

June 2022

Volume IX, Number 6

THE LINE

Newsletter of the Convocation Of The West
OF THE MISSIONARY DIOCESE OF ALL SAINTS

Analysis of the Seven Churches in Revelation: Thyatira

By The Very Rev. Canon Michael Penfield

Byzantine basilica of Thatira
Photo by Klaus-Peter Simon
Creative Commons

This is our fourth article discussing the Seven Churches in the Book of Revelation. As you will recall, I asked all the churches in the Convocation of the West to use this past Lent as a period of discernment, not just for our individual churches, but also for our Convocations and for the Missionary Diocese of All Saints.

Although our official period of discernment may be over, we still need to pray to God that He will let us know to whom we are to reach and how we are to reach them. Additionally, we need to continue to pray to God to let us know what we are to do so we can continue to be a Diocese that is a beacon of faith and hope and a light to the world. And while we pray for discernment, we need to remember:

*Unless the Lord builds the house,**

Their labor is in vain who build it.

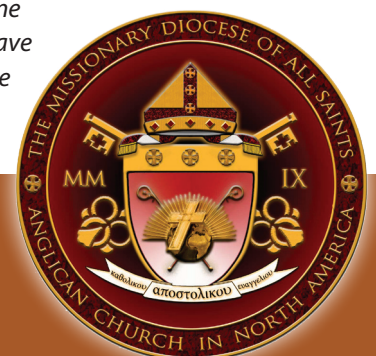
*Unless the Lord keeps the city,**

The watchman keeps vigil in vain.

[Psalm 127:1-2; BCP 2019 page 444]

In an effort to help us in our prayers to rightly see what we must do, we now continue our analysis with the fourth of the Seven Churches – Thyatira:

“And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write, ‘These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass: ‘I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first. Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works. But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come. And he that overcometh, and keepeth



The Convocation of the West Summary Statement

We are a missionary people living out the historical, Biblical Christian faith in the Anglican tradition.

my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.” [Revelation 2:18-29]

With Thyatira, we now move inland. Thyatira was located in a long vale, connecting the Hermus and Caicos valleys. This was a perfect route to the Aegean Sea and therefore was very important militarily speaking. So, in the middle of this vale, Thyatira was constructed as a defensive outpost. However, unlike other fortified cities, Thyatira was not built on top of a hill. It was built on top of a slight rise. What made it strong at the time of Revelation was that the Romans stationed an elite guard there.

Thyatira was also famous for the many trade guilds that prospered in the city. Each trade guild had their patron god or goddess. They all had festivals worshipping their particular god which usually degenerated into the debauchery consistent with

the peculiar peccadillo of the god they worshipped. Additionally, they often had cultic meals in the temples of their patron god.

This set up a terrible dilemma for Christians. If they were part of a guild, their faith would make it impossible to worship the patron god. Additionally, after the Council of Jerusalem that ruled that food sacrificed to idols could not be consumed by Christians, it made it impossible for Christians to participate in these cultic feasts. If they did not participate in these meals, they may be banned from the guild and consequently their trade. They would be effectively made destitute by their faith and also an outcast from their society.

But, in Thyatira, we do have a Christian church. And Saint John has a message for this church from Christ:

“And unto the angel of the church in Thyatira write, ‘These things saith the Son of God, who hath his eyes like unto a flame of fire, and his feet are like fine brass.’

Eyes like flame and feet like fine brass is the image of God as Judge. This is Christ in judgment of the Church in Thyatira. It is clear there is an issue here of great import. And it is clear that this Church must listen and take note. However, Christ starts by telling the Church what they are doing correctly:

“I know thy works, and charity, and service, and faith, and thy patience, and thy works; and the last to be more than the first.”

Obviously their works have been great. Christ also recognizes their charity, service and faith. All of these are great; all of these are important. But there is something amiss. There is something so bad in the midst of their Church that it threatens to destroy it. And, whatever it is, is so bad that Christ is threatening judgment if they do not correct this problem.

“Notwithstanding I have a few things against thee, because thou sufferest that woman Jezebel, which calleth herself a prophetess, to teach and to seduce my servants to commit fornication, and to eat things sacrificed unto idols. And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not.”

