

The Church in Pergamum

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 February 2024

Preacher: The Rt. Rev. Mike Hill

[0 : 00] So, if you have your Bibles with you, you might like to turn to Revelation chapter 2 again. And I'm going to read to you from verse 12 onwards.

I think we've got the readings up on the screen. Revelation 2, verse 12. To the angel of the church in Pergamum write, These are the words of him who has the sharp, double-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, not 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. There are some among you who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin, so that they ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality.

Likewise, you also have those who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent, therefore.

[1 : 26] Otherwise, I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth. Whoever has ears, let them hear what the Spirit says to the churches.

To the one who is victorious, I will give him some of the hidden manna. I will also give that person a white stone with a new name written on it, known only to the one who receives it.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. So, we come to the church in Pergamum, a church which, I suppose you would say, received a kind of mixed report from the risen Christ, delivered through John.

Just a word about the city of Pergamum today. If you go to Turkey, it's a city called Bergama. B-E-R-G-A-M-A.

And it rose to prominence as a city in the ancient world, round about the 3rd century BC, during what's called the Attalade period, when Attalus conquered the city.

[2 : 48] It soon became very prominent when the Romans took over, and in fact became the capital of the Roman province of Asia. Also there were two notable altars.

One was to Asclepius. Some of you might know Asclepius if you've been to Kos, where the first, at least the first hospital we have any remnants of, is on Kos, and is dedicated to Asclepius.

Asclepius's symbol is a serpent wrapped around a pole, and was taken up by medical professions across the world into the modern day.

Asclepius was the god of healing. The other altar of significance was, up on the hill above Pergamum, there was a massive altar dedicated to the Roman god Zeus, who was the kind of king god of the Roman pantheon of gods.

And because of all this, there's also a temple dedicated to Augustus and Rome. And because of this, it became the centre of the imperial cult of the Roman Empire.

[4 : 13] A very Roman city, as you would say. And I want, by way of introduction tonight, just to run through some stuff.

Because this was a city, which the risen Christ describes as the habitat of Satan. And the challenge of that seems to me, which is, I think, a similar challenge to what we have today, although I think we would be a little more uncomfortable in widely using the language of satanic to describe our culture. At the same time, I think you would agree to me, agree with me, that there is a lot about our culture, which is going badly wrong at the current time.

I have described this to congregations in the area as kind of economic challenges. It is a surprise to me, if I'm being quite honest with you, that the American economy has picked up a little bit, whereas ours is still flatlining pretty well.

But I think there will be economic challenges across the West, and particularly across Europe, in these coming days. And we feel that at home when we read about people who are the victims of the

so-called economic crisis.

[5 : 48] Some of you, maybe some of them, I don't know. And we talk about the environmental challenges of the world. I think they're huge.

And, you know, you have to take your own view on what you make of the climate science and all that, so I'm not here to tell you what to think. But it does seem, although, you know, one would say in terms of weather patterns, it's happened over a fairly short period to date, I think it's a tendency at the moment that we're looking at that weather patterns are changing.

And when it comes to trying to fix the planet, the idea is, you know, that we will reduce our carbon dioxide emissions and that's going to cost a lot of money, which has got to be factored in to the cost of living.

Nobody who manufactures stuff isn't going to pass the cost of environmental responsibility. They're not going to pay that themselves. They're going to pass it on to the customer through the goods and services that they provide.

And then, really seriously, the emotional challenges of our day. In the Times today, there's a big article about people in their 20s, a large number of whom are not at work because they are mentally unwell.

[7 : 19] They're suffering from anxiety, depression, these things. Things that we shouldn't take lightly, but we should ask questions about, well, what kind of a society is it that's creating people in the prime of their lives who can't even go to work because they're not well?

I think I have gone as far as saying, you know, one of the things that troubles me about our environment, our culture at the moment is, it seems to make people ill.

So I want to talk to you today about the challenge of evangelism in a hostile environment. Get round to Pergamum in a few minutes, but that basically is their lot.

