

# Preaching Notes for Sunday

14 June 2020

## Introduction

I am going to share some observations and comments about this season and then I want to bring something I believe God is saying to us.

## Setting

Today is the first Sunday in Green Time. We have now travelled from Advent to Trinity which runs roughly from December to June.



These 6-7 months trace the story of Jesus as tuned to the seasons of the Northern Hemisphere.

But that arrangement doesn't seem in harmony this year. The summer growth season has come. My garden is flourishing but it does not feel like a green season for the church, both for us as Trinity Church and the global church.

After three months of living in versions of lockdown and not gathering together it feels more like a drought or a sustained desert-exile than as if we are now ready to grow in the full gospel of Christ and bear much fruit as church.

## My experience

In considering my own experience and reflecting on the comments of others there has been loss and strain.

Being cut off from life in the old normal with church in its gathered, socially-interactive mode is a desert experience. It's as if the heat is turned up while our social connectedness is turned down.

The impact of this on me had me thinking of the Bird Man of Alcatraz (1890-1963). He was a disturbed convicted criminal locked up in a high security island prison. In his solitude he developed a passion for birds and little by little his cell became an aviary to the point he became a well-respected ornithologist (*big word for someone who studies birds*)

Over the 3 months I found myself beginning to focus and attend much more to small details in my environment.

- I looked at the same plants every day – which is quite exciting in spring!
- I counted how many varieties of bee were active on various flowering plants.
- I measured the rainfall.
- I swept the paths and weeded more often.
- Once a week my lockdown housemate and I took the car and went to Praxis or a garden centre as if it were the weekly outing from a rest home or some sheltered institution.

Within all this I Zoomed, Skyped, FaceTimed, WhatsAppd and phoned with people near and far. I suspect others can relate to this with similar and different features? *Hit 'Reactions' if so?*

This pattern of life has had a spiritual effect through the last 3 months. The physical often leads the spiritual.

So last week I was sitting with this sense of loss, being heavily pruned, feeling all dressed up with no where to go.

For a while I have been wondering what God is doing and listening for his voice to reveal what I cannot see myself. I have been waiting for God's word to shine.

I have been wondering what I as pastor am meant to do in this season?  
How are we meant to be a non-gathered, screen-connected church in this semi-desert? What is mission now in this season?

I have this sense that there is going to be no simple return to how it all was. Christmas 2020 will not be like Christmas 2019. We are turning a corner that may not straighten out for a long time.

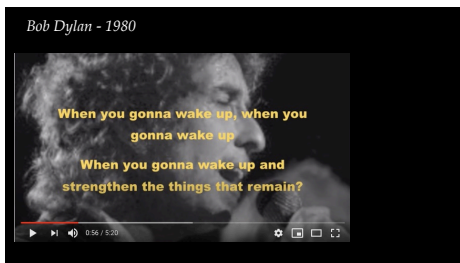
That's the background.

On Tuesday I was at my desk and I heard a verse from the Book of Revelation.  
Being surprised by scripture like this is one way I hear the Holy Spirit speaking to me.

**Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die,**

Revelation 3.2

This was not my own thinking but it spoke to my thinking.



In my ear I heard it being sung by Bob Dylan who about 1981 wrote a song featuring this verse.

In the way I learned and teach prophetic ministry I received and held that line as a raw revelation.  
It's how you might hold a diamond as found in the ground as a rough stone holding a precious gem?  
Raw revelation needs to be discerned and interpreted.

Wake up, and strengthen what  
remains and is about to die,

Revelation 3.2

**Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to  
die,**

Lord, what do I need to hear in this?  
What is your Spirit saying to the church?

If I were to interpret it in its context within the letter of Jesus to the Church at Sardis it would be a very hard, urgent message involving deep rebuke and calling for deep repentance. *See Revelation 3.1-6*

It is part of a message to a church that is described as seemingly lively but largely dead. The vocabulary of that verse is deeply connected to the history, economy and culture of Sardis.<sup>1</sup> After a study we could then discern whether the wider message of the letter to the Church in Sardis fits Trinity Church today?