Jezebel was a woman in the Old Testament that was so notorious, her name is still used today to refer to any woman who uses her wiles to ruin men. Jezebel was Ahab’s Sidonian queen (1 Kings 16:31), who vigorously promoted idolatry in the northern kingdom of Israel. She was also the chief adversary of the prophet Elijah (1 Kings 19:1-2). Jezebel ruthlessly slaughtered the innocent (1 Kings 21:1-16), and was infamous for her harlotry and sorcery (2 Kings 9:22). So, this reference to the “prophetess” in the Thyatira Church as a “Jezebel” is a warning of the highest level. So, let us look at this passage in depth.

What was this woman doing? First, she was calling herself a prophetess, but it is clear she was a false prophetess. I liken her to the false prophets at the time of Jeremiah who lulled all of Judah into a false sense of security, which resulted in the total destruction of the Southern Kingdom and the enslavement of the Jewish people by Babylon.

Second, this woman is teaching the members of the church that it is okay to commit fornication and to eat things sacrificed to idols – in direct conflict with the Council of Jerusalem’s ruling (Acts 15:29). These are the hallmarks of the Nicolaitans, and the Eastern Orthodox believe that she was, in fact, part of this heresy. But she was also probably promoting this position because of the requirements of the different trade guilds. Think about it; doesn’t it make sense that she may have been telling the members of this church that they could go into the pagan temples and take part in the cultic feast. She may even have told them that it was also okay to participate in whatever debauchery ensued. In other words, she may have been telling them what they wanted to hear. She told them that they could do it all and still be “good Christians.”

This is the same thing we all face at one time or another. How many times have we been in the situation where we know something is wrong, but we believe someone else who tells us that it is okay – most times because we really want to do it. It takes a strong person to recognize that this is too good to be true. However, it seems clear that there were those who listened to this woman and this, in turn, is what is happening in the Church in Thyatira.

But there is something else in this passage that I find remarkable. Christ tells us this:

“And I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not.”

This is a remarkable insight into God’s way of thinking. Many times, we think God’s lack of wrath is a tacit approval of our



Jezebel and Ahab (c. 1863) by Frederic Leighton
Public Domain

actions, but here we see this may not be true. He may be giving us “space” to repent and change. This false prophetess did not change even though God, in His infinite mercy, gave her time to change and repent, and now her time is up.

But what about us? How can we tell if God is approving of our action or is just giving us “space” to repent? The only way we can be sure is to hold up our actions to what Christ tells us we should be doing and see if we meet this standard or fall short. In other words, do our actions promote our love and worship of God with all our heart, soul, body, and mind, or does it take us away from worshipping God. Do our actions promote our love for our neighbors, or does it stop us from doing so. In the case of this false prophetess, it was taking her followers away from worshipping God by promoting false gods and the worship of idols.

Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds. And I will kill her children with death; and all the churches shall know that I am he which searcheth the reins and hearts: and I will give unto every one of you according to your works.

In this passage we are seeing God’s judgment. We knew from the image of Christ at the beginning of this passage that we would have a judgment, and here we see it. But what is also clear is God’s infinite mercy. Even in the midst of this pronouncement of judgment, Christ holds out the hope of change: *except they repent of their deeds*. Even in this act of judgment, there is hope; all they need do is repent and come back, like the prodigal son, and they will be forgiven and allowed back into God’s family.

I think we often miss these gems. We sometimes get so wrapped up in the judgment that we fail to see that God still offers hope. In fact, all seven letters to these seven churches is a great act of God to try and help these churches change, and come back to the fold. Christ is speaking to Saint John the Divine for the sole purpose of helping them and us. What a great act of kindness! This is our God; He is so loving that He will go to extremes to save us – even by dying on the Cross. And even by appearing to Saint John and asking him to record these messages to His Seven Churches. Isn’t this amazing.

And here is one of the greatest mysteries of our God. He is a personal God. Even though there is a Master plan, each of us is so important to Him that He is interested in even the most mundane things of our lives. While promoting His master plan, God can answer our most personal prayers. And we can see this both in these Seven Letters and in His wish that all who fall away, will repent and return to the church. This is truly amazing!

But for those who do not repent, judgment is waiting. In this passage, Christ says that He will kill her children “with death.” For us, this may seem just a poetic way of saying that they will be killed, but to Biblical scholars, this phrase means more. It means the eternal death reserved for the damn. So, for those who do not repent, eternal damnation awaits.

