1st August 2021

We come with our curiosity and questions.
We come seeking answers.
We are grateful for our daily bread,
but we yearn for the bread of eternal life.
Let us seek to be fed and filled
with God’s life and love.



**A prayer of adoration**

Merciful God,
we thank you that you are to be trusted,
that you are faithful and provide for all our needs.
When we feel alone in the desert,
that is where we meet you.
In the wilderness of our lives,
we can turn to you and know that you will sustain us.
We worship you,
and we thank you that in you there is always hope.
**Amen.**



**A prayer of confession and an Assurance of forgiveness**

Lord, when we fail to trust you in all things:
**forgive us, and help us to trust you more.**
When we complain that you have forsaken us,
you have left us, abandoned us:
**forgive us, and help us to trust you more.**
When we choose to go our own way
because your way doesn’t seem to make sense:
f**orgive us, and help us to trust you more.**
When we don’t challenge injustice,
and instead, accept things as they are:
**forgive us, and help us to trust you more.**
When we keep asking for more signs,
more proof, more of everything:
**forgive us, and help us to trust you more.**
When we trust a little, then snatch it back:
**forgive us, and help us to trust you more.**
**Amen.**

**Assurance of forgiveness**

When we have not trusted God with our lives and walked away,
we can always come back into God’s everlasting arms,
knowing that we are loved and forgiven.
**Amen.**





**Revelation 3.1-6**

The ‘2020’ Tokyo Olympics finally started last weekend, a year after schedule due to the pandemic. Despite a lack of packed stadiums, it is turning out to be a wonderful spectacle of sporting excellence and endurance. I don’t know about you, but I love watching the Olympics, from the skateboarding and surfing, to gymnastics and badminton, through to all athletics. I find it so exciting to see who will be the fastest/strongest in the world on the day. The competitors’ self-discipline and daily practice, year in year out, is an inspiration. This week Adam Peaty was described as Britain’s greatest swimmer, after winning his 2nd Olympic Gold medal in the breaststroke event. If you wanted to be an Olympian, what do you think your sport would be? How often would you plan to train? Peaty is up at 5am each morning and follows a brutal regime of swimming and gym work for up to 40 hours a week, the equivalent of a full-time job in hard training!

Every competitor at this year’s Olympics has been through a lot to get there. Training has been disrupted by the inability to travel and often by ill-health. Swimming gold medalist Tom Dean was [severely affected by contracting Covid](https://www.itv.com/news/2021-07-27/tom-dean-from-being-ravaged-by-covid-to-winning-olympic-gold-in-six-months) twice!. Lauren Williams, who won silver in taekwondo, had [lived in a caravan with her mother for 18 months](https://www.walesonline.co.uk/sport/lauren-williams-medal-tokyo-olympics-21145644) as at 14 she was too young to live in the training camp. [Georgia Taylor-Brown had been on crutches earlier this year](https://www.bbc.co.uk/sport/olympics/57979326), but survived a flat tyre in the cycling section of the triathlon to gain a silver medal. All of these athletes worked through pain, past disappointments and years of routine training in the cold and the dark to work for the medal that would be theirs.[[1]](#endnote-1)

It is inspiring to see people working so hard work to achieve excellence. However, the life of faith offers a distinctively different approach. Our natural inclination is to think that we need to do things to get a reward. Jesus’ answer is that the work that God wants is simply for followers to believe in him! The amazing news about following Jesus is that we don’t have to earn or work to become a Christian. It is a choice to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and trust that Jesus is what we need to live a full life. This can really release us from feeling the pressure to have to do, work and achieve.

It doesn’t mean we do nothing, however. Believing in Jesus means following Jesus and taking up his concerns and work.

 As we continue our series looking at what the Spirit is saying to the churches and using the letters to the seven churches in the Book of revelation, today we come to the letter to the church at Sardis.

The risen Christ addresses them and says: *I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead.****2****Wake up!*

What does it mean to be dead as a church? What would it mean to wake up? To go back to the Olympic analogy: are we in the race or not? Are we competing for the prize or just ambling along in the life of faith?

Sardis was a city of decline. Seven hundred years before this letter was written it was one of the greatest cities in the world. There the king of Lydia ruled over his empire in great splendour. At the time Sardis was a city of the east, in modern day turkey, that was hostile to the Greek world. The city had been thought to be impregnable. It was secure, sitting on top of a steep hill. Attackers might come and go but the citizens were quite content to see them do so. They knew they could never be captured.

