

St. Paul's Dorking Small Groups 31st Jan 2010

Past Imperfect Future Tense! - the message of Revelation

A Message for the Church - Pergamum! Rev 2 (12-17)



Word: Key points from Sunday's sermon

Today we visit Pergamum, the third of the seven churches to which the message of Revelation was first addressed. Pergamum was an ancient Greek city that became the capital of the Kingdom of Perga that ruled a vast area of Western Turkey in the Hellenistic period. In Paul's day it would have vied with Ephesus and Smyrna for the title of the first city of Asia with a population of over 200,000 and a huge complex of temples and palaces and a vast library with over 200,000 volumes of parchments. Crowning the city's Acropolis would have been the great altar of Pergamum dedicated to Zeus their Saviour and dominating the city's life would have been pagan temple worship with temples' associated with Asclepion – the god of healing and a Temple dedicated to Emperor Worship (John refers to this as Satan's throne in v13). In the midst of this vast urban complex built to celebrate the creative powers of human ingenuity was the Church—a small seemingly insignificant, powerless, helpless and hapless group of people. A community that, in the words of baptismal liturgy, had 'turned to Christ, repented of their sins and renounced evil.' And in the midst of this city with a priceless collection of thousands of parchments and millions of words full of the writings and wisdom of man, John delivers God's wisdom that takes the Church back to Christ - the Living Word the author and perfecter of faith – read v12.

As with all the letters in chapters 2 and 3 there is a Commendation – an affirmation, a Complaint – a call for accountability and a Correction – a hope for the future

Commendation – read v13. According to Christian tradition Antipas is a reference to the Bishop of Pergamum who was martyred in the first century by being burnt in a brazen bull shaped altar. The Christians in Pergamum were not simple peasant people of the back country they were urban city dwellers struggling with the issues of how Christian witness could be made real and viable within the political and cultural life of a sophisticated urban culture. Today we are increasingly living in a world of sophisticated urban cultures. Across the globe cities are growing at an unparalleled rate as the world's population shifts from rural to urban. Here in the UK the Church – you and I - increasingly face the challenge of a sophisticated urban culture which has seen the inexorable rise of secular liberalism advocating a pluralistic and multicultural approach to life. On the horizon lies a threat to our faith in the form of the Equality Bill which aims to 'tidy up' all the existing legislation on equal opportunities. The problem is that it removes existing exemptions for churches and other faith bodies which allows them to employ people whose beliefs and lifestyles are in accordance with the faith they represent. Tory peer Baroness O'Cathain said recently that the Equality Bill was, for Christian freedom, the "single most damaging Bill" to come before her in 18 years as a member of the House of Lords. George Carey comments: *"It is time for the silent majority in this country to stand up to governments and civil servants who seem determined to stamp out the Christian character of this nation either for fear of causing offence to those of other faiths, or through hostility to faith itself. Now please don't get me wrong. Tolerance and inclusion are prized words for me. But I now find myself saying that Christians may themselves have to engage in civil disobedience to stand up against Governments which arrogantly act under the delusion that every problem and every detail of modern life can be fixed with yet another piece of legislation - sometimes ill-thought through."* In this kind of world where Christ is perceived as only one of many equally valid ways of life we are called to live lives that proclaim Christ as **THE** way, **THE** Truth and **THE** Life. The Church in Pergamum were commended for not renouncing their faith (13) despite the pressure and for remaining true to the name of Jesus – despite the risk (13).

Complaint – Read v14 – 17. References to Balak, Balaam (Numbers 31:16) and the Nicolaitans all represent the temptation to idolatrous religion. The Nicolaitans were 'false prophets' who promoted the doctrine of accommodation to the prevailing culture. John rang the alarm bells for the Church in Pergamum which also ring loud today. A quick rain check on aspects of our faith can reveal such subtle accommodation. Worship – Sunday Worship no longer a priority in the context of everything else that can now be done on Sunday; Prayer – no set time or no time at all with the demands of daily life; Word – there's so much to listen to, absorb, read watch God's Word (whether on Sundays or during the week) is neglected. Witness – if we stand out too much as a Christian surely people will see us as freaks – much better to quietly and peacefully work alongside, adapt!

Correction - John says Repent! Read v16. Change your ways, your thoughts, your actions. Turn away from sin and turn to Christ. We often view the call to repentance as a kind of chiding, negative, guilt inducing call but it is far more about a new opportunity, a call to reorientate our lives to a new model, new pattern of living based firmly on the good news that God has already acted in Jesus to save us. Repentance is God's invitation, his challenge to us as Christian community to change, an opportunity we ignore to our cost read v16. This Word is either a comfort and a strength to us or else it will destroy us!

So finally to the reward – read v17 -18. The manna referred to is self evidently a blessing and although there is a bit of a puzzle as to the origin of the white stones (they range from a first century good luck charm to a ticket for the circus!) they were obviously seen by the Christians in Pergamum as a Blessing as well. The Church then and now is called to repent, to stay loyal to Christ, to stand firm in the faith and true to the name of Jesus. If it does so it will be blessed!



Witness: questions to discuss Before discussion, read the Bible passage and ask God to help you discern what the Spirit wants to say to your group. Consider one or two questions below – don't feel you have to use them all but do consider the key question! Make sure there's plenty of room for prayer and ministry.

- 1) Icebreaker Question: What one 'Temple' lies at the heart of Dorking?
- 2) How can we reconcile/communicate our belief that Christ is **THE** Way, **THE** Truth and **THE** Life in a culture that perceives Christianity as only one of many equally valid ways of life?
- 3) What is your reaction to the comments of Baroness O'Cathain and George Carey?
- 4) Look at the Quick Rain Check regarding Worship, Prayer, Word and Wisdom. Taking one at a time examine the challenge that each is to you/your small group/our Church.
- 5) Do you view repentance as something positive or negative?
- 6) Spend some time meditating on repentance. Let the Spirit direct you and offer up your prayers in to God