How do you set about trying to win people for Christ in a city where Satan and the Roman Empire hold sway? Both of whom had a reputation for trying to destroy organizations or agencies or people who posed any threat whatsoever in their direction.

So I want just to think for a moment, if I may, about these challenges. And I think the challenges of Pergamum are the challenges of today.

[8 : 45] And I want to just draw your attention to, it's not our set text this evening, but I just want to draw your attention to Acts chapter 17.

Before I do that, I'm going to talk to you about six things that I think are important in our evangelistic engagement with a hostile culture.

The first thing is, we need to be praying Christians. In Ephesians chapter 6 and verse 18, the great apostle bids Christians to pray at all times in the Spirit.

Paul's not that interested in the kind of prayers where people just gabble away or just say stuff for impact or effect. He's interested in prayer in the Spirit.

Prayer directed to God, directed by God, in the power of the Holy Spirit. But Acts 17 is where I want to draw your attention to.

[9 : 48] And I want to draw your attention to it because it is the only example in the New Testament of a sermon preached to Gentiles, i.e. non-Jewish believers.

Paul, believe it or not, on his missionary journeys, had a plan. The plan was, he would go to what you might call the warm contacts. He'd go down to the synagogue and start preaching that Jesus was the Messiah.

And he'd use, it's a challenge to preachers, he would use the Old Testament to do that. Didn't have a New Testament then. And in Athens, on the Areopagus, which is a hill just outside the wall of the city today, Paul preached to a crowd of people.

We don't have time tonight to go in depth into the content of his sermon, but it is fascinating to look at in relation to the fact that Paul is speaking to Gentiles, non-Jewish people.

And Paul says, in Acts chapter 17, that before he addressed the crowd, he said to them, you know, as I walked around your city, I see you're a very religious people, he said.

[11 : 02] In fact, he said, you know, I can tell that by the number of altars there are. He said, and I came across an altar to an unknown God. He said, so I want to, this is Paul's sense of humour, right?

I mean, you don't have to laugh. Paul said, I found this altar dedicated to the unknown God, but I'm going to tell you about the God you can know. And proceeds to talk about Jesus, the Messiah and

the coming judge, who created the world and all that therein is it.

But before Paul got round to his message, he had spent time observing the lives of these Athenians. So he could kind of get the vibe of their culture.

So he could address them in a way that they might understand. In Acts chapter 17 and verse 23, we read how Paul engages them by quoting to them from their culture.

He quotes a verse of a poem. I mean, in my book, it's not much of a poem because it doesn't rhyme, but the quote is, we are his offspring.

[12:17] Paul uses what you might call the culture of local creative art to try and communicate with these people. Oh, that in our churches we could reignite our imaginations to communicate in such a way that connects with our culture rather than flies over the heads of those who show up.

And then there is a challenge in Acts chapter 17 and verse 30. Let me read that to you. Paul says, in the past God overlooked such ignorance.

That's a kind of polite way. What Paul was basically saying to them is, in the past God overlooked your ignorance. He said, in the past he overlooked that, but now he commends people everywhere to repent.

I think that, you know, I had a, what's called a peripatetic ministry.

It sounds highfalutin. What it means is I went to a different church every Sunday. And what I would say is that there was, you know, quite a lot of history in the sermons, quite a lot of Greek, you know, look how smart I am, I quote Greek.

[13:34] Greek. But, but, what most messages I've listened to were very low on was challenge. I felt like, you know that proverb we have in English, you know, you can take a horse to water, but you can't make it drink.

A lot of preaching felt to me like that, you know, the horses have showed up to listen and they've been taken to the edge of the river and then the preacher takes us back and gives a blessing and we all go home.

No, people need to be challenged. And my experience of evangelism amongst men in particular is the firmer the challenge the more likely you are to get a response.

And then we know this from 2 Timothy chapter 4 and verse 2 that we're called. So in a lot of churches, evangelical churches in particular, people think that the moment that somebody's converted, their job is done.

Wrong. It's a new beginning, it's a new start. Paul says to this young church Timothy and second, young church leader in 2 Timothy, preach the word, be prepared in season and out of season, correct, rebuke and encourage with great patience and careful instruction.