Until one night, during the reign of King Croesus, the invading Persian army found a way. Someone, managed to get up a cleft in the sheer cliff and staged a surprise attack. Because nobody was expecting it, the result was all the more devastating. Cyrus, the Persian, who also features in various biblical stories as well, conquered Sardis in 546 BC in a never to be forgotten moment. Though Sardis remained an important city, the lesson had been learned.

Except that now Jesus is saying the Christian community in Sardis needs to learn it all over again.

They have a reputation for being alive – of being a vibrant going concern, a fellowship where things are happening. But they have gone to sleep on their reputation, and need to wake up. All is not lost, there are some good things happening. But unless action is taken quickly, they, too, will wither on the vine.

The more detailed charge against Sardis appears to be twofold. First their works have not been found to be complete.

*Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have found your deeds unfinished in the sight of my God. V 2*

That may be a tactful way of saying that their performance of the gospel, their Christian way of life, ‘leaves a lot to be desired’.

At the start of this letter, Jesus is described as the ‘*him who holds the seven spirits[*[*b*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation+3&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-30748b)*] of God and the seven stars’.* It is shorthand for saying the full sevenfold, perfect manifestation of the Holy Spirit: that the Spirit operates with all His presence and power. The stars stand for the churches and their angels. Many times, we act as if the church belongs to us, it is our church. But every church belongs to Jesus and any decision regarding the church needs to be mindful of that fact, not what we wish but what Jesus wants.

The accusation is that the church at Sardis is dead. Dead in scripture is also a metaphor for spiritually dead. The New Testament frequently likens sin to death (e.g., Roms 6) Sin can entrap you in prejudices, habits, un Christ like attitudes and ways of living that can bring deadness to your soul instead of making you alive to God.

It can take the loveliest of things and turn them into ugliness. The wish to serve can become the intoxication of ambition. The desire of love can become the passion of lust.

The lifelessness of the church at Sardis had a strange effect and is probably revealed by what is not said about them, in contrast to what some of the other churches are warned about.

For example, the church at Sardis was untroubled by a heresy or new thinking. Last week we looked at the church at Thyatira and how they should discern the teaching of the Jezebel in their midst who was seducing them into compromise with the world values. The church at Sardis in contrast is too dead for that. Too lazily lethargic for effort of thought and the dare of action.

Heresy, conflict, difference of opinions looked at positively, is always the product of searching and seeking minds. It is arguably a sign of a church that is vitally alive. It is a sign that you are trying to at least think things out for yourself.

The early church was full of competing views. Some would overstress the divinity of Christ (technically known as Docetism) Some overstressed the humanity of Christ, so Jesus just becomes a heroic figure, the best of good humanity. Some overstressed legalism – obeying the law and morality, obsessed with right and wrong. Some overstressed grace (known as antinomianism, which believes that grace is so great that sin doesn’t matter – God will always forgive). Those debates are in scripture. In many ways it was a sign of a church that was not content with a second-hand faith and a conventional and unthinking acceptance of orthodoxy, but which was compelled to think things out for themselves – that belief, faith, and its outworking matters. Faith which is alive not dead.

The church at Sardis also seemed to be untroubled by any attack from the outside, in contrast to say the church at Smyrna and the suffering they had to endure. The truth seems to be that the church in Sardis had ceased to matter. It was so lifeless that it was not worth attacking. It had lost it vital force. It was ineffective in the life of its community.

A truly vital church will be under attack. Why, because we should be the conscience of the community and consequently many will wish to silence us or eliminate us. Jesus said, ‘woe unto you when everyone speaks well of you’ Luke 6.26. A church with a positive message is bound to be a church to which there will be opposition. A church which claims that Jesus is the way of salvation will find opposition from those who don’t believe that. The church and the world will remain over against each other, even if at times they will agree on certain issues and maybe change and inform each other. But a church which has so accommodated itself to the world that the world finds no fault in it is a dead church and dead in its witness.

If anything is to be rescued from the impending ruin of the church at Sardis it must wake up. This is the second part of the charge.