That would be a process of biblical exposition which is more like what I usually do with some application attached.

But with this experience on Tuesday came a sense of the meaning that I will try to express:

We have lost a few precious features of church and the response we are being called to is to wake up and reinforce the things that remain, or everything will die.

It's as if the things we still have need strengthening and that is the way to secure our life. Restoring the things we have lost is not the way to secure our life. Strengthen what remains.

Now let me preach it:

It takes effort to wake up.

I have gotten to the point where my eyes take time to get going in the morning.

I need to wash my face with cold water. I need a coffee or two. I need to breathe cool air.

Then I am awake, alert and sharp as I will be that day.

Here is a question for 1Tim4Twelve: *Chat a reply if you can.*

**Q1...**Why would Jesus tell a church to wake up?

**A1...**Because it is asleep?

**Q2...**Why might a church be asleep?

**A2...**Various reasons are possible:

The reason I sense we might be asleep is because we rely on autopilot and have no need to worry about things so we doze and we cruise. Life is a regular rhythm of set activities with enough finance to make it all happen. That was the Church in Sardis which looked really successful but was actually sound asleep on life support and about to die.

**Q3...**How do you wake up spiritually?

**A3...**Getting spiritually focused which usually involves pain - what C.S. Lewis termed 'God's Megaphone'.

That is where our season of discomfort comes in. This time has been a bit difficult. The response of some people has been to get angry with their government and protest because pain and democracy don't fit easily together. I hear the Holy Spirit speaking a different message to the Church.

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<sup>1</sup> To learn more read sound commentary <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/revelation-3/>

## Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die,

Let

- the inconvenience,
- the experience of loss,
- the irritation,
- the annoyance,
- the disruption,
- and the loneliness

wake you up.

.....

- So we cannot gather?
- You cannot receive ministry on request?
- You long for Holy Communion?
- You miss being with brothers, sisters and friends in Christ?
- Sundays are not the same.

That is all loss and grief as we remain the church dispersed – which will not end soon.

**Q4** So what can you do?

**A4** Embrace the losses of the desert as an opportunity to strengthen what remains.

- Take time to seek God as God.
  - *There is a whole sermon series on the Reality of God with suggestions in sermon section of our church website.*
- Take time to fast with prayer.
  - Not because there is a problem but because you seek God's life and strength.
- Take time to confess your sins deeply rather than presume the grace of God or diminish responsibility.
  - Deal with what you might normally leave swept under the carpet.
- Take time to meet Jesus in the Gospels or hear the prophets of old speaking today.

This is like the strategy of someone who loses their eyesight.

Without sight we are wise to strengthen our audio perception, our smelling and our sense of touch.

It's the strategy of someone recovering from brain damage.

Retrain what remains to live life as fully as possible or risk losing that too.

Much of what we enjoy about church is for the time being not coming back as it was.

If we are like the Church of Sardis, we had it too good at the cost of being asleep at the wheel with all the danger that brings.

**Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die,**

**Conclusion;**

The urgency in this message takes us beyond survival.

This is not about hanging on until we get back to happy days.

This is about realising how the easy way of being and doing church is over and being a church member, an active disciple of Jesus is going to mean working with what you have still got after the locusts have been.

Unless you wake up to that, you will die like 75% of the seeds in Jesus' parable of the sower.

**Wake up, and strengthen what remains**

**Revelation 3.1-6** ESV

*To the Church in Sardis*

**3** “And to the angel of the church in Sardis write: ‘The words of him who has the seven spirits of God and the seven stars.

“‘I know your works. You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead. <sup>2</sup> **Wake up, and strengthen what remains and is about to die**, for I have not found your works complete in the sight of my God. <sup>3</sup> Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent. If you will not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what hour I will come against you. <sup>4</sup> Yet you have still a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments, and they will walk with me in white, for they are worthy. <sup>5</sup> The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life. I will confess his name before my Father and before his angels. <sup>6</sup> He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.’