[14:59] what did Paul imagine that Timothy might preach? Did Paul think, sorry to use Anglican speak for a moment, that it would be highly effective for some preacher to stand up and give a few garbled thoughts on the collect of the day?

No, he didn't think that at all. In chapter 3, Paul tells us exactly what he wants Timothy to preach about. 2 Timothy 3, 16, all scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.

Paul didn't imagine that preachers could just stand up and do their own fang. He imagined that the faithful preacher will stand up with the word of God in his hand and to the best of his or her ability will give exposition to that.

I said that every moment of any approach to evangelism needs to be surrounded by prayer. My experience was for every new Christian we had in the church that I was minister at, that we had to spend a lot of time and resource in taking somebody across the line and giving their life to Christ to kind of keep them there, to stop them from falling away and becoming backslidden.

An important part of that was making sure that new converts were prayed for. Anybody remember Operation Andrew?

[16:44] My memory is that what it asked church members, people like you, to do was to split into groups of three meeting in your homes or in the coffee shop or wherever and the three of you would bring the names of three people who you really wanted to play a part in bringing them to Christ.

You would then pray together so you'd have nine people to pray for and three of you praying for those nine people. I can't think for a moment why we don't do that today.

Our experience back then and different time I get that but our experience back then was a remarkable number of people came through to trust Christ not as a direct result of us praying but I

can't help thinking that our prayer for these people men and women went you know it was a wasted time.

There was a book some of you may have read some years ago which was called What Happens When Women Prayed and the stories and testimonies that came out of these groups of women that met I think they called them Lydia groups or something like that and they pray together and there's some amazing outcomes of those prayers.

Look we think there's a lot of stuff to do today to engage with our culture but trust me there is a lot of praying that needs to be done as well.

[18 : 22] I want to go on just before I talk about Pergamon very briefly to talk about this fine balance between collusion and compromise and I want to say to you to start with always remember the church isn't I mean the church is institutionalized it's certainly the church of England is which is the only one I can speak of with any inner knowledge.

The church is not an institution in a normal sense it's a living body. I read an article recently in the American New American Scientist American Scientist I think it's called and it was talking about how every day every movement everything we do is a miracle.

Talked about how avoiding serious disease could be down to a very minimal factor like at the right time you coughed and by coughing you expel from your body something that if it had taken hold in your body would have caused you serious illness.

It talked about the signals your brain sends out to do a very simple thing like blinking your eyes. And as we know in 1 Corinthians 12 Paul speaks about the church as a body.

And you know only too well that there doesn't need to be much wrong with your body for it to lose its balance and for you to be seriously undermined in your ability to do things because of that.

[20 : 06] We won't talk about the tongue. James does that and warns us about the tongue and how the same tongue that blesses God is the same tongue that we used to curse men and women with.

But just the everyday balance. You know I'm sure we should wake up thanking God and praying to him that God would maintain our physical balance in our health and the reason why Paul calls the church a body is that he makes the point that when one part of that body is out of kilter with the rest the whole body is impacted.

He also makes the point that we can't all be hands. We can't all be feet. We can't all be heads. The church is a body with different parts as Paul.

And by that he means we are a group of people who are gifted by God with spiritual gifts in order to glorify God to serve the church and to bless the world.

So the church is a living body and the issue of balance is a huge issue. But here's a question which I think is impossible to answer and I feel it's a bit unfair asking you.

[21 : 34] But how do we know when we've crossed the line between compromise and collusion? I'm making the assumption that compromise isn't always wrong.

wrong. But it can quickly become the foothills of unhelpful collusion. So now the church in Pergamum and the risen Christ through his letter delivered by John starts by saying talking about sorry let me turn over talks about these are the words of him who has the sharp double-edged sword.

At the time that John was writing there were two kinds of weapon that were described as a sword. one was a makaria which is more like a big dagger than a sword. And the other was the ramphosa which is a proper sword both sides of which were home to be very very sharp.

And it was said that soldiers could split things down the middle very easily. with their ramphosa with their big swords.

