

## **“LETTERS FROM THE LORD – 4: PERGAMUM”**

### *Revelation 2:12-17*

We’ve already had a look at two very different letters that the Risen Lord Jesus Christ told John to send to seven of the Christian churches dotted around the west of Asia Minor at the end of the first century AD. The churches at Ephesus and Smyrna were worshipping and witnessing in two great trading cities in the Roman Empire. Today we turn our attention to Pergamum – not a great trading city, but one which surpassed them both in importance, for Pergamum was a capital city. When Alexander the Great divided up his huge empire, Pergamum became the capital city of Asia and in 133BC it became the capital of the Roman province of Asia. So when John wrote this divinely dictated letter to the Christians there it had been a place of great importance for over 300 years.

One of its greatest attractions was the huge library that stood there, second only to the great library in Alexandria in the ancient world. It held 200,000 books – an amazing number in the days when everything was copied out by hand. Its link with literature was so great that our English word “parchment” is derived from the name of the city. I know I said we wouldn’t go into the background too much, but I’ll just mention this – all books used to be written on papyrus, which was supplied to Pergamum by the great library at Alexandria, but when Pergamum tried to poach Alexandria’s chief librarian, they cut off supplies of papyrus and another material had to be found – what we now call parchment.

Anyway, the main attraction of the city wasn’t the library but the amazing variety of religious activity that went on there. Pergamum was a great centre for the worship of pagan gods, particularly Zeus, Athena, Demeter and Hera. And it was, as many historians have described it, “*the Lourdes of the ancient world*”, because there was also a temple to the god Asclepius Soter, the god of healing. Now listen to this, those of you who really don’t like going to the doctor. If you were ill, you would go at night to the temple of Asclepius and lie on the floor on the dark. There were hundreds of non-venomous snakes which crawled around the temple floor and if one touched you, it was taken to be the touch of the god and you could consider yourself healed. This is one explanation of the phrase “*Satan’s throne*”. The symbol of Asclepius was the serpent (still used today by pharmacists and Army medical units), but that creature was linked in believers’ minds with Satan, and the title of Asclepius – “*Soter*” – means “*Saviour*”, so Christians would have found all this a bit blasphemous.

However, it’s more likely that this phrase is used because this city was the first and greatest centre of Emperor worship in Asia. The way in which the state – and particularly the state’s personification in the person of the Emperor – had usurped the place of God in the lives of the citizens of the Roman Empire meant that it well deserved the name of Satan in the opinion of the Christians. That’s even more likely as the meaning of the word for “*throne*” used here includes the idea of power as well as place.

And it’s here – here in this seat of Satan’s power – that the believers live. In the other six letters Jesus says to the churches “*I know your deeds*”, but here he says “*I know where you live*”. And that’s not the usual word for “*live*” that we find in the New Testament. Usually it has an idea of a temporary stay, a sojourn. Christians are usually those who are just passing through this world on their way to their true home. But the word used here means permanent residence. Jesus is saying, effectively, that these believers are stuck here, with no means of escape at the moment. They have to live within this system and live within it as Christians, with all the trials and difficulties that that entails. And we too are called to live within the society, the culture of our time, and recognise our responsibility to witness to it rather than withdraw from it.

In this Christian community at Pergamum, the majority of the believers are faithful in the face of what must have been considerable danger. Even the death of Antipas has not weakened their resolve to “*remain true to [Christ’s] name.*” Antipas is reckoned to have been the first Christian martyr in Asia and he was executed by being roasted alive in a bronze bull – a rather bizarre death that was meant to stand as a warning to other believers. This is, by and large, a faithful and committed bunch of Christian people.

But we know from the two letters we've already read that there comes a point where Christ has more to say ("Yet" in the first two letters) and here it is introduced with "Nevertheless" in English (although it's actually the same phrase each time in Greek – ἀλλὰ εἰς). Despite the faithfulness of these Christians in the face of a great deal of opposition, there are some problems which need to be dealt with.

