

Therfield Chapel
Sermon
The Church in Satan's Throne
Revelation 2 12-17
22nd June 2008

When I was at university in Leeds (a long time of now), I remember meeting a girl a little younger than me who'd recently joined another church in the city

And we got into conversation about her new church and the youth group to which she's joined

After a while she approvingly told me that members of her youth group had a much more enlightened view of sex than in her previous church

She said that although the youth pastor mildly disapproved, no one fussed too much about the sex that was going on between couples in the group

"At least we know how to enjoy ourselves", I think was her remark

I expect that her attitude and comment would not have been untypical for certain members of the church we're considering tonight – the church at Pergamum

Last week we thought about the church at Smyrna and I referred to it as a suffering church or a persecuted church

But tonight – like the church in Leeds - we're going to think about a letter of the Lord Jesus written to a church that was in danger of compromising its testimony to the Lord Jesus – the church at Pergamum

The more I study these seven letters that Jesus wrote via John to the seven churches in Asia Minor, the more I can see their relevance to the church in all ages

It's as if they each address one abiding danger which is common to all churches in all ages

In Ephesus, the great danger was that the Christians there would lose their first love

In Smyrna the danger was that they would buckle under persecution and deny their Lord

And here in Pergamum the danger was that they would compromise by absorbing the practices of the pagan society around them

I think this letter is highly relevant for the church in the western world today

For our danger is not that we face the threat of physical violence; our danger is that we adopt the thinking of our culture and water down the gospel message to make it more acceptable to the times that we live in

The danger is that there is little distinction between the Lord's people and those in the world

And that's what we find at the church at Pergamum

Let's begin in verse 12 "To the angel of the church in Pergamum write: These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-edged sword"

Now we know from previous sermons that this is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ

Then we read on: "I know where you live – where Satan has his throne"

In the first century, Pergamum was a renowned centre for pagan worship

There were many gods worshipped in the city including Zeus and the cult of Caesar

But on the highest point in the city a great temple stood which was used for the worship of the Greek god Asclepius who was the god of healing

In fact you can see that temple in beautiful condition in a Museum in Berlin

People flocked to the temple of healing from all over the Ancient World with all kind of ailments and sicknesses

Now it might be the whole city of Pergamum or this particular temple that Jesus referred to as Satan's throne

We don't really know, but as with all pagan idolatry in the Ancient World, with it came the prostitutes and sexual orgies

And according to the text, it seems that Satan was the one directing the affairs of the city; in fact in various passages of Scripture we are lead to think that Satan stands behind all idolatry receiving the worship that is due to God alone

But the danger – not it seems for the church as a whole – but for some of the congregation, was that of compromising with the forces under Satan's control¹ by involvement in those pagan practices

But before we think about Christ's rebuke and warning, let's note that the first thing that Christ does is to praise them for two things:

¹ G Campbell Morgan, The Letters of Our Lord, p46.

(1) Verse 13b He writes, “Yet (ie in spite of living in Satan’s territory) you remain true to my name”

So the Lord Jesus commends them for their faithfulness to him in the midst of a city that was given over to wickedness and sin

“You remain true to my name”

As a church they proclaimed Jesus’ name as higher than the name of every other god

If they’d lived this side of Charles Wesley’s hymns, they may well have sung as we did tonight:

Jesus, the name high over all
In hell, or earth, or sky;
Angels and men before it fall,
And devils fear and fly.

That’s easy for us to sing, but when you’re a tiny minority in a city of hostile pagans who’ve erected symbols to their gods all over the city and who think that you’re silly fools for believing what you do, it’s not so easy to believe that Jesus is the name high over all

It was a bit like being a Christian today in Mecca – a city surrounded by reminders that at the very least you’re the odd one out; that your conviction is very much the minority one

So Jesus commends them praises them

(2) And the second thing the Lord commends them for is their faithfulness during a time of trial

He writes (verse 12): 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

From this verse we can only assume that there was preciously an incident when these believers were put to the test and were pressurised to renounce their faith

And it seems that they refused to buckle under the pressure and that in consequence one of their number (perhaps their leader) – Antipas - was killed for his stand

So here we have the Lord’s acknowledgement of their faithfulness – it had not gone unnoticed to him

But then he continues: v14 “Nevertheless, I have a few things against you”

We ought to note that Jesus doesn’t let them rest on their laurels; he doesn’t say 50 percent is good enough

No, he's is far too jealous for the integrity of his church for that

So he goes on v14 "You have people there [that is in the church] 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"

So what's that all about? Balaam and Balak and all that?