[23 : 09] That's the word that's used here. The other word is used in the New Testament. I think it's something like Hebrews chapter 12 and verse 10 which talks about the double-edged sword.

That's not a ramphosa that is a makaria that's the short dagger thing. Of course scholars have written pages on the difference between the use of those two words for sword.

what it means is that this double-edged sword that the risen Christ has tells us of his sovereignty, his double sovereignty.

He is sovereign of all that goes on on the earth but he's also sovereign of what will be. so there's an element of the amazing authority of Jesus with this double-edged sword but there is also a measure of judgment.

It's a word that we don't really like to think about too much in the church today but that's the meaning of that symbolism. I know where you live.

[24 : 25] It sounds like a threat doesn't it when you read it out like that? I know where you live. Where Satan has his throne. Again wide speculation as to exactly what John was referring to there.

Some think it was that altar to Zeus on the hillside there. Some think it was the temple of Asclepius. Some, probably me, think it was the temple dedicated to Augustus and Rome which made Pergamum the centre of the cult, the Roman Empire.

What the risen Christ likes about them is they remain true to the name of Jesus. He says you didn't renounce your faith in me and he gives only one example but one example of somebody who is so faithful to Jesus under the threat of this hostile culture that it cost him his life and to pass my faithful witness who is put to death in your city where Satan lives.

I mean imagine that there isn't crisis to them. I know where you live and it's where Satan lives. And by and large I'm impressed by your faithfulness.

I'm impressed that you don't collude with the cult of Rome. And I'm impressed that you resist the satanic forces at work amongst you.

[26 : 12] people. But then he goes on and says nevertheless nevertheless and so reminds me of my own school reports I think you could summarize my school reports as yes but.

Mike sets himself extremely low standards and consistently fails to achieve them. So these people in this awfully hostile culture were faithful in the face of martyrdom.

But here's what the risen Christ thinks they need to pay attention to. Thinks that their balance as the body of Christ is being put out of kilter by these forces.

He says there are some of you who hold to the teaching of Balaam who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin so that they did two things unacceptable.

They ate food that had already been sacrificed to idols. In other words not only Jewish people would find that unclean but Christians would find it unclean as well.

[27 : 29] And then they committed sexual immorality. It would be nice to say wouldn't it that today's church is free of all that.

You know we don't do that stuff. Except remember you know the job I had was the exercise of discipline across 256 churches in a large area.

I would love to put my hand on my heart and say to you we didn't have any of that. When I was a parish priest I found the chairman of churches together where's Tim?

Not him. Chairman of churches together and the secretary of the PCC. I don't quite know how to put this.

Let's just say they were naked in the middle of a wood and my dog discovered them when I was walking with my dog. I had to put my hand on my hand and say I have come across none of this sexual immorality of the church but friends I have.

[28 : 44] And part of the problem is our culture is obsessed by sex. So much so it has perverted our understanding of what love is.

The Bible word for love is the word agape. You know that. It's a word that doesn't primarily call upon our heart strings.

It's not about what we feel. it's how we set our will. How do you think if Jesus said love your enemies how would that work if he really meant desire your enemies?

It would be an impossible. No we need to think about love and loving our neighbor as wanting the best for that person even if we don't necessarily like them.

you know what would that do to the debate about asylum seekers if we fed that understanding of love into that?

[29 : 53] Look at the teaching of Balaam actually Balaam it's very interesting that the word Balaam the name Balaam and the name Nicolation followers of Nicholas.

So in Hebrew the word Balaam is made up of a root word which means to conquer and then which is balai and then the word aham which means people.

So the word Balaam means conquering people. the word Nicholas is a mixture of two other Greek words one is Nikan which means to conquer and Laos which means people.

I mean whether these were two distinct groups of people who encoded language remember we said that this book is apocryphal it's written in a hidden language so that people wouldn't necessarily understand it if they didn't know the keys to understanding it.

But these two names given to these two heresies actually both meant the same. They were about controlling subjugating people. Is there anything further away from the gospel community than the desire to control people?

