

PERGAMUM

After a brief interlude last week, with the Women of Vision and Mary and Martha, we return to the book of Revelation. You may recall that the apostle John, son of Zebedee, ex-fisherman of Capernaum, is now an old man and is the apostle to the churches in the Roman province of Asia Minor in what is now western Turkey. And John had come to the attention of the authorities who had exiled him to the rocky prison island of Patmos – off the coast of Turkey in the Aegean Sea between Cos and Samos (the places where sun-seekers now go on holiday). John had been preaching and teaching about Jesus (1:9) which had got him into trouble and like all authorities before or since, they had arrested the leaders of the Christians and exiled him (them) in the hope that without such ‘troublemakers’, things would die down.

The nearest modern day equivalent, perhaps, is the long imprisonment of Nelson Mandela and his compatriots on Robben Island off the coast of South Africa.

And one Sunday, John describes himself as being ‘in the Spirit’ – quite what he’s doing we don’t know (worshipping, praying, maybe speaking in a spiritual language provided by the Holy Spirit), but he’s obviously tuned very much into God.

And he receives an amazing vision or series of visions which form the content of the book we call Revelation.

The first vision is of the risen Jesus dressed in a white robe with a golden sash over his chest. His hair is pure white like wool, his eyes flash like fire, his feet like bronze glowing in a furnace and his face shining like the sun in all its strength. His voice is described as being like “many rushing waters” (i.e. like the sound of a huge waterfall). John is told to write down messages to each of the churches in seven named cities. We’ve had a look at the first two of these messages – to Ephesus and Smyrna – and now we come to the third message – to the church at a place called Pergamum. Let’s read the letter:-

To the angel of the church in Pergamum write:

“These are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. 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.

Nevertheless, 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. Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitians. Repent, therefore! Otherwise I will come and fight against them with the sword of my mouth.

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.”

Rev. 2:12-18

Let’s pray before we look at the letter.

First of all, who is it addressed to? Pergamum was about 40 miles north of Ephesus and 13 miles inland up a valley. Although it couldn’t compete with Ephesus and Smyrna for trade (it was inland) or with Ephesus for splendour, it was the capital city

of the area. (Nowadays, Washington DC may not be as powerful or well known as New York, but it is the capital of the USA.) When Alexander the Great's empire broke up upon his death, one part became the Attalid Kingdom which had Pergamum as the capital. In 133BC its dying king willed it into the empire of the Romans. The Romans kept it as the capital of their province of Asia. By the time John wrote, Pergamum had been a capital for 300 years (roughly the same as Washington DC by coincidence). And as a famous capital city, Pergamum had some world class (and world known) features. It had a library with 200,000 books (all handwritten) and a place of great scholarship.

At one point all books were written on papyrus, which comes from a Nile reed. **Then the king of Pergamum tried to live the librarian of Alexandria (a man called Aristophanes of Byzantium) to their library. The Egyptians retaliated by cutting off supplies of papyrus and so the scribes of Pergamum began writing on specially prepared animal skins, which became known as "Le Pergamen Charta" (the Pergemene sheet), which became in time corrupted to 'parchment'.**

It was also a celebrated centre of religious worship. There was a famous temple to the Greek god of healing, Asklepios, with associated medical schools and wards for the sick. People came here to be cured and one thing they did was to be allowed to sleep in the temple. At night tame snakes would come and move between and over the sleeping sick and it was thought that someone touched by a snake would be healed as they had been touched by the god whose symbol was the serpent. There were also temples to Zeus and Athene, which were halfway up the hill that dominated the town. The altar to Zeus was very famous and you only had to look up from Pergamum to see it and the smoke of the sacrifices.

But most importantly still, Pergamum prided itself on being a prominent centre of emperor worship. There was a continual pressure from each citizen to acknowledge the deity of the Roman emperor. Each year, loyal subjects would take a pinch of incense and offer it at the altar of Caesar's temple and say "Caesar is lord." Except that the Christians wouldn't do this because as far as they were concerned, Jesus is Lord and there could be no other. In times of persecution, failure to perform this simple act could lead to the death penalty at the extreme. And Pergamum was the epicentre of Caesar-worship in the province.