And the main problem is the one which I think is the underlying problem in all these seven places – and is still the number one difficulty particularly for western Christians today. They stand accused of compromise with the values of the society around them. However much Christians in Western Europe bleat on today about persecution and the eclipse of Christian faith in the public arena, the biggest threat to our existence is compromise by Christians with the values and attitudes of the culture of greed, short-termism and personal hedonism which are all around us. So what Jesus Christ has to say to these beleaguered first-century Christians is very relevant to us today. "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches."

Two people are mentioned in this letter whom we really need to avoid, for their teachings (or the teachings of those like them) have had a powerful effect on God's people down through the centuries. And it's interesting that their names both mean the same. Balaam and Nicolaus – one Hebrew, one Greek – both mean "Conquer the people". Both of them were trying to defeat the people of God by insidious means. Balaam we read about in *Numbers* (from chapter 22). He advised King Balak of a way to overcome the people of Israel whom he saw as a threat to his power. Rather than attack them openly, he should try and seduce them away from their God with opportunities of pagan worship and sexual immorality. Pagan women literally seduced the men away and drew them into the worship of false gods. Although no-one has ever successfully pinned down who Nicolaus was, it's clear from the context here and in other letters that he was doing the same kind of thing with followers of Christ. The Christians in Pergamum may well have been facing direct attacks from the pagan worshippers and the forces of the state who wanted them to show their allegiance to Caesar by worshipping him. But there were far more subtle pressures at work on them as well.

One of them was to do with the eating of food that had been sacrificed to idols. St Paul had a fairly liberal view on this, as you can read in *Romans 14 & 15*, allowing people to follow their individual conscience about it. But here in Pergamum it is obviously proving to be a problem that's a bit harder to swallow (in more ways than one). It's a form of compromise that is not helpful to these people and they have to make a stand on something in a city that is so polluted by pagan worship. Remember that Daniel and his friends took a similar stand when they first arrived in Babylon (*Daniel 1*).

Then other main issue was to do with sexual immorality. (It's interesting that these two issues are the ones which were specifically mentioned in the Letter from the Council of Jerusalem to the new Christian churches in *Acts 15*). It has been said that the major new virtue which Christianity brought to the ancient world was chastity, because for most people sexual immorality just wasn't an issue. Prostitutes were seen as providing a much needed public service. Concubines were accepted as a normal part of any relatively well-off household. The Greek writer Demosthenes actually summed it all up when he wrote: "We have courtesans for pleasure: we have concubines for the sake of daily co-habitation: we have wives for the sake of having children legitimately and of having a faithful guardian of the household affairs." Now, apart from the obvious expense involved, the Christian teaching about sexual faithfulness and being "one flesh" grated rather hard against the prevailing culture.

The teaching of the followers of Balaam and Nicolaus encouraged the Christians to think that it really didn't matter. Think back a couple of months to Wayne Rooney's surprise that his wife Coleen should be upset that he'd spent time with a prostitute – that's the kind of attitude. After all, everyone else was doing it. It was an accepted part of life. But once their loyalty to their spouse was called into question, what did that say about their loyalty to God. And what about the aspect of the use of sexual activity in pagan worship. Pagan temples were full of prostitutes who were there to help the men in their expression of worship to the gods. Both this and the issue of eating food that had been prepared for idols boiled down to an issue of idolatry – if they succumbed to these pressures then the first claim on their loyalty and

faithfulness was no longer God. There was probably immense pressure from the surrounding culture to get involved in these things – and some people within the church were saying, by their practice and by their teaching, that it was all really OK.

Nothing much has changed in 1900 years, has it? The pressures are still there. We are still tempted to conform and to compromise. And often we try to justify it from a Christian perspective – I'll lose my right to witness if I don't identify with them in some way, everyone else is doing it, a god of love can't be that repressive, and so on. And certainly as far as sexual immorality goes, the very same problem is still with us. There is just so much that bombards us on the subject of sex, from the way it's slipped into costume drama on the television and music videos on MTV to the way it's so blatantly used to sell stuff in advertisements. And just go and have a look along the shelves in your local newsagent or supermarket. I don't mean the top shelves! Look at the covers of women's magazines, lads' mags, teenage magazines. They all have mention of sex on the cover in some way or other. (You'll be pleased to know that *The People's Friend* has so far managed to resist!)