[31 : 26] Is there anything that could be worse in a relationship in a marriage where one person seeks to control the other?

And this these heresies led people into very dark behaviors dietary and sexual immorality and the risen Christ has a very clear message verse 16 Repent therefore as a consequence of this collusion with these people in the church repent of that otherwise I will soon come to you and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth they will come under judgment and it will be a dark day for them and for the church of God why?

Because in their midst they tolerated heretical teaching that sought to control the people of God rather than the God whom we worship who empowers us with his Holy Spirit God I never understood years ago when I was ordained I was ordained in Canterbury Cathedral I didn't live in Canterbury or even in Kent as such I lived in Croydon and the Church of England with this kind of slightly mixed up thinking made a archdeaconry of the Diocese of Canterbury completely separate from the Diocese of Canterbury and there was a reason for that the reason was that the Archbishop of Canterbury then had his summer palace in Croydon and it was felt that would be wrong of him to leave his diocese when he went on his holiday so if you can't take

Mohammed to the mountain move the mountain to Mohammed so I was getting ordained there and it was a great privilege and Donald Coggan was the Archbishop of Canterbury and for the ordination retreat we were invited to stay in the palace at Canterbury with the Archbishop and Mrs Coggan who came down to breakfast every day and we had normal chat over breakfast Coggan was very against the idea of the ordination retreat as a kind of massive wind up and you know when they did that I mean people who had been in college for three years had nervous breakdowns and couldn't show up in the cathedral on the Sunday morning they were so mentally disturbed by it Coggan was very relaxed and it was just at the time that the Bishop of Durham had declared that there was no such thing as a physical resurrection of Jesus do you remember that and it was terrible you know harsh over that and quite rightly so in many ways and some upstart of an ordinand not like me said to the

Archbishop across the table so are you going to throw him out then my Archbishop choked over his boiled egg and said well I have no means to throw him out and the upstart ordinand said what do you mean he said there's been a studious attempt in the church's disciplinary measures to avoid any disciplinary measure which would involve wrong teaching or heresy that bit of legislation I think put together in 1972 was replaced at the end of the 1990s which came into force I think in 2002 called the clergy discipline measure I mean you can get thrown out of the church of England if you baptise somebody twice but you can deny the resurrection or say that Christianity from next week onwards will be about nudity and nobody can do anything about it it's amazing isn't it

[36 : 01] I mean I was one of them you know still am I mean so the issue of how do we tackle in our churches wrong teaching I think is an interesting one who adjudicates what is wrong teaching who decides on that and the Roman Catholic Church has a magisterium that does make decisions about these things and you know I mean who's the German cardinal who got made the Pope retired early Ratzinger I thought Ratzinger I mean he's a highly cultured and intellectual man as a matter of fact but he was kind of hired by the Pope as a sort of you know the Pope's kind of attack dog to any province of the Roman Catholic Church that decided to go off on its own and teach things that the church found unacceptable you may remember there was quite a lot of press in that the Roman

Catholic Church's resistance to same sex relationships drew a lot of attention to the count I think it's got some very highfalutin term the council that looks at all this and the Church of England doesn't have that and I think independent churches probably would struggle to work out well who would be responsible for dealing with wrong teaching I mean you might say the senior pastor that's okay as long as it's not the senior pastor who's doing the wrong teaching but surely surely you can't read this letter to Pergamum without thinking there ought to be some mechanism to stop people just turning up in churches and teaching what the hell they like I mean does that seem mad to you so they were called to repentance and then the risen

Christ says to them I will soon come to you if you don't do this if you don't repent I'll soon come to you and we'll fight against them with the sword in my mouth verse 17 whoever has ears let them hear what the spirit says to the churches may that be our prayer friends as we meet together in this

Lent season that the church today in the light of this antagonistic culture might be really attuned to what the spirit says to us and then a common theme in these letters the promise to the one who is victorious I will give some of the hidden manner and this is a rather kind of curious legend that grew up within Judaism and as far as we can tell it doesn't have much authenticity in history but what was thought happened was that you remember when the

