Becky is a saint! She's well known at work and amongst her friends as a Christian. They admire her devotion; she sacrifices her Sunday morning lie-in to be at church pretty much every week, she turns up and sings passionately, she'll always be first to volunteer when chairs need stacking, she even leads a Bible study group for non Christians. Sure, things aren't quite so rosy when she's out of the public eye but, though she'd never admit it, she's much more bothered what people see. At nights, she finds herself replaying her best (and worst) moments from the day over and over again ; what did they think? Did I leave the wrong impression? Did they notice? Again, she'd never put it so strongly, but Jesus is sometimes a bit of an afterthought. She's pedalling so hard and so fast to keep her life together, and to keep up appearances, but there isn't much love for Jesus.

Let's say you had a chance to sit down with Becky and to have a frank conversation. What would you say? More importantly, what *will* Jesus say, when she stands before him? Perhaps you're not a Christian, and one of things that most puts you off following Jesus is the hypocrisy you've seen in some Christians or churches - well we'll see today what Jesus thinks of hypocrisy like that.

In Rev 3 :1-6 we get to listen in to a message from Jesus himself to church in Sardis towards end of the 1st c. But as we look at it, we'll find ourselves doing more than just listening in. In these first chapters of Revelation, we read seven letters to seven real churches. But why 7? There are at least 10 in Roman province of Asia? 7 churches representing the essence of the wider church spanning all continents and time. What's written here is a revelation written to all 'his servants' (look at ch 1 v 1). We, too, are very much its recipients.

The message to Sardis is going to make for very uncomfortable reading, and it's going to be tempting to write it off as a message "to them, for then" but John will not let us do that. As we eavesdrop on this message dictated in person by the risen Lord Jesus, let's not dodge the same words that are similarly directed *to us, for now* as members of Westlake church, Lausanne.

We're told three key things about the church at Sardis. We're introduced to her as…

1) **A church asleep** : appearances can be deceptive (v1-2a)
Jesus message is to a wealthy, successful city. It's a centre for trade in the province of Lydia. And on top of that wealth, it's a place of great technological and financial innovation. Under Croesus discovered how to mint gold and silver to sufficiently high purity that could be used as currency. Not only that, but this city could even take pride in having re-built itself after destruction by an earthquake in AD17 probably just a generation before the letter was written. Truly an impressive CV; people looked at Sardis and saw success.

Have you noticed that the intro's to each church's letters vary, picking up on elements of that wonderful vision of Jesus John described in the second half of chapter 1, as appropriate to the church? So to Smyrna (a couple weeks' back) who face persecution and even death for Christ, Jesus is (look down at ch 2 v8) "the first and the last, who died and came to life". He reminded them that faced with aggressive and intimidating persecutors, Jesus has *always* been and *will always* be; that he has overcome death.

So it is with Sardis. Jesus is him who has the (v1) "seven spirits of God and the seven stars" . Other translations render that the "sevenfold Spirit" of God and it's clear the reference is to the third person of the Trinity; he who knows the very thoughts of God himself; all-knowing and all-seeing. Jesus figuratively holds this knowledge in one hand, and in the other he holds the church of Sardis. It's a picture of intense insight.

As Jesus looks deeply at this group of Christians, his diagnosis is devastating: (3v1) "You have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead".

Let's make no mistake; the church at Sardis is not what the world would call a dead church. Maybe even fellow Christians at her sister churches in Asia looked up to her with awe: "there is a group of Christians that is growing, active, successful".

Oh they look for all intents and purposes like very well-to-do Christians in a very comfortable situation, but as Jesus' penetrating gaze rests on the church, that facade is stripped away. As the church stands there naked in the cold light of reality, Jesus' words suggest that none would be more surprised than the church itself. It seems that, just as this church has convinced others of her vibrant faith in Christ, so she has even managed to convince herself. In her comfortable complacency she has fallen asleep.