It would be naive in the extreme to assume that such preoccupation with sex – which is pretty well always divorced (if that's the right word) from any talk of faithfulness or commitment – did not have an effect on Christians. And you don't have to turn over too many stones in most churches to see that there are still those who “*hold to the teachings of Balaam*”. It is a compromise, a selling out to the values and idols of the world.

The issue of meat offered to idols is perhaps not quite so much of a problem today – unless you are someone who has been influenced by some of the hysteria (not listeria) to do with the issue of supermarkets selling unmarked hallal meat. Or is it? What about churches using money from the National Lottery – money that has been offered up to the supreme god of this age, Quick Profit. There is so much that we take on board quite uncritically and accept without really asking what god such and such an idea has first been offered to – the gods of materialism, of individualism, of nationalism, of sectarianism, of consumerism. How easy do we find it simply to follow the ways of the world without stopping to think what it might say about us? In the book I mentioned in the first sermon in this series, *You've Got Mail* by Stephen Travis, there is a list of things we might find we're slipping into. I could have paraphrased these and pretended they were my ideas, but I'll be honest with you and give them to you as Mr Travis does. He says that we are like the church at Pergamum when we:

- *Are more concerned to be popular than to be faithful to Christ*
- *Expect to find glory without suffering, birth without pain*
- *Accept without question the values which dominate our society – for example, the expectation of an ever-increasing standard of living, whatever the implications this may have for other people or other nations*
- *Do something simply because 'everybody does it'*
- *Give space to the idea that Jesus is only one of many possible ways to God*
- *Surrender to the common assumption that God may receive attention on Sundays, but has little to do with our lives from Monday to Saturday*
- *Allow people to kid us that religion is a private matter, not to be discussed or argued about, and certainly not to be related to everyday life or to business or political affairs*
- *Look to Jesus simply as a personal source of help and encouragement, rather than as Lord of creation who has a purpose for the whole world and calls us to be involved in that purpose*
- *Fail to see how revolutionary the Sermon on the Mount is meant to be when it is actually allowed to mould our vision of what our own lives and our society might become.*

I'm sure there are others we could add to that, but the main way to resist such compromise is to think critically about what we do and why we do it.

Alas! The Pergamum Christians were already up to their necks in some of these things, and that makes the task of keeping pure so much more difficult – as it does for us today. So the key word here – as it was to the Ephesian Christians – is “*Repent!*” A new start is called for, a new beginning to their lives. Of

course, they are still saved, but there's a need to get right with God once again, to set their affairs in order or they will feel the edge of Christ's sword.

Remember that we said each of these letters contains a reference back to the vision of the Risen Christ in chapter 1? Well here the title that Christ uses is "*he who has the sharp double-edged sword*". That refers to *1:16* and still has something to say to us today. For the people in Pergamum who first heard these words they would have stood in stark contrast to the "power of the sword" wielded by the proconsul in the capital city. He held the symbolic sword which gave him the power to execute at will. Christ, though, brings the double-edged sword of his word, which was symbolised by it being seen as a tongue by John. We read about that aspect of it in *Hebrews 4:12*: the word, or Spirit of God who can slice into our lives and our fellowships to expose the hidden evil, who can separate the pure from the impure, the good from the evil, the faithful from the compromised. Jesus says he will come and "*fight against*" the ones who are leading lives of compromise. It's hard stuff to accept, but that's what he says.

Do you need to repent? Is your Christian faith becoming watered down and compromised because of the pressure from the world around. Are you finding that it's difficult to make any real progress in your Christian life because there is something holding you back, some unconfessed sin, maybe? You need to get it sorted out before you feel Christ fighting against you.