Well, to understand the point that's being made, we need to recall a little Old Testament history

In the Book of Numbers, it's recorded that the nation of Moab was facing Israel in battle

But when Moab's king, Balak saw the might of Israel's army he panicked and backed down from the fight

But Balak was still determined to destroy Israel so he hired a prophet called Balaam – and his famous talking donkey - to curse Israel

Remember in that culture blessings and curses were a big deal

But if you recall the story God overruled and Balaam couldn't curse the people of God no matter how much money the king of Moab offered him; in fact whenever he tried to curse the Israelites all that came out were blessings and a pronouncement that the Israelites would win the battle

So finally in frustration, Balaam suggested another strategy for undermining the power of the Israelites

Balaam knew that if he could get Israel to fellowship with godless people from the surrounding nations, they would be dragged into idolatry and fornication.

So Balaam proposed that the girls of Moab seduce the young men of Israel

I'll read to you a verse from Numbers 25:

While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, ² who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate and bowed down before these gods. ³ So Israel joined in worshipping the Baal of Peor. And the LORD's anger burned against them.

So as the Israelite young men started to sleep with the Moabite women and marry them – in complete defiance of the command of God - they were soon enticed into the worship the Moabite gods

And the nation was weakened as the loyalty of the Israelite men to Yahweh sapped away to be replaced by increasing attachment to the gods of their wives

And God's anger burned against them

So what Balak the Moabite king could not achieve openly in battle he achieved by stealth – the weakening of the people of God

And it is this story from the Old Testament that Jesus uses here as he rebukes the church in Pergamum

For they were in a similar situation

It seems that there were people in their midst [not the whole flock] who were suggesting that it was ok to indulge in a little idol worship along the worship of the Lord

And the result was that some of them were participating in the pagan rituals which included sexual immorality and eating food sacrificed to idols

The closest thing I can liken this to today would be a group of Christians from a church going off to the Glastonbury Festival (not wrong in itself) and joining in the sexual revelry that the festival is notorious for

That this kind of behaviour was occurring at Pergamum is confirmed by the reference that is made in verse 15 to people in their midst who held to the teaching of the Nicolaitans

Now we don't know much about the Nicolaitans, but what little we do know is that they were known to promote promiscuity and unrestrained indulgence

Their teaching probably said things like:

“We are Christians of course but a little sexual pleasure on the side won't do us any harm... In any case we all have a right to sexual fulfilment”

“Don't be too puritanical and hard-line – after all God wants us to be happy and enjoy ourselves”

In thinking these things they were after all only really following the creed of the ancient world

In fact for many in the Roman Empire, Jesus' instruction to deny yourself would have been revolutionary in a culture that said indulge yourself

Or perhaps alternatively, the Nicolaitans were saying

“Our families go to all the pagan festivals as they come round each year – it’s a great day out for us all and if we don’t go with them they’ll think us weird and how will we ever win them for Christ?”

I guess that these ideas in the church were subtle and undermining – they were an attempt to get the Christian believers to lower their standards of behaviour and mar their testimony to Christ

Satan’s frontal assault in the church had failed – as we’ve heard they’d remained true to the name of Christ in their hour of trial

But now they were in great danger of succumbing to Satan’s clever and more deadly strategy

If he couldn’t recruit them to his cause by a frontal assault, he’d recruit them by stealth

Frontal assaults are easy to recognise and be beaten off; attacks by guile from within are much harder to deal with but ultimately no less deadly

If Satan could destroy the church by undermining their righteous conduct – their behavioural testimony to Christ - then there was no need for them to be martyred for they would be just like everyone else in their city

If they could be persuaded that their conduct could be divorced from their verbal testimony Satan would win a great victory

This false teaching is a version of what theologians later came to call antinomianism (which literally means against law) – the heresy that what matters is the Christian’s verbal profession of faith and that conduct matters little

It is the opposite of legalism – it’s licence

It’s the idea that faith can save us without affecting our lifestyle and still be true faith

It’s the idea that is heard in America a lot that you can accept Christ as Saviour and be saved but not submit to him as Lord of your life

It’s what we might call it easy-believism; accepting Christ without any regard to the responsibilities that implicitly go with belief in him

So what was at stake with this false teaching?