What does it mean to wake up? Watchfulness should be a constant attitude of the Christian life. Paul urged Christians to wake up from your slumber (Roms 13.11) and to watch and stand firm in your faith (1 Cor 16.13) to be alert against the devils’ tactics. Unlike Sardis wasn’t when they were attacked. They were complacent, slack in their watchfulness, Christians should always be on watch against temptation, especially in unguarded moments, weariness, fear, or over confidence. Unceasing vigilance is called for. ‘Watch and pray’ said Jesus ‘that you don’t enter into temptation’ Matthew 26.41.

Repeatedly in the New Testament Christians are urged to be on watch for the coming of the Lord, Verse 3 says *I will come like a thief* – echoes of that in other parts of scripture, as an exhortation to not give up doing the work of Jesus and been found asleep to his call.

I know through the time of this pandemic I have spent learning a bit more about myself using the ancient spiritual tool of the enneagram, which helps you explore your personality its strengths and its weaknesses and in a Christian perspective helps you become more spiritually aware and can plot your path to spiritual growth.

It helped me identity myself as a type nine – a peacemaker or mediator - where I try to be sensitive to others and hold people together. But consequently, I can fall asleep to myself, what I believe and need. I can be trying to avoid conflict and confrontation, being attentive to everyone else and trying keep everyone happy, that I fail to be attentive to myself. I can come across as indecisive and unclear about my own position and role but actually I am trying to avoid the stress of taking a position and upsetting those who would disagree with me. Why? Because I want to keep the peace. So, I need to wake up to myself, suggested the enneagram and express my own position, my own boundaries, limits, and priorities and not fall asleep to all that.

For us as a church, still in a pandemic, we are still caught up with the insecurities and unpredictability of daily life, still living under fear of what could be, still traumatised by months of living with a virus that could harm us, even kill us. It’s very difficult to get anyone to wake up and look ahead and plan for the future in that kind of climate. Yet sooner rather than later we will need to. We can’t be complacent as a church and think we have a reputation for being alive. Yesterday’s achievements and glories are yesterday. The challenge is always to live in the present and prepare for the future. Soon we will need to try and get things up and running once more.

We have plans to reach out to our needy world – from the plans for youth outreach across the churches in the Illuminate scheme, to a planned outreach for people searching after happiness. But there will also be a need to nurture and sustain us as a Christian congregation in worship, prayer, bible study and fellowship. Some may have slipped away.

Jesus in this letter urges the church at Sardis to ‘*remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; hold it fast and repent’ verse 3*

 Remember the enthusiasm you had at the start for your Christian faith. It is a fact of life that things can grow dull or familiar. Yet they can be reawakened. When we return to some place where we had some great experience the sight of the place can rekindle that fire. When we return to a graveside, the sorrow which the years have dulled may grow poignant again. Always go back to the cross and remember what God has done for you in Christ.

It is often good to keep a journal to jot down answered prayers and encounters with God -so you have a record -so you can recall and remember. Then repent – change direction, decide again for Christ. Instead of drifting away or procrastinating be decisive to live for Christ again. Hold fast to the way of Jesus. Sometimes we are capable of the greatest kindness and then the next moment to a lapse of the greatest meanness or intolerance or selfishness. Can we be awake to our spiritual journey with the Lord and greater consistency? Those who walk hand in hand with Christ, those who are awake to His presence, are more likely to be consistent in their faith.

Watchfulness, awakeness!

The letter ends by talking about those who remain faithful and awake – those who haven’t soiled their clothes. I could tell you about the time I had to lead worship and halfway through the sermon I got a bout of diarrhoea. But you are all going to Sunday lunch soon so I’d better not. Having been married to a former primary school teacher of a reception class, young children would come to school for the first time and often soil their clothes because they were nervous, anxious, or not disciplined and fully potty trained. Fears, doubts, disease of the spirit, ill-discipline – can all soil our metaphorical spiritual clothes, our commitment and purity to our Lord.

The challenge, like those Olympians, is to find the discipline and the strength to keep going, to train in faith and courage, to follow the Lord – that our names will be in the book of life. This was an allusion that is mentioned elsewhere in Revelation (13.8; 17.8; 20.12,15; 21.27) that refers to Greek cities that had an official register of all citizens and if they were condemned to death they would be blotted out. Here Jesus says I will never blot your name out of the book of life.

But it also refers to the saying of Jesus that if a person confessed his name before others, he would confess their name before his Father in Heaven (Matthew3 10.32, Luke 12.8-9). Those who live the victorious life will be dressed in white -just like they did in Roman processions when triumph was celebrated. Paul elsewhere employs analogies to the ancient Olympic games about running the race and receiving the prize for the victory of faith – those who held steadfast and true to the Lord.

