

SEVEN LETTERS to SEVEN CHURCHES



SMALL GROUP NOTES: Sunday 5th July – Week 3 ‘PERGAMUM’

Read Revelation 2.12-17

On your doorstep

Jesus begins by telling the church in Pergamum that he knows where they live, that he understands what is on their doorstep. He knows what it is like to live there and what the challenges are.

If you were trying to explain to someone else what it is like living where you do, what things are ‘on your doorstep’ – good and bad, great and challenging – what might you say?

Living in Pergamum was tricky – it was the centre, the hub for all kinds of things that made being a Christian really hard. Powerful religious, political and social forces were at play here – right on the doorstep of this church – no wonder it is described as where Satan has his throne.

Which aspects of being a Christian living in the North East in July 2020 do you find tricky?

What difference does it make knowing that Jesus completely understands all you face?

The problem for the church in Pergamum was that although they had stood firm in the face of persecution, they had opened their doors to some things that should not be in the church of Christ. It’s interesting that where a full-on attack from persecution was not successful in weakening them as a church, it was the more subtle infiltration of ideas and practices that was having a much more damaging effect. The teachings of Balaam and the teachings of the Nicolaitans.

Lessons from Balaam

Read Numbers 22.21-35

Balaam was a prophet for hire who was offered money by Balak, the king of Moab to ‘curse’ God’s people Israel. But God intervenes. A donkey speaks, an angel appears! What is interesting here is that the direction that Balaam is headed is ‘reckless’ and he needs to listen to God (v32).

We are at an interesting time as a church where we look forward to some kind of re-opening of our church for public worship. Whilst we might not describe our usual activities as 'reckless', this passage does provoke questions about the direction we head in next. We have a once in a lifetime opportunity to re-imagine church, to refine what we do and not simply pick up all we laid down at the start of the COVID-19 emergency.

What aspects of our life together as a church might we be asked to travel away from? To let go of?

How do you feel about that?

Interesting Balaam heeds the warning of God, but disaster still came upon God's people as they were seduced into immorality with Moabite women and this led to the worship of Baal (Numbers 25.1-3)

Something similar must have happened in Pergamum... we know some of the temple worship in places like Pergamum would have involved temple prostitutes and somehow some of the member of the church had got involved. Whether it was actually in the sexual immorality of just attending feasts to the gods where this sort of thing went on and food had been sacrificed to idols is unclear. But what is clear is that this behaviour was compromising the church and weakening it – and Jesus calls them to stop.

Following on from the previous questions, this story makes us pause and reflect on what seduces us and causes us to be distracted by others gods/priorities/desires.

Jesus calls us to close the door on anything that prevents us from fully worshipping him and walking in his way as disciples of Christ.

What sort of things might this mean for the church to be vigilant against?

What are we in danger of being seduced by? Where might that lead?

Manna and stones

The letter to Pergamum finishes with some curious sentences. 'To those who overcome I will give some of the hidden manna, and a white stone with a new name written on it'

Often in early Christian writing, these fledgling churches were seen like the Israelites in the wilderness – that is also the setting for the story of Balaam – perhaps here we are meant to be thinking of that moment when God fed his people with 'manna' bread that dropped from the sky. I will do the same for you, promises Jesus here; the place where you live may seem to be starving you – but I will give you 'secret manna' – I will sustain you and keep you.

In what ways has God been sustaining and feeding you through the COVID-19 crisis?

And a white stone? Well as you might imagine this has puzzled theologians for centuries – there are various explanations:

- One arises from legal practice, where a member of the jury who was for acquittal handed in a white stone as casting their vote for freedom.
- Another idea is that the white stone is a symbol of a happy day (like the old red-letter days). Along similar lines is that it was seen as an amulet bringing good luck.

- There was a custom of using white stones with the name of the guest on it as a ticket to let them into the feast. The white stone was the invitation to join in with the feast.

We cannot know for certain what the stone means in this letter but clearly it was bringing assurance or blessing.

Which of these explanations do you like best?

Why do they resonate with you?

Why a new name written on the stone? Does this signify people turning to Christ and living now in the power of his name? Is it secret because the church was persecuted and effectively an underground movement in Pergamum?

In these times, the 'name' was widely held to sum up what a person stood for – their character, their standing. Here a new name could mean a new character rescued, restored and redeemed by Christ. 2 Corinthians 5.17?

How does this letter speak to you?

What is the Spirit saying to the church right now?