To the church in this place the risen Lord Jesus describes himself as the one with the two-edged sword. In 1:16, John describes the sword as coming from his mouth and there is no doubt that it refers to the word of Jesus. Does anyone know what a two-edged sword is designed for? (Sheila is excluded from this as she's seen one at the Roman army museum at Carvoran on Hadrian's Wall in Northumberland. You have two sharp edges on a sword that is designed to pierce and stab – if you're going to slash or cut, you only need one sharp edge – the main Roman infantry sword or "gladius" was a short, sharp two-edged blade that the Roman soldier stabbed out from between his neighbour's shield into the opposition's vital organs. And Jesus says to the people of the church at Pergamum that he's armed with an offensive weapon – his word can pierce and divide. Not to be taken lightly then. If someone comes at you with a sharp knife, they grab your attention – Jesus says he is coming armed with that sort of weapon.

And first of all, he tells them that he knows where they live and the Greek word used here has the technical meaning of "stopping for good". The church folk at Pergamum don't have the option of moving on – they're stuck there. What's more, it's the place

where Satan rules. Yet, although the Pergamene church is stuck in this forbidden place, they had stayed true to Jesus' name even when one of their number; a man called Antipas, had been executed for being a faithful witness to Jesus. Almost certainly, Antipas would not say 'Caesar is lord' but insisted on 'Jesus is Lord' and so was martyred – church tradition has it that he was roasted to death in a bronze bull, but we don't really know. What we do know is that he was killed for his faithful witness; yet the others would not abandon the name of Jesus.

But with the word “nevertheless”, we see the piercing nature of the words of the risen Christ. He has things against them. With their number were those who followed the teaching of Balaam. Who is he? Well, to find out we have to go back to the book of Numbers. Balaam was a man with genuine prophetic powers or gifting, who was summoned by the king of Moab (modern South Jordan) to curse the Israelites as they emerged from the desert on their way to the Promised Land of Israel. Balaam was unable to curse Israel because God kept filling his mouth with blessing and also prevented him with angels who would have killed Balaam if his donkey had not kept turning aside despite beatings. You may remember that this animal spoke to warn Balaam of the angel in Numbers 22. But Balaam had a problem – his employer, the king of Moab, was displeased. So Balaam encouraged the Moabites and the Midianites to seduce the Israelites with worship to idols and sexual immorality with their women. This nearly led to the failure of the nation of Israel before they'd even got to the Promised Land. Some of the church people in Pergamum were doing similar things, someone, maybe someone in your trade group, would invite you to a feast at the temple of a foreign god. An animal would be sacrificed and although a portion went to the god, most was cooked up as a feast for the participants. Sometimes, the feast would become more like an orgy as the drink flowed. It was commonplace in the Roman empire of the times for men to have concubines as well as wives. Some Christians thought it was okay to compromise and fit in with society. The risen Jesus will have none of it and says that if there is no repentance, then he will come and fight with the compromising ones with his sharp sword. This is no idle threat – we mess with compromise at our peril. The sources of compromise are always the same in the New Testament. When the Council of Apostles at Jerusalem in Acts 15 was writing to the gentile converts about what was required of them, what rules did they insist on?

“It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything but the following requirements. You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things.”

Acts 15:28-29

And here we are 40-50 years later with people in Pergamum straying down the same paths.

And what of us? We may not be invited to a pagan feast and asked to eat food offered to idols, but we are tempted to follow down worshipping celebrity, putting everything second to the cult of money or even the cult of me. And as for sexual immorality – our culture is riddled with it, isn't it? The Christian standard is sexual union between a married couple who stay faithful for life. That's the way God designed it and that's the standard. If anyone is sleeping around, they should stop. If anyone wants to

marry, they can and joyful, physical union is encouraged within that covenant relationship. Adultery is off limits. There should be no compromise among us.

There is a reward or rewards for overcoming in these areas. To the overcomer, Jesus will give a feast of 'hidden manna' – heavenly food not earned but given graciously and daily. Clean food in contrast to the soiled food from idol worship.

And this white stone business. When invited to a do, participants were often given a stone (often a white one) as an entrance key to be given to the doorman at the feast. Jesus is saying that if we overcome, we'll be given an invitation to that greatest of all feasts in heaven, at God's table.