The trap is wide open for us, too. It's perfectly possible to manufacture the appearance of spiritual life; to do and say all the right things at church. For our colleagues, friends and family to label us as enthusiastic Christians. We might even start to believe it ourselves.

In the 1990's the BBC released what would become one of its most popular comedies (measured by worldwide export). I turned 30 a couple weeks ago, and am painfully aware of indicators of my new found age status, like this one, so let's say I often watched the repeats years later! The title was "keeping up appearances" and in the show we were given an insider's view of Hyacinth Bouquet (really spelt "Bucket") and her frantic attempts to improve her social status and to ingratiate herself with those that she considers superior. The show was a hit - perhaps particularly appropriate within the sometimes stifling confines of polite British culture - and we loved to see right past her hard-won exterior appearance. But what was funny in that comedy, is tragic in the life of a Christian. Maybe sometimes that's what our Christianity is like. Oh yes, it'll be hard work, it might even be exhausting -we'll make loads of sacrifices -, and it certainly won't bring us any joy in knowing Jesus.

Sardis is a church asleep, and we are faced with the uncomfortable truth that spiritual appearances can be deceptive. "*Wake up!"* Jesus shouts to them.

That brings us to our second point. Sardis is…

2) **A church at risk** : incomplete faith will not save (v2b-3)
The contrast could not be clearer. The church thinks it's alive ; Jesus declares it dead. The church is complacent, comfortable and asleep ; Jesus shouts out a warning.

You can hear the urgency in his words in v 2 "wake up! you are on the verge of death".

Revelation is not a book about the distant future. Sure, some of the events described will take place at the very end of time when Jesus returns to judge, but the reason that God lifts the curtain of eternity in the book of Revelation is to inform the church then and us now how to live in the light of that future reality. These are things that God tells "his servants" "must happen soon". And for Sardis, unless a change happens, they are in great danger now. But what is that danger?

The people in the church at Sardis had heard the gospel and their initial response had looked promising; indeed a church had been established (v3). Certainly there were a few in the church who had truly been converted - Jesus refers to them in v4 "you still have a few names in Sardis, people who have not soiled their garments". But for most of them it seems that their initial enthusiasm for the gospel had not lasted.

Jesus keeps referring to their "works" while diagnosing their condition: "I know your works" (v1), "I have not found your works complete" (v2).

Is he saying that if only they were to work a bit harder, they would pass the threshold for acceptance? A sort of legalistic assault course? Of course he isn't. John has already reminded them in 1v5 that a Christian is "freed from [his or her] sins by [Jesus'] blood". In fact, John has spent a lot of time emphasising God's gospel grace in ch1 - he is unambiguous ; a person is welcomed into friendship with God as a gift, not a reward for being good. So what's going on here?

He is picking up on a common biblical theme that if God has entered a person to bring about conversion by virtue of his grace, he always follows through to produce a changed life. And for Sardis, the evidence is just not there ; Jesus is questioning whether they were ever really converted at all.

The risk they face, therefore, is simple. A so-called "incomplete salvation" is no salvation at all. Some of those in the church at Sardis are in terrible spiritual danger. Look at the end of verse 3. Without Christ, they face an hour in the future when Jesus will oppose them. What's worse, in their complacency they will not even see it coming. It'll be like a burglary, catching them totally unawares. They are at risk of one day finding themselves face to face with God and (v5) with no entry found in the "book of life" there is no entry to heaven. Sardis is a church at great risk ; an incomplete faith will not save.

Finally, Jesus presents them with a choice that they must make urgently. Sardis is …

3) **A church at a crossroads** : Jesus' response to true repentance (v4-6)

As the letter was being read, some of those at Sardis would have felt the pain of Jesus' words cutting through the facade they had constructed and pinpointing their true condition. The command of Jesus to them is not complicated, it's simple. v3 "Remember, then, what you received and heard. Keep it, and repent".

Jesus commands no ritual, requires no work of penance, insists on no impressive outward display of emotion. No, he simply calls them back to the gospel. Yes, for some of them their salvation is incomplete. Yes, some of them are in great danger. But, for now, the offer of the gospel remains available to them.

