

True Faith: 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: 13 October 2002

Preacher: Rev. Dr. Neil Mancor

[0 : 0 0] Looking at this passage about the church in Pergamum in Revelation chapter 2 this morning. The title of this sermon has been given as Pergamum, True Faith.

And that's what I want to look at this morning. What does true faith look like? What does it mean to have true faith? It's a very interesting passage as well. If you have just a scan through it, you can see we're talking about faith, which seems very esoteric, very ethereal, something of the air that kind of floats around.

And yet Jesus is using very concrete language. He talks about having a two-edged sword, Satan's throne. And he talks about hidden manna and a rock, a white stone with a name etched on it.

And he talks about coming to make war. I have to say that after the guys gave me this passage and I saw I had to figure out what the white stone with a hidden name on it meant, I wanted to say thank you very much.

But actually it's really quite clear what Jesus is trying to say if we have a look at it. And what he's doing is using very concrete physical language to talk about true faith.

[1 : 0 9] And more about that in a moment. I remember when I was a boy growing up in Vancouver one year when I was about eight, I went to Camp Artaban and the theme leader gave a talk which has remained with me to this day.

And it was a talk about warm fuzzies and cold pricklies. And it was all about how we should be with one another and how God wants to be with us.

It's giving us warm fuzzies. It's like, you know, going around saying to each other, Bless you in the name of the Lord. It's a warm fuzzy instead of cold pricklies. It reminds me of my daughter's favorite teddy bear.

She's two and a half and has this teddy bear that has to be in bed with her at night and must be brought with her down for breakfast in the morning. Otherwise, trouble will ensue as we discovered last night when the said teddy bear went missing.

And, you know, the teddy bear is someone she can hold close to her at night and cuddle. And it's very soft and warm and fuzzy. It's a wonderful thing to comfort her at night. And I think for a lot of people, faith is like that.

[2 : 1 5] It's a warm fuzzy. It's about God affirming us in our humanness. It's about the love of God expressed in Jesus. Jesus, my faith affirms me as someone loved by God, no matter what I do or who I am.

There's a God who loves me. In fact, I read a description of the Christian faith quite like that in a Christian newspaper only last week. And the faith is described this way.

And it's God words are being put in God's mouth here. It's God speaking, saying this. Look, you know that I love you just as I love all my creatures. And all I really expect in return is that you love me too.

Isn't that nice? It's such a nice comforting picture of the faith. A wonderful statement of the faith is a warm fuzzy. It's about God's love for us and our love for each other. It's life affirming. It's not threatening.

It doesn't demand anything of us beyond loving God. It affirms us where we are and calls us into our humanness. That is faith as a warm fuzzy. Well, that's really nice.

[3 : 16] But, of course, if you look at the letter to the Pergamum church, what you'll find is that Jesus is defining the faith and saying some very important things about the faith. And what he is saying here is far from warm and far from fuzzy.

In fact, Jesus is speaking into the church in Pergamum a very clear word in which he defines faith as something active, as a verb, something to be done, something to be held on to.

And he defines the faith as something to be defended. The faith is active, something to be held on to, and it is something to be defended.

And what he says to them is this, basically. Do not let go of the faith. Fight for it. He says, do not let go of the faith.

Fight for it. For those who hold on to the faith, he promises eternal life. And for those who let go of the faith, he condemns. It really couldn't be clearer than that.

[4 : 15] And I just want to look at that and think about what that means for us as individuals and us as a community. And I've just got two points. The first is an example of faith, and the second is the challenge of faith.

So, first, the example of faith. Would you read with me in the passage, starting from the opening verse? 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, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful witness, and who was put to death in your city, where Satan dwells.

Now, the church in Pergamum, the Christians in Pergamum, were not at the time of writing facing direct persecution for their faith. He's not speaking into a persecution situation. But they are living in the center, a major center of pagan worship and immorality.

Pergamum is famous for its huge carved altar, which you can see to this day at the Pergamum altar. It's in a museum in Berlin. It is a huge, fantastic edifice to pagan worship.

[5 : 26] And so this is a place that is a center of pagan worship and morality or immorality. And notice the power of Jesus' words here. He says, I know where you live, where Satan has his throne.

Because he knows that in a place where the true God is not worship, there Satan is worship. And where Jesus is not the one that everyone bows the knee to, Satan is the one where people bow the knee to.

So it is a place where Satan is enthroned. He knows that. And the church is in the middle of this. And in all the temptation and all the pulling and pressure that that brings.

And he says to them, Yet you hold fast to my name and did not deny the faith. Now what he's referring to here is a previous time of persecution. Antipas, referred to in the text, is regarded as the first Christian martyr in Asia.

And tradition has it that he was killed by being slowly roasted to death. And yet that man stayed firm to the faith in Jesus Christ right to the end.

[6 : 29] And his reward is given in the passage. He's given a new name, a new title. Antipas, my faithful witness. That's what Jesus calls him. And that's a title that was given to Jesus himself in Revelation chapter 1.