But for those who remain faithful, who resist compromise and open themselves to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, there is a reward. To those who overcome there is the promise of the "*hidden manna*". In the Ark of the Covenant, the holiest of all the religious objects of the Jewish people, there were kept three sacred objects: the Ten Commandments, Aaron's rod which had budded, and a small pot of manna. Tradition had it that, at the time of Jeremiah, when the exile took place, the Ark was destroyed, but Jeremiah took and hid the pot of manna. It would be rediscovered when the Messiah finally arrived. For the people of God it was a symbol of wonderful things in store. Great things are promised for the faithful and they will be given a "*white stone*" as a kind of entrance ticket to this final great feast. Stones of various colours were used for all kinds of things in the ancient world, from jury decisions to protective amulets, but in this context it is probably best to think of it like the white stone that was handed in as a ticket on entry to the circuses, where bread was also distributed to the poor.

And with the stone comes the power of Christ's name. Those who are faithful have his protection and power – a "*new name*", not the old name of the Emperor or any other earthly potentate. That's the choice given to the Christians at Pergamum and that's the choice that is still offered to us today. Do you compromise and give in to the pressure of the world around you – pressure to demonstrate your apparent success by the size of your car, the number of houses you own, the clothes you wear, your position in the company? Pressure to appear young and vibrant by the number of one night stands you have, the amount of alcohol you can put away, the idolisation of your body? Are you bowing down to the idols of this age and trying to square that with your Christian faith by reading the Bible selectively and shutting out what the Holy Spirit might be saying to you? Or are you ready to put that behind you, to repent and ask the Holy Spirit to clear out the dross from your life, so that you can look forward to all the good things that Christ has for you with a clear conscience? "*He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.*"

*Discussion notes on next page*

## THE CHURCH AT PERGAMUM *Revelation 2:12-17*

Pergamum was a capital city and had been for around 300 years by the time John wrote *Revelation*. It was famous for its enormous library (from which we get our word "parchment"), but was also the centre of a great deal of religious activity. This almost certainly accounts for its description as "*the throne of Satan*" (v13). This may refer to the worship of Asclepius, the god of healing, whose symbol was a serpent. Or, more probably, it is a reference to the importance of the city for emperor worship (the state is often referred to as "*Satan*" in the later chapters of *Revelation*).

The Christians in Pergamum are to live in this place and witness to Christ in their daily lives. The Greek word translated "*live*" here is not the usual New Testament word, "paroikein" (παροικεῖν), meaning "sojourn", but "katoikein" (κατοικεῖν), meaning "take up permanent residence". The majority of the Christians are resolved to "*remain true to [Christ's] name*" despite the exemplary fate of Antipas.

"*Nevertheless*" (v14), there are still those who are willing to compromise with the values and behaviour of the society around them – followers of the teaching of Balaam and Nicolaus (both names meaning "*Conquer the people*"). Balaam advised King Balak to try and defeat the people of Israel by undermining their morale and morality (see *Numbers 31:16*), and we have seen already (in the letter to the church at Ephesus – 2:6) that the Nicolaitans were sexually immoral. Both the issues mentioned here – eating food offered to idols and sexual immorality – have at root the idea of idolatry, and were among the few things banned by the Council of Jerusalem (*Acts 15:20,29*).

We still have to grapple with the problems of compromise in our own generation (as we saw last week). Peer group pressure, the worldly idols of materialism, nationalism and so on can seem very appealing to us and we need, like the Christians of Pergamum to "*repent*" (v16) of such things or face the prospect of feeling Christ's "*double edged sword*" (vv12,16 cf 1:16), as the Spirit divides the good from the bad.

For those who remain faithful, who resist compromise and who open themselves to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, there is the promise of great reward and the power of the name of Jesus Christ being released in their lives.

### Questions for discussion

1. What effect do you think persecution and some executions like that of Antipas would have on the church in Britain today?
2. Can you think of any contemporary parallels with eating food offered to idols? What should be our response? (A look at *Romans 14* may be useful here.)
3. In which areas do you think we find compromise easiest today? Is compromise sometimes justified? Why/why not? If so, when and how?
4. Does the thought that your works might be judged, even as a Christian, motivate you at all in your Christian life? Why/why not?
5. "*Sexual immorality*" can cover a wide range of things, and the boundaries seem to change from time to time. Are there any absolutes to which we should adhere? On what authority?