

Introduction

Today is the third sermon in a series that looks at the letters to the churches in the book of Revelation. Last week Richard Turnbull looked at the letter written to the Church in Smyrna while the week before Ian took us through the letter written to the church in Ephesus. Today we look at the letter written to the church in Pergamum.

What these 7 letters offered to the churches then and what they also offer to us now is a reminder and a challenge that we must constantly fight against the temptation to become loveless, immoral, lenient, compromising, lifeless, or casual about our faith. The letters make it clear how God feels about these faults.

Also recognise that although this was written by John it was Jesus who gave this revelation of himself to John enabling this scripture to be written. So let's be clear about this - what we hear in Revelation is Jesus' words speaking to us. So it goes without saying that it's worth listening and acting upon. So before we begin to unpack the specific reading we've heard this morning take heart from Jesus' words right at the beginning of Revelation 1:3 "Blessed is the one who reads the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is written in it, because the time is near".

So let's start to open up chapter 2 verses 12-17 - but as we do this realise we are a church, we are one body in Christ, we all have a part to play, so as we delve into this passage be aware that it will reveal things about the church in Pergamum 2000 years ago and by the same token Christ Church here in Chineham in 2009.

It will reveal some good things but it will also reveal other things that are not right with God. So as we think about what this scripture says to us consider that if we have things that are not right with God within our church they effectively apply to all of us because we all have a collective responsibility.

So let's go to Pergamum and work out what was going on and as we do that the following three points will emerge. These are the three R's

1. Recognise (compromise)
2. Repent (now - immediately)
3. Reward (reward from Christ as we repent and hold onto the truth)

The city of Pergamum was a sophisticated place, a centre of Greek culture and education. But it was also the centre of various cults, and it rivalled Ephesus in its worship of idols. The city's chief god was Asclepius who was considered the god of healing. People came to Pergamum from all over the place to seek healing from this god.

Pergamum was also the Roman capital of the province of Asia. As such it also had the very first temple erected in honour of a living Roman emperor and so the pressure to conform to worship of the emperor would have been significant in Pergamum. This wasn't a very Christ honouring city and there would have been considerable pressure upon the Christians of that time to compromise on their faith.

So it is perhaps significant that this letter to the Pergamum Christians begins in verse 12 with Christ introducing himself by saying "These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword". Just as the Romans used their swords for authority and judgement, Jesus' sharp, double-edged sword represents God's ultimate authority and judgement. For example in Hebrews 4:12 we hear "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart." God's word convicts and spurs us into actions and whilst here in Revelation, this is God's word written specifically to the Pergamum church, it is also meant for us today.

However, let's be clear about this - although the Church in Pergamum has some problems it also has some plus points and in verse 13 Christ writes to commend it giving us a picture of the things that were right. "I know where you live-where Satan has his throne. Yet you remain true to my name. You did not renounce your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, who was put to death in your city-where Satan lives".

Pergamum was called the city "where Satan has his throne". It was surrounded by worship of Satan and the Roman emperor as god, and yet the Christian church at Pergamum refused to renounce their faith, even when Satan's worshippers martyred, Antipas one of their members. So Jesus commended them for holding fast to his name. He commended them because they did not renounce their faith even in the midst of persecution. We don't know much about Antipas, but commentators suggest he was roasted in a brazen bull. It seems clear that at some time in the past, persecution had touched these people personally, but they remained firm.

If we think about this in terms of today we may not be threatened with death and being roasted in a brazen bull but we probably all recognise that standing firm against the strong pressures and temptations of society is never easy. Nevertheless, despite the times in which we live when anything and everything seems to be acceptable, we have the opportunity every day to uphold Jesus' name and his standards. So we have to ask ourselves - are we faithful in doing this? Which moves us to our first point.

1. "Recognise Compromise".

Let me ask you a question: What is a Christian supposed to do... ? Well, there are many ways to talk about what a Christian is - what we're called to do and be. But one pretty good definition is that a Christian is someone whose faith is in Jesus Christ, and is faithful in serving him. But let's be honest with each other - following Jesus, and serving him is not always easy to do. It's a jungle out there. There are a lot of people who make it difficult to be followers of Jesus.