But unto you I say, and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine, and which have not known the depths of Satan, as they speak; I will put upon you none other burden. But that which ye have already hold fast till I come.

This passage has two important facts contained within it. The first is that those who do not fall under the wiles of this Jezebel, those who do not get distracted from the proper path, will be preserved. They will not be punished. All they need do is “hold fast.” This also speaks to the justice of our God. He will not punish the just because of the iniquity of the unjust. He will not punish those who believe with those who do not. But this begs the question, then why do the believer and why do the just find themselves punished and persecuted. This is because these acts are not of God. They come from those who hate God. And they come from Satan.

But there is a second point in this passage.

Jezebel used the occult. The phrase “the depths of Satan” is believed by some scholars to mean that these followers of this Jezebel in Thyatira dabbled in the occult arts of sorcery and astrology, resulting in the spiritual ruin of the practitioners, further revealing the true nature of this false prophetess.

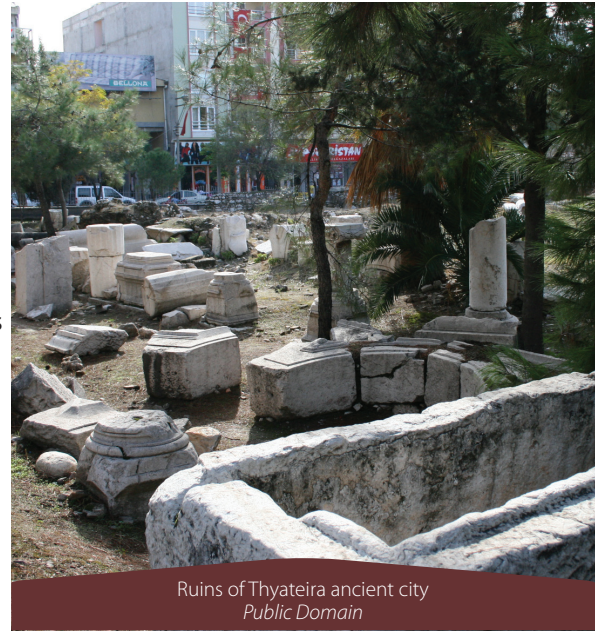
The final passage at which we will look is this:

“And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. And I will give him the morning star. He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.”

There are several symbols in this passage that may escape our understanding, but this passage is clear. Those who follow Christ will help Him rule His Kingdom when He comes to reign. One illusion that we may understand is “*And he shall rule them with a rod of iron.*” This harkens back to Psalm 2:8-9, where David’s royal heir is offered dominion over all nations. However, I think most of us understand what is meant by this passage because we still use this illusion today. The other illusion is not as clear to us:

And I will give him the morning star.

The morning star is a name for the planet Venus. It is visible just before daybreak. In ancient pagan times, this “star” was symbolic of victory, and the early Christians adopted this symbol. It became a symbol of Christ’s Resurrection and His victory over death. So, there seems to be a double meaning here. First, Christ is telling us that we all will have final victory when we too are raised from the dead, but it may also allude to something more. Some Catholic Biblical scholars believe it may also be a promise that the believer will triumph over the dark forces at work in



Ruins of Thyateira ancient city
Public Domain

pagan astrological practices.

This letter to Thyatira is a powerful lesson to all of us. Christ warned us of wolves in sheep's clothing, that there will be those who claim to be Christ's disciples who, in fact, are false. He warned us that others would come after Him claiming to be Him or to be the Messiah, but they will also be false. He then cautions us to be as wise as serpents, but as gentle as doves. This is what has happened in Thyatira and this has and can happen to our churches today. It is easy to follow those who promise the easy way, the ones who don't require us to repent or change. But are they telling us the truth or are they telling us what we want to hear? We need to be honest with ourselves and with God or we may be duped into something that is not acceptable to God.

The message to Thyatira is a frightening one, because it clearly reveals the weakness of our human nature. But, it also may cause us to overreact. Look clearly at the false prophetess in our

passage. She is committing sins, that is clear. She is an adulteress who also dines on food sacrificed to idols. These are sins. She may even indulge in the occult. But, what makes her especially evil in God's eyes is how she is trying to seduce others into her sinful ways. She is a corrupter of others and a disseminator of lies. Let us not confuse this with your everyday sinner.

I do not want anyone to think that this letter is addressed to the Church in Thyatira just because this false prophetess has engaged in some sexual sins. No, it is much deeper than this. And we must understand why Christ is so appalled by this false prophetess.

