

Sunday 1st May 2022
Glynde Lutheran Church
Sermon on Revelation 2:10
Theme: “Struggle on to victory”

“What to focus on when the pressures of life get you down”

Introduction:

One of my wife Jenine's complaints to me has been that I've never, ever written a poem for her expressing my love for her. My come back is that I've only ever resorted to writing my feelings down in poetry form when I've felt utterly depressed. And I've never felt that way married to her....

I'd like to share with you one little poem that I found in my old files from way back. Actually, it's not much of a poem.... In fact, that's probably one of the reasons why I don't write poetry anymore: I'm not very good at it. It's a little poem that I wrote when the pressures of life had got me down and I was alone in my rooms staring at a rather poor specimen of a cactus that I had in my room.

It goes like this:

**frail cactus withered
dying
do you long for 'The Day of the Lord'
do you search
the sky
for his presence**

**struggle on
little cactus
He will come
again
in glory.**

Maybe some of you are feeling now as I did then: utterly depressed and down. Maybe life only has these moments for you now and then. But I think that we all can appreciate how much life is a struggle for each of us, even us who know God's love and forgiveness through Jesus.

Well, Jesus has a message in today's text for you and me as we struggle on in life:

“Be faithful to me until death, and I will give you the crown of life”
(*Rev. 2:10*).

Struggle on in life and the Day of Victory will come to you. Keep close to Jesus always, and always keep the goal of eternal life *with him* in mind.

Part 1: Life as a Christian is a struggle

Our Bible verse for this morning comes from the very last book of the Bible, the book of Revelation. It's a book that is hard to understand and a book which has frequently been misunderstood. Often people see it as some sort of blue-print for the future...

But in reality, the book of Revelation is like all the other books of the New Testament: a writing written to particular people on a particular occasion for a particular purpose.

Actually, the book of Revelation is a letter.

It begins in the typical way that letters of that day began:

⁴ From John to the seven churches in the province of Asia:

Grace and peace be yours from God, who is, who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits in front of his throne, ⁵ and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the first to be raised from death and who is also the ruler of the kings of the world (*Rev. 1:4-5*).

And it ends like the usual letters of the day ended: with an expression of good will:

²¹ May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with everyone.

(*Rev. 22:21*).

And the purpose of the letter? To encourage the Christians in Asia Minor to remain faithful to Jesus amidst the pressures of life, the pressures that would have been wearing them down and eroding the faith of some of them.

We talk about our troubles, and the pressures in our life' that get us down and eat away at our faith.... But at least we don't have active persecution of us simply because we are followers of Jesus! And that was the situation of many of the Christians to whom John was writing.

In fact, in the Christian communities to what John was writing, Christians had actually been killed for being faithful to Jesus. John tells us that in Pergamum, a man by the name of Antipas had been killed for being faithful

to Jesus, for saying “Jesus is Lord” and for refusing to burn incense to the Emperor and for refusing to say “Caesar is Lord” (*Rev. 2:13*)

So then, life for those Christians to whom John was writing was quite a struggle. Not only did they have to handle the normal pressures of life that we have, but in fact their very lives were in danger: just because of the mere fact that they were followers of Jesus.

Part 2: Persist in the struggle: it's worth it

And how did John encourage his fellow Christians in his letter, and what words of encouragement does he offer us today for our life of faith?

Well, John in his letter encouraged his fellow Christians to remain faithful to Jesus in one main way: by keeping before them the joy and the happiness that would be theirs in their life with God and Jesus after death, if they continued to remain faithful to Jesus.

All through the book, there are examples of this encouragement. Let's take a quick trip through the book of Revelation and look at the ways in which John does this....

- 1) John's letter begins with his account of a vision that he had while he was exiled on the island of Patmos for being a Christian. John writes that he saw the risen, glorified Lord Jesus, and that Jesus said to him, **“Don't be afraid! I am the first and the last. I am the Living One. I was dead, but now I am alive for ever and ever. I have the keys of Death and Hades”** (*Rev. 1:17-18*).

With these words, Jesus assures John, and through John the Christians of Asia Minor *and us today*, that he and they and us have nothing to fear from death. Jesus says in effect:

“Look you don't have to worry about dying. I have power over death. I have the keys to it, and I will open its doors for you”

- 2) John goes on to say that Jesus told him to write down messages for each of the seven churches in Asia Minor:

¹⁰ On the Lord's day the Spirit took control of me, and I heard a loud voice, that sounded like a trumpet, speaking behind me. ¹¹ It said, “Write down what you see, and send the book to the churches in these seven cities: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.” (*Rev. 1:10-11*).

These messages are found in the second and third chapters of the book of Revelation. Each of these messages ends with a word of encouragement from Jesus. At the end of each message, Jesus promises life after death for the person who is victorious, that is, for the person who remains faithful to him “until death”. Let me just read to you what Jesus tells John to write to the first two churches, the churches at Ephesus and Smyrna:

⁷ “If you have ears, then, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches!

“To those who win the victory I will give the right to eat the fruit of the tree of life that grows in the Garden of God.

¹¹ “If you have ears, then, listen to what the Spirit says to the churches!

“Those who win the victory will not be hurt by the second death (Rev. 2:7, 11).

The rest of the book contains a number of visions which God gave to John.

Many of these visions are warnings about the punishments that will befall those who refuse to repent and turn in faith to Jesus (e.g., 6:1-17; 8:6-9:21), but many too are visions which God gave to John to encourage his readers, and us too, to remain faithful to Jesus.

