

15. November 2022

## The Churches of Sardis and Laodicea

Rev 3:1-6,14-22

*I, John, heard the Lord saying to me, "Write to the angel of the church in Sardis and say, 'Here is the message of the one who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars: I know about your behaviour: how you are reputed to be alive and yet are dead. Wake up; put some resolve into what little vigour you have left: it is dying fast. So far I have failed to notice anything in your behaviour that my God could possibly call perfect; remember how you first heard the message. Hold on to that. Repent! If you do not wake up, I shall come to you like a thief, and you will have no idea at what hour I shall come upon you. There are a few in Sardis, it is true, who have kept their robes unstained, and they are fit to come with me, dressed in white. Anyone who proves victorious will be dressed, like these, in white robes; I shall not blot that name out of the book of life, but acknowledge it in the presence of my Father and his angels. Let anyone who can hear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. Write to the angel of the church in Laodicea and say, 'Here is the message of the Amen, the trustworthy, the true witness, the Principle of God's creation: I know about your activities: how you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were one or the other, but since you are neither hot nor cold, but only lukewarm, I will spit you out of my mouth. You say to yourself: I am rich, I have made a fortune and have everything I want, never realising that you are wretchedly and pitiably poor, and blind and naked too. I warn you, buy from me the gold that has been tested in the fire to make you truly rich, and white robes to clothe you and hide your shameful nakedness, and ointment to put on your eyes to enable you to see. I reprove and train those whom I love: so repent in real earnest. Look, I am standing at the door, knocking. If one of you hears me calling and opens the door, I will come in to share a meal at that person's side. Anyone who proves victorious I will allow to share my throne, just as I have myself overcome and have taken my seat with my Father on his throne. Let anyone who can hear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.'"*

One cannot ignore the serious tone of these words....

In the case of the church of Sardis, the reproach seems to be that some of its members bear the name of Christians, but their inner life is about to die.... That is why their works are no longer perfect. Seen simply from the outside, life would seem to continue on its usual course; but the inner strength, love, which is the true motivation of every good work, has weakened.

*"Remember how you first heard the message. Hold on to that. Repent!"*- thus says the Lord to the church at Sardis, and this exhortation suggests that they were not faithfully observing the doctrine as it had been handed down to them... Here, the fact that a deviation from the right doctrine will carry consequences, becomes evident. Indeed, when one deviates in this way, he is no longer sustained by the grace of truth, so that he loses his clear orientation. Therefore, clinging to the transmitted truth is not an act of stubbornness or scrupulous legalism - although these tendencies do exist- but it is drinking from the wellsprings of truth. In this adherence one can experience again and again within oneself God's unfolding grace in those paths that He Himself has laid out. Outside the path of truth, disorder arises.

It is very important for me to emphasize again this dimension, which is also emphasized in Sacred Scripture. This is particularly important in the present time, when some Christians no longer attach much importance to doctrine and regard it merely as a general, but not binding, orientation. They are very much mistaken, because, as time goes by, this will have repercussions on the whole Christian life, so that the light of right doctrine will cease to illuminate the understanding and errors can easily creep in. In the long run, errors have negative effects, because instead of the divine light ruling, merely human reflections, worldly thinking or even demonic deceptions will take their place.

Therefore, the call to conversion addressed to the church of Sardis goes hand in hand with the exhortation to keep the word, the doctrine.... But also in Sardis there is a "holy remnant": they are the ones who have remained faithful and whose names are inscribed in the book of life. They must have given a firm witness to Christ and declared themselves in His favor, for the Lord assures us that He too will declare Himself in their favor before His Father and His angels (cf. Mt 10:32).

Along with the seriousness of the warning, the remedy for getting out of this condition and being healed is also laid out. This is how God treats us! On the one hand, he tells us very clearly what does not correspond to His Will; on the other hand, with the same

clarity, He shows us how we can return to this Will of His. The consequences that will follow if conversion does not take place are also mentioned. Whoever does not strive to live fully in the truth, will end up blinded in the face of the Lord's Return, and will not realize that the hour is approaching, in order to be prepared to receive it.

Even stronger than the warning to Sardis is the one addressed to Laodicea. According to some exegetes, the description of the seven churches of Asia Minor can also be taken as a description of the different types of communities. Following this interpretation, the church of Laodicea would represent a community with material well-being, but poor in spiritual strength. However, she is not even aware of her state; for it is precisely her wealth that confers on her a certain security, which in reality is nothing more than an illusion. Perhaps, due to its economic power, such a community even has influence over others, thus attributing to itself a position that does not correspond to it at all. From the spiritual perspective, it belongs to those who are far from God. Such is the state of lukewarmness: it has no clear convictions, no burning fire, adapts itself to the currents of the times, is incapable of swimming against the current... From the spiritual perspective, lukewarmness is a deplorable and extremely worrisome state.

It is striking that the Lord, in addressing this church, does not highlight any good work to which it should return. Rather, He makes an urgent call to conversion and to turn fully to Him. He alone will be able to restore life to this community, if it comes to understand that only in Him will it find its richness; if it learns to see with the eyes of the Lord and in the anointing of the Holy Spirit, and does not remain in its blindness, having adopted the mentality of the world; if it washes its baptismal garments in the blood of the Lamb, thus renewing the robe of grace (cf. Rev 7:14b).

Conversion to God is urgent, and there is no time to lose! Even to the community of Laodicea, whose state is so worrisome, God offers a way out... "*repent in real earnest*" - he says to them. The invitation is there, but it must not be wasted!