It is a title, a name for Christ, my faithful witness. And he is bestowing it upon this man who was faithful to him right to the end. And you know, I can't imagine a greater affirmation than that.

To have Christ give you or me or us a new name, my faithful witness. Because we have held on to the faith right to the end.

We didn't waver. We didn't give in to pressure. We held firm. And so is the church in Pergamum is being praised for holding fast to the faith. Even in an evil situation.

Even when one of their number was murdered. And they were clearly a church who held on. At the time of writing, they are being praised by Jesus Christ. Because they have held firm.

[7 : 31] They have not allowed their faith to be polluted by the environment around them. And that is what the faith is all about. Holding firm to Jesus Christ. They are doing something that is active.

They are not just standing there passively, kind of hoping it's going to go away. They are holding firm to the faith in Jesus Christ. Because the faith is not a passive thing.

It isn't something that just happens to us. The faith is not something that comes and goes. Which you can grow into and which you can then lose. No, the faith is something we all stand firm in.

No matter what the consequences. No matter what the situation. The articles of religion in the Book of Common Prayer talk about there is one faith in Jesus Christ. And it is that faith we have to stand in.

I looked up on the internet what faith looked like when painted. What does it look like if you depict faith? What would it look like? And actually in the Renaissance there is a wonderful depiction of faith.

[8 : 34] As a figure standing, feet planted firmly. Holding on to a cross. And touching a Bible. And looking straight out with confidence into the future. And I think that is a great image of faith.

Holding on to the cross. Holding on to the word of God which is our authority. And then being confident as we gaze out into the road ahead. That is the faith that Christ is praising in Pergamum.

And that is the faith Christ wants for us. And you know, for us as individual Christians, Christ wants us to stand firm in the faith.

To hold on to the faith. To be confident in our faith. How is your faith looking today? How is it doing? Are you feeling confident in your faith?

Or are you feeling tired in it? Feeling confused? Uncertain? I do find that when crises come into our lives. Or difficulties happen in society. Or when the church goes through times of turbulence.

[9 : 35] Those are moments when people suddenly start questioning their faith. They start worrying about their faith. And you hear all sorts of things. You hear people saying, Oh, I am confused in my faith right now.

Or people say, Well, I am all mixed up in my faith right now. Or they say, Oh, I am just all over the place in my faith right now. I just can't get it together. I don't know. You see, that faith is something very passive.

Which comes and goes. Yet the picture of faith here in this passage is an active one. Faith is something that is held on to. And faith is what we are supposed to do.

Hold on to our faith. No matter what the consequences. No matter what the situation. We have a choice to stand firm in our faith in Jesus Christ. Or to let it go.

And so to lose your faith. To hesitate in your faith. To become confused. To let it kind of pass away from you. Is not a state which falls upon you. Or doesn't fall upon you.

[10 : 35] It is a matter of choice. You can choose to hold on to your faith. To stand firm in your faith. Or to let it go. And that's not a warm fuzzy.

It's a decision. It's an act of the will. And it's what Jesus wants for us. To hold firm. And stand in our faith.

Like the Pergamum church. Well that was an example of faith. But let's move on and look at a challenge of faith. Because faith is challenging. Let me just read on in the passage.

Jesus says this. Nevertheless I have a few things against you. You have people there. Who hold on to the teaching of Balaam. Who taught Balak to entice the Israelites to sin.

By eating food. Sacrifice to idols. And by committing sexual immorality. Likewise you also have those. Who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans.

[11 : 31] Repent therefore. Otherwise I will soon come to you. And will fight with the sword of my mouth. Love. Very strong words from Jesus here. In the Greek.

He makes reference to putting a stumbling block. In the Greek it's a skandalon is the word. This is a scandal to Jesus. That is how strongly he feels about what's happening there.

Now we have these groups. The Nicolaitans. He's probably referring to one group here. We hear about them in the Ephesus church. In the book of Revelation. They're one group. And they represented people who.

They were a heretical group. They were enticing people. away from the worship. And standards of Jesus Christ. To accommodate. The standard around them. In this pagan culture. To just accommodate with this idol worship.

And accommodate with a sexual morality. Around them. They were a heresy. And they were tempting Christians. To compromise their faith. Their worship. And their morality. Now in the first part of the letter.

[12 : 29] Jesus has praised the Pogamon Christians. For being active. And holding on to their faith. But here he is criticizing them. For being passive. And tolerating this heresy. In the congregation.

Which is enticing people away from Jesus Christ. And the point isn't this. And is not just the heresy. It is the toleration. That is a scandal.

It is a scandal. That people are being enticed away. From the worship of Jesus Christ. As Lord and Savior. So you've got a picture in this church. Of one group of people.

Staying firm in their foundation. On Christ. On the one hand. And another group being tempted. And being tempted away. From the faith in Jesus Christ. And the congregation.