The ruler of the kings of earth, Jesus who speaks these words to the church in Sardis, the ancient one with all splendour and majesty, before whom John could only fall at his feet as though dead, is the same Jesus who died for them. As John recalls this Jesus in ch 1 he bursts into praise. 1v5 Jesus is the one who loves them and has freed [true Christians] from their sins by his blood"

Yes, in the black and white terms of v1 their condition is best described as dead, but wait, a glimmer of hope remains if they return to the gospel. Let them recognise their hypocrisy and superficiality, let them treat as worthless their great reputation, and let them cry out to Jesus with the words of the tax collector "have mercy on me a sinner".

The promise of Jesus to those who do repent is wonderful, isn't it? They are v4 to be clothed in the white garments of his righteousness; to be called to walk alongside the great King. And not only that, rather than finding themselves disastrously undone on the last day, they will find a King who is proud to name them before almighty God. Because of his death, the book of life will contain their names, if they repent.

Jesus' words have been hard, but the church would be making a mistake to discard them as simply offensive. The church at Sardis stands at a crossroads, looking down a road to disaster, but with Jesus' beckoning them another way. We see Jesus' loving warning, and his gracious and wonderful response to true repentance.

Conclusion/application
We're not given the end of the story. We don't know if the church at Sardis carried on its charade or not. Maybe they listened solemnly and politely, thinking of how appropriate this message would be for someone else in the congregation, quietly admiring the stirring message John had brought them. Or maybe they were cut to the heart as Jesus' words of love highlighted their need for the gospel once more, and they cried out to him for mercy at the foot of cross.

We're not given the end of the story, and that's no mistake. Whilst immediately directed at the historical church of Sardis, 1v1 reminds us that the words of the book are words for all Jesus' servants.

As a church body, how should we hear this? Are we, in reality, pretty happy with ourself as a church? We're "sound" doctrinally. We're growing. We look great, on the outside, but is that external reputation matched by real love for and devotion to Jesus?

Perhaps individually, too, we feel Jesus shining the light of truth onto our own lives. None of us would claim that our feelings and actions fully reflect what we know to be true about Jesus. There's some measure of hypocrisy in all of us.
But maybe for some of us in the privacy of our own hearts we realise our lives just don't back up our claim to be Christians, beyond the bits of polish we've been able to work up.
It's hard to discern our motives in every area of life. But perhaps it would be helpful to ask ourselves where the balance lies between outward activity and inward devotion. It's easy to be a flurry of activity at church; but how much does our diary say about our private devotional life? Do we **ever** find joy in times with the Lord, reading the Bible? Does our devotion to Jesus go beyond our reputation … at all? An incomplete faith would not save the people in the church of Sardis, and it will not save us.

If that's you, then be encouraged. You're not asleep! Jesus calls you back to the gospel you first heard, maybe years ago! His voice is urgent, yes, but not one of reproach only ; he is one who loves you and gave himself up for you. It may be that some of us have never really experienced the freedom of being known and loved by God, the freedom from having to perform before him or others. For others it may be that we are Christians, but we're very aware of our hypocrisy. But wherever you stand, what matters is whether we come back to the gospel. The forgiveness he offers now is the same as it has always been and those who

repent he will clothe with his own righteousness. His offer is free, overflowing with grace and the matchless love of one who would die in your place.

A word to those of tender conscience: Jesus is not undermining your assurance if you're trusting him. All Christians this side of heaven stumble and fall. Your right standing before God is grounded in Jesus' death for you not on your performance.

Jesus words of warning are directed at those who mask the absence of genuine love for him with a fake exterior of apparently spiritual activity. It is to them he warns that appearances can be deceptive - that we can kid everyone and even ourselves, but not Jesus. Such an incomplete faith will not save, but Jesus stands ready to welcome those who hear the warning and flee back to the gospel. He, or she, who has an ear, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.