For our church the message is clear: we need to evaluate everyone who comes in Christ's name. And we must decide whether they are false or true. If they are false, they will try to lead us away from Christ. But if they are true, they will keep us on God's path. This is the lesson especially for the Church in Thyatira, and this is a lesson especially for us today. Amen.



Pictures of Shireen Abu Akleh in the streets of Jerusalem, May 14, 2022.
(Osama Eid, Wikimedia Commons)

By Bishop Winfield Mott

This is a true story. It begins and ends in Jerusalem, but it covers a lot of other ground in between.

Years ago, a young girl from Jerusalem started her college studies at Yarmouk University in Jordan, after finishing her preparatory education at the Rosary Sisters School in Jerusalem. Although she was born and baptized in Jerusalem, her family roots were in nearby Bethlehem, where her ancestors had lived for millennia.

In college, her major was architecture, as her parents had wished her to study in that field. But Shireen soon realized that she had a calling, a vocation (the word "vocation" is derived from the Latin word for calling). Journalism was to be her mission, her calling from God. As a journalist, she could report the truth to

people. Accordingly, she changed her major and received her bachelor's degree in print journalism.

"What is truth?" Governor Pontius Pilate asked rhetorically at the trial of Jesus, held in Shireen's hometown long before her birth. He was neither the first nor the last politician to disregard the search for truth. But it was especially ironic in Pilate's case, because the answer was standing in front of him. "I AM the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6) says Jesus. Truth, like love, is not ultimately a thing but it is God himself. Knowing the whole truth cannot be achieved simply by a study of doctrine or science. To know truth is to know the person who is Truth, from whom all true thoughts and deeds flow.

Thus it is that professional journalism is a particularly fine

Christian vocation. To report the truth, guided by him who is Truth, is a life of great service to both God and mankind. Journalism in our time has strayed far from this ideal, often becoming little more than propaganda. As a result, Shireen's objective reporting stood out in contrast and she became known for telling the straight story without regard for whose side was helped or hurt by the truth. Unlike some whose accurate reporting and lack of bias makes them cold and impersonal, Shireen also was guided by the one who is Love, and combined her objective clarity with a warm compassion for others.

Her career took her many places in her younger years. She spent a number of years in America and became an American citizen. But eventually, she found her true calling back in Jerusalem, the place she knew and loved best. Along with her reporting, she was able to teach journalism at Bir Zeit University, the Palestinian Christian college in Jerusalem, passing on her skills, knowledge and sense of vocation to others. For the past several decades, her employer was Al Jazeera, a rigorously independent international TV channel based in the Middle East. Not many of Shireen's bosses over the years were Christian, but they admired and supported the way Shireen told the story of the great and the small persons in the news, with truth and with compassion.

Soon, Shireen was a face and TV presence known throughout the Arab world, valued by all who knew they could get the real story from her reporting. Nor did her fame warp her, as it sometimes can do and her participation in the life of the Melkite Christian community to which she belonged did not diminish.

Oscar Wilde, a comedian from a century ago, observed that "if you are going to tell people the truth, you have to make them laugh, or they will kill you." Some recent comedians have combined news and entertainment with that in mind. But most authentic journalists like Shireen just report the truth, which is often enough not a laughing matter. One spring day this year, she was called to a story in Jenin, a mostly Christian town in the occupied West Bank. As she was standing on a quiet street corner with her producer, an Israeli soldier shot her in the head, killing her. Her flak jacket had a large Press sign on it, front and back.

The Israeli military reacted swiftly, producing a doctored video claiming she was shot by Palestinian "militants." However, there were a number of witnesses in the area, including some journalists from various media who were able to both report and show video that there were no "militants" in the area, and that the Army was not telling the truth.

Shireen's funeral was in Jerusalem, beginning with a

procession from the hospital to which she had been taken to travel the two miles to the Cathedral of the Annunciation, where the requiem mass was celebrated. As the procession, led by the crucifer carrying a large white cross, emerged onto the street, the crowd of many thousands of mourners, both Christians and Moslems, fell in behind the casket as it moved towards the church.