May we be awake to the prompting of the Spirit and claim the victory of faith in Christ.

**Prayer**

Living and loving God,
Help us to be faithful in whatever circumstances we find ourselves.
Grant us the courage to look forward, leaving the past behind us.
Kindle the spark of new life, as we step beyond the pandemic to follow you once more.
Thanks be to God,
Amen

**Prayers of intercession**

Lord, we come to you, the Great Provider, with all our cares and our needs, trusting that you will provide for us. So often we tell you what we *want* rather than asking for what we really need. Teach us to listen to your voice so that our wills join with yours and so that our asking becomes harmonious with what you want for us. As we lay our petitions before you, remind us that what you give us is what we truly need even if we don’t always recognise it.

Jesus, bread of life,
**help us to trust in your provision for us.**

We commend our athletes to you, Lord, as they compete in the Olympic Games. We thank you for the joy that sport brings to so many, whether watching or participating. We pray that all the athletes will be able to bring their best to their competitions. We pray for the witness of those who are Christians, that their love for you will have an impact for good on those around them.

Jesus, bread of life,
**help us to trust in your provision for us.**

Lord, we bring our land to you today. Every day we hear of the further spread of Covid-19, even if numbers infected are going down, and we begin to wonder if there will ever be an end to the pandemic. Even though in the UK the restrictions have lifted, for so many the anxieties and isolation remain. Give us the insight this week to see who needs our help: whether it’s doing their shopping, giving them a call or something else. Give us the courage to step out of our comfort zones to serve others in our communities. Keep us from despondency and help us look for positives each day.

Jesus, bread of life,
**help us to trust in your provision for us.**

Lord, we have heard harrowing tales of historic abuse in our land this week. We pray for all those who have suffered and still live with the consequences. We pray that they will be able to find peace of mind and healing of deep hurts with you. And we pray for their abusers, that they will come to a place of repentance and know your forgiveness.

Jesus, bread of life,
**help us to trust in your provision for us.**

We pray for our school children during this summer holiday season. We ask your peace for those awaiting exam results. We pray for those saddened by not being able to say a proper goodbye as they left school. We pray that families will have opportunities to have rest and relaxation and recharge their batteries in the sunshine. We pray for safety for all those on holiday and for your comfort for the families of those who have lost their lives in the recent heatwave. Lord, we particularly bring to you those children for whom the long summer holidays means going hungry and maybe living in fear of someone at home.We ask that you will provide nourishment and safe spaces for them.

Jesus, bread of life,
**help us to trust in your provision for us.**

We thank you, Lord, for this church community and the nourishment we find by spending time here with you. Fill us with your Spirit as we praise you so that we may go out from here enriched and ready to serve you in the wider world. Help us to encourage one another and build each other up, that this may be a place of affirmation, acceptance and love. We pray for our leaders, both locally and nationally, asking that you will provide them with wisdom, patience and grace.

Jesus, bread of life,
**help us to trust in your provision for us.**

Lord, we offer ourselves to you as we prepare to go forward into the coming week. We pause in the stillness now to think of the places we will go to and name some of the people we will meet. We offer any potentially difficult situations up to you, asking for your courage to face them. Teach us not to take your gifts for granted, but instead to keep our eyes fixed on you. Draw us constantly back to you to find the energy, strength and refreshment that we need for our daily living.

Jesus, bread of life,
**help us to trust in your provision for us,
to feed on you and draw our strength from you,
and help us to be truly blessed by the nourishment you give us.
Amen.**



**A prayer for all ages together**

Invite people to pretend to ‘tear and share’ a piece of bread
with someone near them as each line is spoken.

Generous and loving God,
we tear up violence
**and share out peace.**
We tear up fear
**and share out joy.**
We tear up poverty
**and share our food.**
We tear up cruelty
**and share out kindness.**
We tear up all that divides
**and share our love for Jesus.**
**Amen.**



**A sending out prayer**

As we seek to do what you want, Lord,
may we bring bread to the hungry –
food for bodies and food for souls,
strength for the journey, and hope for the future.
In Jesus’ name.
**Amen.**

1. *Dr Angela Mak & Simon Carver* ttps://www.rootsontheweb.com/lectionary/2021/114-july-august-2021-b/proper-13/the-week-in-focus [↑](#endnote-ref-1)