There's times we really don't feel like being forgiving. And there's situations in business and at work and at University and at school where... Well, let's just say we sometimes may be tempted to be a bit less Christian and a bit more like the world around us. It's easy when the pressures on to think I'll let my faith slide a bit today, just this once. What harm could it do? And that leads us neatly into verses 14 and 15 which provides a picture of the things that were wrong within the church in Pergamum.

14Nevertheless, I have a few things against you: You have people there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin by eating food sacrificed to idols and by committing sexual immorality. **15**Likewise you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

So what's all this about? Some of the Pergamum Christians were being influenced by the teaching of Balaam. You can read about Balak and Balaam in Numbers 23-24. Basically back in the Old Testament Balak was a king who employed a prophet called Balaam to pronounce a curse on the Israelites. Although Balaam didn't manage to curse them he did manage to influence many Israelites to turn to idol worship. And what of this group called the Nicolaitans. Though it is difficult to know exactly who these people were it appears they claimed to have a special relationship to God which gave them "special knowledge" and freedom from the law and so they happily participated in sexual pleasures and eating food offered to idols.

Any way the upshot of this is that Christ rebukes the Pergamum church for tolerating those who lead people away from God. So here we have some of the Pergamum Church being lead astray by some false teaching that proclaimed one could be a Christian but with a bit of compromise you could still live like the world and accept it for what it is. For example some seemed pretty comfortable being a Christian and yet still worshipped the emperor or ate food offered to idols, or even participated in sexual orgies which were part of the pagan worship. These were Christians in name even though they acted no differently from the world that was around them. They compromised their faith big time and it was a dangerous. It was dangerous then and this compromising approach to the Christian faith still remains dangerous today.

The net result is that when we adopt this approach we effectively start saying anything goes and we simply stand by and accept the things that are going on around us even though they are wrong. We end up compromising the Christian stand not only to the detriment of ourselves but also those ensnared in the sin we seem so readily prepared to accept. Now don't get me wrong - I'm conscious that as followers of Jesus we need to be out there encouraging people to discover Jesus for themselves. Therefore naturally we need to co-operate and get along with people as much as we can, but at the same time it's important that we avoid any alliance, partnership, or participation that could lead to immoral practices. Sure there is room for differences of opinions but how do we feel about pornography, sexual sin, cheating, gossiping and lying. (CLICK) Do these sorts of things go on in Basingstoke - yes they do? And what about Chineham - well - yes they do.(CLICK) And when these things happen do we simply tolerate sin and bow to pressure to be open-minded.

It's not easy for me to stand up here and say this because I know I see this sort of thing happening indeed sometimes it's me making it happen and I'm afraid to say that all too often I just accept that's the way it is. This is tough but just as Jesus posed this challenge to the Pergamum Church 2000 years ago and effectively said "Hey guys recognise you are compromising your faith" - he still poses that

same challenge to each and every one of us today in 2009.

You see the fact is living in Satan's town was no excuse for the Pergamum Christians and living in a sinful world is no excuse for us. Do we happily live in the sin of today's society or do we maintain that we are called to a distinctive way of living and that actually there's a difference between good and bad, right and wrong?

And do we try and help each other when we witness our brother or sister in Christ compromising their faith or do we just stand to one side and let them get on with it because we don't want to upset them. During the last Alpha course here I helped as one of the group leaders. I decided to commit myself to turn up every week and do my bit. What I didn't reckon on was Reading forcing a draw away to Tottenham Hotspur in the FA Cup and the reply being scheduled at the same time as one of the Alpha evenings. I really wanted to go and see my team play. Surely it wouldn't matter if I missed just one evening. I'm really pleased to say that someone had the guts to very gently suggest to me that I should really think it through and they urged me to stay faithful to my commitment to the Alpha course. I'm really pleased that I did, firstly because I knew deep down this was actually the right thing to do. And secondly because Reading lost 1-0!

Now don't get me wrong, there is nothing wrong with going to a football match, in fact I'd recommend it! But what if I'd gone, what would that have said to those people in my discussion group, people who were on the edge of their faith - people who I'd made a commitment to?