What was at stake in allowing people in the church to suggest that the worship of idols and the eating of food sacrificed to those idols was ok, accompanied of course by the sexual immorality that went with it?

Well the answer is everything; everything was at stake for this church

The Old Testament teaches us many things; but one thing that ‘smacks you in the face’ as you read it is that God called a people – the Jews - to be His and His alone

Idolatry was the ultimate and final betrayal of the covenant that God had with his people

Everything they were supposed to find in God they looked for in other places

He called it harlotry, prostitution, adultery

It was like a wife coming home one day with a new lover and telling her husband she didn’t want him any longer

Read the book of Hosea and see how Hosea was commanded to marry a prostitute so that he could feel the betrayal that God felt as his wife left him for other men

But what was shocking at Pergamum was that some in their midst were almost certainly teaching that you could worship the Lord Jesus and visit the idols of the city for your joy as well

That the sexual orgies were ok – after all doesn’t God want us to have fun?

In the Bible idolatry and immorality always seen to go hand in hand; as I think that do today

That’s because our sexuality is in the context of covenant love for God; without God we have no compass or boundaries for our sexuality

We see this in our society; as we worship the idols of the land we express our unfaithfulness to God through unfaithful and immoral sexuality

So there was immorality in the church at Pergamum

But aren’t we in danger of making too much of sex – aren’t Christians obsessed by sex and sexual immorality in their midst?

Well, I don’t think so

When we think about sexual immorality in the church there’s a danger that we miss its seriousness because we fail to get the right context

Today in our society we think of sexual relations as a kind of private arrangement between two people – no one else’s business except their own – that’s the contemporary context of sexuality

But as soon as we begin to think Biblically about the issue our whole view of the matter has to change because we now have a new different context

For we find that the story of reality – the drama of the ages – is actually told through our sexuality

What do I mean?

Well, The Book of Revelation – and many other parts of the Bible - reveals to us that history culminates with the Marriage Supper of the Lamb, when Christ takes the church to be his bride in eternal covenant

The bride that he's redeemed to take by the shedding his of own blood

Or to put it another way, the universe is a stage upon which God is presenting the great drama of redemption – a true life pageant or play – in which those who've rebelled against God and have wrecked his universe are now being prepared to marry his Son – the Lord Jesus in an eternal union

History is all moving towards that climax

And when we think about our sexuality we have to place it into that context

Yes, I know that marriage is for our mutual companionship and for the raising of children

Yes, we say that marriage is a covenant relationship between a man and a woman – and it is

But it's much more than that

Every marriage is a picture of what is to come

Every marriage is a telling of the story of reality

The apostle Paul tells us in Ephesians that the husband represents Christ; and the wife the church, the bride of Christ

So the Christian husband, in the way he treats his wife, is to display to principalities and powers and the watching world the strong and loyal love that Christ has for his bride

And the wife through her submission to and cooperation with her husband is to display the church's relationship to Christ

And that's why in God's economy sex is only ever permitted in the context of marriage

Fornication is sex outside of marital covenant

And adultery is the breaking of sacred covenant vows

Both fornication and adultery can't be seen only in terms of the terrible damage they do to the lives they impact

What we must realise is that every act of misdirected sexuality diminishes and tarnishes the story that Christians are charged with presenting

Every act of sexual immorality does violence to the telling of the story and is an attack on God's eternal purpose – on the very reason for him making the world; that his Son should have a bride that he would love faithfully forever

Why don't we think about these things more?