At that moment, a large number of Israeli police suddenly attacked the crucifer and pallbearers, throwing stun grenades and knocking cross, crucifer, and pallbearers onto the ground as they beat them with nightsticks. The casket dropped almost to the ground despite the efforts of the pallbearers to save it. Finally, the casket was put in a hearse, which managed to make it to the church, although the police smashed out a window and ripped off the funeral decorations.

Shireen now is laid to rest in Mt. Zion Christian Cemetery, only a short distance from where she began her life. The Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem (i.e. the senior Roman Catholic hierarch in Palestine) commented that Shireen was "killed covering the daily sufferings of the people of this land."

This is a true story, as mentioned. But it is more a story about the truth. To search out and proclaim the truth is the mandate of the Great Commission. It is not a vocation reserved for deacons, priests and bishops, but equally for all those baptized into the people of God, the laity (from the Greek word *laos*), which is everyone, including the clergy.

Shireen followed her calling from God faithfully and

forcefully, until it ended in her martyrdom for he who is Truth. In following the "daily sufferings of the people," Shireen could show the face of Jesus in the face of everyone she encountered, especially the "least of these."

We, too, are called to report Truth. Our message to the world is nothing more nor less than that, keeping in mind that we are to "speak truth in love." When someone is genuinely looking for truth,

we can encourage their search. If they seek authentically, they will eventually find Truth, in person, although they may not start at first in the right direction. Roland Syens, a Lutheran pastor in Ukraine, comments, "The most powerful weapon in the world is not nuclear. It is the truth—the truth found in Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth and the Life." It applies equally to Palestine as to Ukraine, and to all of us.

Memory eternal, Shireen. In the middle of a violent and disturbed part of the world, you were called by God to report truth. May we emulate your faithfulness to your vocation, as we follow ours.



An Al-Jazeera microphone laid to rest at the tomb of Shireen Abu Akleh
Wikimedia Commons

Our Church's Charism

By The Very Rev. Canon Michael Penfield



This article is to explore our new summary statement and why we chose it. The goal is for the Convocation of the West to be more focused as to what our purpose as a Church really is, and how we are to live this purpose every day. However, this is a working document. So, any constructive input is welcome. To start with, we are *"A missionary people living out the historical, Biblical Christian faith in the Anglican tradition."*

We are missionary in that we are trying to grow our churches and reach others for Christ. One of Christ's commandments to us is what we call the Great Commission:

Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, to the mountain, which Jesus had appointed for them. When they saw Him, they worshipped Him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen. [Mathew 28:16-20]

This seems clear. We are missionary as all Christians are missionary, spreading the good news of Christ. However, what we have to stop thinking is that missionary only entails some place overseas where no one has heard of Christ. We are missionary like the early Christians were missionary. We live in a hostile environment, one in which our society is becoming increasingly negative to our beliefs. To be a Christian may soon cost us our jobs, our status in society and maybe even someday our lives. It is our duty no matter where we live to spread the Gospel and tell of the healing love of God through His Son Jesus Christ.

Additionally, we are *"living out the historical, Biblical Christian faith"*. As I wrote before, I remember someone telling me that MDAS was designed to be a refuge for churches, which did

not ordain women and were members of Forward in Faith. According to one priest, being a refuge was not a compelling statement. We needed to be positive about what we represent. Defining ourselves as having a historical faith explains why we only ordain men to the priesthood and episcopate. This is our Church's historical record from its inception.

In fact, there are historical records of the early Church before the Great Schism discussing and deciding the issue of women in the priesthood and the episcopate. It clearly reveals what they decided and why they decided against it. Therefore, we feel we cannot change it until the Church, as a whole, changes this tradition.

Plus, our faith is Biblical because it is based in the Bible. I once heard that 95% to 98% of our liturgy comes directly from the Bible. We should be teaching, reading and living the Bible. And we should do it to be an example to others.

And finally, we manifest our Christianity in our worship and theology within the Anglican tradition. This is unique to us. Our dogma is not so very different than the two other great Catholic faiths – Roman and Eastern Orthodox – and our form of worship is not so terribly different as well. But where the differences exist, they are important. We need to understand why we are Anglican so that we may communicate this to others. And in the process, this may help others to come back to the Church.

As I wrote last month, we are very excited about our new vision for the Convocation of the West. And, if we all commit to following this vision, we will see a change in our approach to ministry. But remember, only through God does the world hear His Word, and only through God can we hope to change the world.

Next month, I will start breaking down our Mission and Vision Statement.

God bless.