Had that person not offered those gentle words of wisdom it's likely I would have gone to the match. They were true to their faith and were prepared to risk offering gentle words of wisdom that enabled me to avoid compromising my own faith. High as they are we need to be constantly striving to keep Christ's standards and as such be on the look out for Satan's desire for us to compromise Jesus' call on our lives.

So what's the remedy for us if we do compromise our stand to follow Jesus? Well it's right there in verse 16: 16 Repent therefore! Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

2. Repent immediately

A couple of weeks ago Ian used the word 'repent' in his sermon about the letter to the church in Ephesus. Remember that repent basically means "change direction" - turn away from the things that hinder our love for Jesus.

This call to repent in verse 16 is a command from Jesus and it's a command to repent immediately. Those who had fallen away were to repent immediately of their deeds and the Pergamum church was to repent of its failure to deal with these problems that existed in the first place. God was calling them to no longer compromise on what was true, condone what was ungodly or crave anything that wasn't pure. Yes - this applied to the Pergamum church then but it also applies to us today. We are not encouraged to linger in Satan's ways, but to repent, change our mind, actions and attitude immediately.

Verse 16 also makes it pretty clear that the consequence for not repenting is that we will face God's word - his sword - this time in judgment and condemnation.

His word is a powerful opponent - it calmed storms, healed sick people, drove out demons. What Jesus says to us here has to be taken seriously, and acted upon with speed and determination. If we are living in compromise today, Christ is telling us to turn around and to turn around - QUICKLY.

But there's good news at the end of this passage as we discover a final message from Jesus that offers a wonderful picture of promise in verse 17 : He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give some of the hidden manna. I will also give him a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to him who receives it.

3. Reward

Christ ends with a promise of reward to those who heed his warnings and respond in repentance.

So let's spell out these promises...

Firstly Hidden Manna is promised. Remember that back in the Old Testament manna was given to the people of Israel during their desert wanderings. It was God's amazing provision and showed his concern for his people.

The reference to Manna here, however is more than a reference to physical food. It is the hidden manna - that which can not be seen by man. Remember that Jesus called himself the bread of life and contrasted himself with the Manna of old ... John 6: 47-51 says ... 47I tell you the truth, he who believes has everlasting life. 48I am the bread of life. 49Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. 50But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. 51I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world."

While the manna of the Old Testament sustained physical life for a time, the bread of life - "Jesus" - came to give life and life in abundance. The bread that is Christ is all sufficient for us through all situations, but is only available to us if we repent.

The hidden manna therefore is a promise to those who turn around, hold to the truth and refuse to compromise. God promises to reveal himself and be our spiritual nourishment until that day we can eat with him in heaven.

And what of this second promise of a white stone with a new name on it. Commentators appear to be unsure what is meant by this white stone, though clearly it did convey some assurance of blessing. What Jesus is saying to the Pergamum Church and to us is "do we want to gain that genuine closeness to him"? Do we want to live life and live life in abundance? Do we want to truly know his blessings upon us? If 'yes' then he makes it pretty clear - repent of those things that stand in the way and put aside the compromises that we allow to infiltrate our faith. He wants us to hold on to the truth, stand firm and avoid compromising despite the pressures that society places upon us.

Do you not see what powerful incentives Jesus has given the church in Pergamum and the church of today to repent? Sadly it seems that History confirms the Pergamum Church did not take the word of the Christ seriously because today not much of this ancient city remains.

Summary

So where are we at ... We live in a time and a place where it is so easy to compromise our stand. It is easy for us to get caught up in the acceptance of things that society has simply come to accept. Well the message from this passage seems pretty clear. If we are guilty of living a compromised Christian life, then Christ calls us to repent quickly. The rewards for doing so are that He will sustain us (physically and spiritually) and pour blessings upon us.

The words of Jesus may sting, but they come from His great compassion. We need to remember that while God loves and accepts us as we are, He loves us too much to leave us that way. His objective is to transform our lives, for our good and His glory.

So - are we compromising? Do we need to repent? Are we assured of our hidden manna and white stone? He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. Recognise where this applies to us, repent and live in expectation of God's reward.