The only conclusion I can come to is that so often we see life from a human standpoint rather than a God standpoint

Sadly, so often eternal realities weigh so lightly upon us as to hardly influence our thinking let alone our behaviour

And so the church that fails to uphold sexually purity can expect to face God's judgment

There are massive, immeasurable things at stake in the arena of human sexuality

And because of that nothing corrupts a church like sexual immorality

The church is not some social club; it's a witness to the living God on the earth

It's called to point to Him, day in day out, not just with our preaching but with our lives

So there was moral compromise in the church at Pergamum

And what did Jesus say to them?

Verse 16 "Repent therefore"

You will know that repentance in the Bible is much more than saying sorry and carrying on sweetly as you did before

The Greek word for repentance (*metanoia*) means to turn around – to change your direction

I guess in this context it means that the church had to tackle those in their midst and call them to repentance

And if they refused to repent, either that the church was to separate from those who teach and practise such heresy or to expel them from their midst to preserve the purity of my church's witness

It seems that the fault of the main body of the church wasn't that it had participated in these sins but that it had indulged those in its midst that had and not dealt with them – the had failed to exercise church discipline

In fact one of the things that the Lord commended the church for at Ephesus (in the first letter) – and they also had a problem with the Nicolaitans – he commended them for, “not tolerating wicked men...you have tested those who claim to be apostles and are not and have found them false” v2

Then (in verse 6b): “You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans which I also hate”

But isn't it harsh to separate from these people or to expel them from their midst? Isn't it unloving?

No. To overlook it would reveal a false and sentimental view of love

It's not unloving to cut a cancer out of a dying patient

The church leadership had to secure its testimony to the light in the midst of a dark city

Otherwise that light would be blurred and would eventually go out with no gospel witness in the city

The purity of the church had to be preserved

After receiving this letter, the church at Pergamum had a duty to take on board the indignation and displeasure of their Lord on the matter

To see it as he saw it – not as they saw it

Because if you don't repent says the Lord Jesus: v16 “I will soon come to you and will fight against them (that is those who practise such things) with the sword of my mouth”

That's a very strong, very severe thing to say; that the Lord Jesus will fight against people in his own church with his sword

One thing that they could not afford was to have the Lord Jesus against them

It's was one thing to have the Romans or the Jews against them, but to have the One who holds the keys of death and hell against you, that's infinitely more serious

Christ was ultimately concerned about what was happening because it brought his people into union with his arch-enemy Satan

He needed a people in this city who were his

And then we read: verse 17 “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches”

It is possible to have an ear but ignore what’s being said

And that’s why the Lord reminds them and us to take care how we listen

And then we see the blessings v17b:

“To those who overcome by:

Keeping straight in a crooked world
Keeping clean in a unclean world
Keeping Christian in a pagan world”²

To them the Lord Jesus makes two promises in verse 17:

(1) I will give some of the hidden manna

What’s all that about?

Well, let’s think back to the children of Israel in the wilderness

They were fed and sustained supernaturally by God by eating manna

Quite likely the Lord Jesus was saying to them:

‘Living as a Christian in a wilderness like Pergamum amongst all the pagan people can seem like being in a barren place. And at times it might seem like you’re missing out on all the fun – all the parties and festivals”

But the Lord says: “I will feed you whilst you live in that wilderness; I will give you food from heaven so that you’ll be kept along the way and won’t miss out”

I’ll see that you’re alright

(2) Secondly they are promised a white stone with a new name on it

What does that mean?

² David Pawson.

It seems that in their city when a person was invited to a pagan festival, they were given a white stone as an invitation, with their name inscribed on it

But this white stone given by Jesus to the one who overcomes is probably an invitation to the festival that all history has been a rehearsal for; the marriage supper of the lamb

To those at Pergamum who refuse the banquets of the pagan gods, Christ will give an invitation to his Great Banquet at the culmination of history

What wonderful promises

So this letter to the church at Pergamum is a sobering one

It's a lesson that there are two sides to the gospel coin

On one side of the coin has to be an inscription to right doctrine and on the other side to right behaviour

Or on one side we could write the apostle Peter's words (Acts 2:21), "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" but on the other side we would need to write the apostle Paul's words: (Tim 2: 19) "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord, must turn away from wickedness".

STOP