Has tolerated this. And it is scandalous. As far as Christ is concerned. And what seems to have happened. Is that the Christians of Pergamum.

[13 : 22] Stayed separate from the heretical ones. They kept themselves apart. And yet. What Jesus says to them. Is this. Repent. Repent. But if not.

I am going to come soon. And will wage war. With the sword of my mouth. Do you see that this is urgent. Christ is going to come. And he is going to deal with heresy. And immorality in his church.

He is not talking about the second coming here. Christ is saying. I am going to come. And I am going to deal with this situation. Because the faithful people. Of Pergamum. Have a job to do.

They have a responsibility here. Christians are being led astray. The name of Christ is being compromised. And this is happening. In the church. And Christ does not like it.

And even though the Christians. Were remaining faithful to Christ. That was not enough. Because this is happening. In the church. And Christ is angry about it.

[14 : 20] It is not good enough. For them to pull away. From this heresy. And immorality. They have got to counteract it. They have got to do something about it. They have got to repent. They have got to repent.

That this has crept into the church. Repent that this has happened. Even though. They themselves remain faithful to Christ. They have not checked. The creeping in of error.

And Christ takes it seriously. And so they must deal with it. Otherwise he will come. And bring his authority to bear. In the situation. And that is a powerful message.

For the church in Pergamum. And it is a powerful message. For us. Because. If you address these letters to us. Just as an individual congregation. Then I think we do very well.

We are standing firm in Christ. We are remaining firm. On the rock that is Jesus. But. We are not. An individual congregation. We are part of a much larger body.

[15 : 17] The Anglican Church. And an even larger body than that. The Christian Church. In Vancouver. We are part of that whole gathering. Of Christians in Vancouver. Worshipping our Lord Jesus Christ.

Today. And so when I read this passage. I find myself feeling worried. Because in the Christian Church. In Vancouver. There has crept. Compromise and heresy.

In belief and practice. Things that are repugnant to Christ. Are being paraded as good. Belief in the reality of Jesus Christ. Is being traded in.

For a watered down faith. Of good feelings. And personal affirmation. In which Jesus is no longer Lord. Why has this happened? Why has this happened? Now let's be quite clear.

That Christ is displeased. When immorality and compromise. Come into his church. And he will deal with it. But like the faithful people of Pergamum.

[16 : 14] Who remain quite absolutely faithful to Christ. We are being challenged. In our own time. To deal with heresy and immorality. In the church. It is not enough.

To remain firm in our own faith. We have got to repent. We have got to repent. Of the heresy and immorality. That has come into Christ's church. The church of which we are a part.

We have got to repent. Because repentance is powerful. When we repent. We place ourselves and our situation. Back under the authority of Jesus Christ. Under his word.

And repentance calls for action. We have got to do something about it. And Christ gives us that wonderful image. Of his authority. The double-edged sword.

His word is his authority. He will come and deal with his church. With his authority. We are under the word of God. The Bible is the authority. Under which we must all live.

[17 : 11] And to which the church must submit. It is the challenge of faith. We are part of a body. We have to deal with what's happening there. But finally there is a reward.

And I just want to end on this. If you read with me. He who has an ear. Let him hear what the spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes. I will give some of the hidden manna.

I will also give him a white stone. With a new name written on it. Known only to him. Who receives it. There's that white stone again. You know one of the gracious things about God.

Is that he makes his intentions very clear. And for all the symbolic language of the book of Revelation. Really is quite clear. Because Christ is saying what he wants his church to do.

What he wants to see in his church. And what he does not want to see. He is laying out his plans. For the eternal future. Offers an invitation to everyone to take part.

[18 : 10] And sets out exactly what you need to do. To take part in all of it. And the final words to the letter of the church in Pergamum. Are not confusing.

They are symbolic of eternal life. He wants to give us nourishment. He wants to feed us. He wants to build us up. That's the hidden manna. And he wants to affirm us. That's the white stone.

Because in the voting practices at the time. A black stone was a no vote. And a white stone was a yes vote. And Jesus wants to give us his yes vote. And the name written on it.

Is the name of the victor. Like Antipas in the beginning of the passage. Who stood firm to the end. And received the name my faithful witness. So it is Christ wants to give us.

The name of the victor. My faithful witness. Because we are being told to stand firm in the faith. No matter what. To stand against compromise and heresy in the Christian body.

[19 : 06] And when we stand firm in our faith. We will receive Christ's vote. His affirmation. His yes. And I believe that as St. John's Shaughnessy Church stands firm in the faith.

We will receive that affirmation from Christ. My faithful witness. You see the faith is not about warm fuzzies. There's nothing warm or fuzzy about it.

It is about standing. Standing firm on the rock that is Jesus. It is about standing firm. Even when error comes into the church. It is an act of the will.

Faith is a choice. More than that. It is what Jesus expects us to do. There was one time in the gospels. Where Jesus asked this question.

When the son of man returns. Will he find faith on the face of the earth? That depends. That depends on you and on me.