Jews were in the wilderness you can read about it in the book of numbers they were complained that they didn't get any food so God supplied them with this stuff that came down every morning and it was called manna and they were told this is your provision and of course like the human beings right so they got sick of this manna I don't think it was particularly nice to eat it was probably good protein but that's all you could say about it and the idea was that when the temple was built a little bit of that manna was put into a pot and taken into the temple into the holiest of holies where it was kept in the tabernacle and alongside the legend there arose this idea that on a day appointed by God that pot could be opened and the manna could be eaten

I mean I think you would be rushed straight off to the emergency room according to numbers the thing went off over a 24 hour period they were told not to store it because it did go off and it used a very robust language if you leave it over 24 hours it will stink it is a bit like fish or something I don't know but you know not pleasant so the idea was that the promise here relates to the time that some of that hidden manna would be given to the people of God and when they were given that manna it would reinforce the idea that they were being rewarded for overcoming what had gone before in the church and prevailing and then there's this other promise the white stone and my friend

[41 : 21] John Angle walked into church tonight and said to me I've got a white stone with me and proceeded to tell me the story that lay behind that white stone and so I just said to John would you stand up and just say you might have to speak loud I knew that it was talking about a white stone in Pergamum tonight and I just picked this up off the shelf which I keep in my study in the 1990s I was worshipping at St.

Andrews as some people know and I felt called to ministry and Bishop Jim as was then he decided that yes he would send me to a conference where I would be assessed as to whether I was suitable to go forward for ministry I was walking around the garden in this residential place prior to the conference taking place and I bent down and I picked up a stone this white stone I put it in my pocket and I went back to my room and then I suddenly realised this passage in Revelation and I read the passage in Revelation which said I will give him a white stone with a new name written on it and I grabbed the stone and I said yes

Lord that's your promise to me I am going forward to something new and God you're going to be with me and you've given me that stone as a promise so I feel that the white stone it means a promise of something new to come and that was what this meant to me my white stone thanks John so amongst the books I've read on the book of Revelation there are four things where people seek to and I want to say that it seems to me John that your explanation of the stone is not far from some of these things actually in the ancient world if you're given a white stone sorry if you were acquitted at a trial you would be given a white stone so

Protestant theologians made a lot about this and made it an analogy of the doctrine of justification which Paul talks about in Romans chapter 5 justification means we're counted righteous on the back of the righteousness of Jesus it is appropriated to us the second reason second use of a white stone was if you won a battle you'd be given a white stone a bit like a medal in the modern army you were given a white stone and the third reason you would be given a white stone in the ancient world was when you were given freedom of the city and the final one which I think has more in it than the other three explanations is what's known as the tessera hospitalis that means the token hospitality what happened was that two friends would be given white stones and they would write the name of the other person on their stone and then time might separate them and go their different ways if they died they would hand their stone on to their son or their daughter probably their son and when they met up with the person had the other stone this meant there was a responsibility on you to show hospitality that didn't mean you had to go and cook them a meal I mean it might mean that what it meant was that you would be hospitable to them and I think it's not too fanciful to see this explanation as a kind of foretaste of the heavenly banquet that our names if we trust Christ and we stick with him whatever the opposition then we will have our invite to the heavenly banquet we should be there and God will have our name written on the stone that he hands to us so very quickly what have we learned thus far from Ephesians we learned that doctrinal

purity without love is not what the risen Christ calls us to you can be as sound as you like as a Christian but if you don't have any love in your heart agape in your heart it means nothing secondly love without any doctrinal understanding just leaves the church undefended wide open to the modern day

[46 : 42] Balaam's and Nicolatians thirdly to those who prevail says Jesus I will give eternal life chapter 2 and verse 7 so keep your eyes on the prize chapter 2 verse 11 and then I think what we add tonight is that we need to monitor the balance in the way we go about our evangelism about how we connect with this world that balance between collusion and compromise and that takes wisdom from on high as I said earlier I think there's only one route for us to have wisdom on high it's not via a university not via a public school not via any school it's via our relationship with God and our willingness to seek his wisdom on any and every subject amen amen

Thank you.