are ill equipped to face the foe.

Second, fear causes denial of the truth. Take St. Peter on the night of Jesus' arrest. Though he had shortly before sworn that he would gladly die beside his Lord, when put to the test, fear caused him to deny that he even knew Jesus.

Finally, fear can cause faith to be abandoned altogether. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus speaks of the grains that fell on rocky soil. The plants sprang up quickly, but when the heat of the day came, they withered and died. He explained that these represented those with shallow faith who, when persecution came, gave in to their fears and renounced the saving truth of the Gospel.

This is why Jesus tells the faithful at Smyrna not to fear what will come upon them, but instead to cling all the more to the faith in Christ that saves, continuing to speak it out clearly even in the face of Satan's attacks.

Now, perhaps it may seem that this admonition from the Lord, as important as it is, is far removed from us. Yes, the church is being persecuted in various parts of the world – and some Christians (especially in Muslim countries) are facing such things as forced conversion, loss of property, arrest, rape, and even murder. But there's nothing like that going on around here. No one is threatening to imprison us, or torture us, or put us to death. Agreed. But that's all the more reason to be ashamed that we too are subject to fear.

In our little Synod, like the church at Smyrna, we are not the biggest, not the richest, not the most popular church around. But we are rich: rich in the Gospel and God's truth – and often maligned by others who call themselves Christians precisely because we insist on sticking to the truth. But this runs us afoul of what might be thought of as the American civil religion. It's the idea that all religions are equal, and that all paths lead to heaven, and that no one group has

all the right answers. It's a cult of inclusion that is willing to mix and match statements of faith so that each person can have their own designer religion. It's what the pagans of our days believe, and they take offense when we refuse to confess the same thing. And here's the sad part: we are not faced with a tiny fraction of the peril faced by the Christians at Smyrna, but we often allow ourselves to be afraid of it. Though the worst thing that will happen is that they will call us "intolerant", "bigoted", or "arrogant", still we let these threats cause us to fear; fear that forces us into silence, compromise, denial, and for some, the forsaking of the faith altogether.

So, like the church at Smyrna, we will do well to listen to the Lord's warning not to fear. And when do we feel afraid, we need to recognize that it's Satan's ally in our midst, and repent of our lack of trust and turn again to him who said, "Don't fear, for I have overcome the world." If you are with him, the one who for us conquered death, there really is nothing that can harm you. Recognizing this, we will be encouraged all the more to speak the faith that we believe; and we, like the Christian congregation at Smyrna, will be a fragrant offering to the Lord.

Jesus said, "Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life." So may he give us his Holy Spirit to keep us both faithful and fearless. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!