The vision recorded in chapter seven, for example, gives us a wonderful picture of life with God and Jesus after death. John writes in chapter seven:

⁹ After this I looked, and there was an enormous crowd—no one could count all the people! They were from every race, tribe, nation, and language, and they stood in front of the throne and of the Lamb, dressed in white robes and holding palm branches in their hands. ¹⁰ They called out in a loud voice: “Salvation comes from our God, who sits on the throne, and from the Lamb!”

¹¹ All the angels stood around the throne, the elders, and the four living creatures. Then they threw themselves face downward in front of the throne and worshiped God, ¹² saying, “Amen! Praise,

glory, wisdom, thanksgiving, honor, power, and might belong to our God forever and ever! Amen!”

¹³ One of the elders asked me, “Who are these people dressed in white robes, and where do they come from?”

¹⁴ “I don’t know, sir. You do,” I answered.

He said to me, “These are the people who have come safely through the terrible persecution. They have washed their robes and made them white with the blood of the Lamb. ¹⁵ That is why they stand before God's throne and serve him day and night in his temple. He who sits on the throne will protect them with his presence. ¹⁶ Never again will they hunger or thirst; neither sun nor any scorching heat will burn them, ¹⁷ because the Lamb, who is in the center of the throne, will be their shepherd, and he will guide them to springs of life-giving water. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” (Rev/ 7:9-17).

- 3) The book of Revelation ends with a number of glorious visions of the life that we Christians will have with God and Jesus after death. They, like the vision that I just read out to you from chapter seven, were given by God and recorded by John in order to encourage us Christians to remain faithful to Jesus no matter what happens to us in life.

In chapter twenty-one, for example, John writes:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The first heaven and the first earth disappeared, and the sea vanished. ² And I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared and ready, like a bride dressed to meet her husband. ³ I heard a loud voice speaking from the throne: “Now God's home is with people! He will live with them, and they shall be his people.

God himself will be with them, and he will be their God. ⁴ He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared.”

⁵ Then the one who sits on the throne said, “And now I make all things new!” (Rev. 21:1-5).

And at the start of the next chapter, John pictures life in God's city as life in "paradise regained". As in the garden of Eden, there will be a river, a "tree of life", and no curse.

John writes:

The angel also showed me the river of the water of life, sparkling like crystal, and coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb ² and flowing down the middle of the city's street. On each side of the river was the tree of life, which bears fruit twelve times a year, once each month; and its leaves are for the healing of the nations. ³ Nothing that is under God's curse will be found in the city.

The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will worship him. ⁴ They will see his face, and his name will be written on their foreheads. ⁵ There shall be no more night, and they will not need lamps or sunlight, because the Lord God will be their light, and they will rule as kings forever and ever (Rev. 22:1-5).

The other side of the coin, John asserts, is separation from God and eternal punishment. Those whose names are not written in Jesus' book of life, that is, those who refuse to trust in Jesus or who turn their back on Jesus, will be "thrown into the lake of fire" (Rev.20:15; 21:8).

It's a graphic picture of the anguish of being separated from God...

Or to use another picture that John gives us, they will be refused entry into God's holy city (Rev. 21:27; 22:15).

This is what "hell" is: "hell" is life lived apart from God. And life apart from God and his love and his protection is what will happen to those who turn away from trusting in Jesus.

Exhortation:

- 1) My niece Laura is going to be married next month at Strathalbyn. I always remember what my sister Sue said to her daughter at her 21st birthday.... Sue reminded Laura that she had been named "Laura" after one of our great aunts, "Gertrude Laura", an aunt *who along with her sister Doris*, gave herself sacrificially for our family in the hard days when we were growing up. She said that she didn't think that she could name her "Gertrude", so she settled for her second name, "Laura".

At the end of her speech, Sue said:

When my Auntie Gert was dying of cancer, her last words to me were: “Stay close to Jesus!”

And then Sue said to Laura:

That is what I want to say to you today, as you celebrate your 21st birthday: “Stay close to Jesus!”

- 2) When the former Bishop of the SA/NT District, *then President*, Rob Voigt gave his farewell to the District at Mt. Gambier some years ago, he mentioned that his favourite verse in the Bible was Hebrews 12:2 **Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end.**

And this was Rob’s parting message to us, as he retired from the role of being President of the District:

“Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus!”

I think that it’s even worth reading to you all three verses of Hebrews, chapter 12, because they echo what Jesus is saying in the Bible verse that we are focussing on this morning:

As for us, we have this large crowd of witnesses around us. So then, let us rid ourselves of everything that gets in the way, and of the sin which holds on to us so tightly, and let us run with determination the race that lies before us.

²Let us keep our eyes fixed on Jesus, on whom our faith depends from beginning to end. He did not give up because of the cross! On the contrary, because of the joy that was waiting for him, he thought nothing of the disgrace of dying on the cross, and he is now seated at the right side of God's throne.

³Think of what he went through; how he put up with so much hatred from sinners! So do not let yourselves become discouraged and give up (*Heb, 12:1-3*).

Conclusion:

Yes, sure, sometimes life can really get you down, as it did for me when I wrote that "cactus" and as it still does sometimes.

But don't despair! Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus! We live our lives now under God's umbrella of love and forgiveness and we have a great future to look forward to if we continue to trust in Jesus as our Saviour.

On this we have our risen, glorified Lord's personal promise, a promise that was given through John, the writer of Revelation.

Jesus assures us today, as he assured the early Christians long ago:

"Be faithful to me until death, and I will give you the crown of life"
(*Rev. 2:10*).

May the Lord God give us all the strength and the help to remain faithful to our Lord Jesus until the day that God calls us home.