

REVELATION 2:12-17
TRUTH?

We alluded last week to the values' debate - what kind of society are we creating in the new Scotland? This is part of the political debate around the referendum. Who decides what values we are to adopt as a society? The politicians? The media? Or do we have a free choice as to which values we sign up to personally? I'm not sure about last of these – I'm not sure that we are as free to pick and choose! What happens when this new set of values for the new Scotland, shaped by secular ideas by and large - what happens when that set of values comes up against a different set, for example, Christian values espoused by Christians? From a Christian point of view there are 3 possible reactions to this collision: first of all, to hide behind a large (metaphorical) wall and live our own lifestyle untouched by the world, a bit like the Amish in the USA; or secondly, to take on board, totally, the new secular values in the name of trying to be part of the world to influence the world with the danger that we lose our sense of distinctiveness, and even compromise what we believe; or thirdly, to be in the world and engage with the world, but somehow hold onto a distinctive set of Christian values.

The people of God were under attack. Their enemies had hired a prophet to be their hit-man; he was hired to put a curse on the people of God so that they would lose their power and these enemies would be able to defeat them. The prophet's donkey had more sense than the prophet himself and eventually this hit-man worked out that putting a curse on the people of God was not a good idea. God and His people were too powerful for that; they resisted and survived this attack; the full frontal attack didn't work. But then something else happened: Israel is camped and "*the men...*" (*Numbers 25:1f*) Something more insidious began to happen, something working from the inside; the people began to indulge themselves in things that God had warned them against, particularly sexual immorality and wrong religion and their enemies began to prevail and the people of God were weakened from the inside and their faith was undermined. This is story of Balaam; you can read it in Numbers 22-25.

Pergamum was another famous city in the ancient world, the site of modern Bergama in Turkey. The ancient city sat on the top of a hill 1000 feet high; it was famous for its library of 200,000 volumes; for its four pagan temples, including one to worship the Roman Emperor – the worship of the emperor was the touchstone of their civic loyalty; it was famous as a place of healing, the " Lourdes of the ancient world". It was a hard place to be a Christian: there were open threats - Antipas was a Christian martyr slowly roasted to death in a bronze kettle. There were subtle threats to compromise their faith. Of our three options which do the Christians in Pergamum adopt? Do they live in own bubble? Do they adopt the values of the first century pagan society? Do they live in the world, but hold onto their distinctive Christian values, shaped by Jesus and His word? What does Jesus want them to do?

This is the third in a series of seven letters that come from Jesus to these churches in Asia Minor. There is a little pattern in most of them: there is something to commend the Church, there is a complaint and finally a remedy for the complaint. This is certainly the pattern we see here.

What is good about the Church in Pergamum? "*I know...*" (*Revelation 2:13*) Jesus knows their situation; He knows how hard it is to be a Christian in Pergamum; He knows the pressures they face to keep the faith and His grace has surely helped them. They have faced direct threats and hatred from the pagan culture and the pagan authorities; they have even faced up to Antipas being martyred, one of their brothers being brutally killed as an example to them all so that the others would

renounce their faith. Their allegiance to Jesus as Lord is seen by the civic authorities as treason against the emperor Domitian who had taken the title "Master and god"! The Christians had resisted that pressure and they remain true to Jesus; they resist the full frontal attack on the Christian faith and the Church and they stand firm and Jesus commends them for it.

"Nevertheless..." (Revelation 2:14f) There is another threat to the Christian faith in Pergamum and it comes from inside the Church itself. There are people who hold to the teachings of Balaam, and these vague Nicolaitians rear their head again having met them in Ephesus, though we know little about them. What we do know is that these groups had begun to adopt option two of our three earlier choices, they had begun to think and teach that it was all right for Christians to indulge in the values of pagan culture, especially in sexual immorality; and that it was all right for Christians to engage in pagan worship and sacrifice to other gods. How far they went we don't really know, but their Christian values were being reshaped by the values of Roman pagan culture and for Jesus that is a problem! The danger from inside the Church had to be resisted as much as the full frontal attack from outside!

The remedy: *"Repent!"* This is not the most fashionable word in our vocabulary. It does two things: first of all, it asks us to admit that we've got things wrong, that something is amiss and needs to be put right. The Christians in Pergamum need to recognise that their values are awry, that they've done something wrong by their sexual immorality and idol worship; this is a sometimes painful first step, but first step it needs to be. Secondly, it asks us to make changes: repentance is not just about being sorry for our mistakes, but is about changing the way we live and getting rid of what is wrong to live differently. The most common picture of repentance is the U-turn: I was driving recently on Wester Hailes Road behind a van coming towards Gillespie crossroads and without warning or signaling the van suddenly did a U-turn and went back down the hill; it was a complete change of direction. The Christians in Pergamum have adopted a wrong set of values and need to change; repentance is the way to make that change. To those who do, Jesus promises blessing and a kingdom: *"To him..." (Revelation 2:17)*

We were given a sight of some of the 2011 Census statistics. There is a link to them on the Church of Scotland website and they will tell you lots of things about our parish. There is a summary set up as "If Juniper Green were a village of 100 people" 7 would be in primary school; 4 would be in high school; 21 would be aged between 25 and 44; 19 would be aged 65 or over; 76 would be of working age (16-74), including 14 who have no qualifications; 30 who have a University degree, 31 who work full time; 16 who are retired; then finally 39 would say they belonged to the Church of Scotland, 37 say they have no religion at all.

Some people are getting all worked up about these statistics and they do give us pause for thought, as does the statistic that says only 1.5% of the Edinburgh population will be in Church today. They show us the size of the task facing us; the measure of the assault from outside the Church to our very existence. But we read these statistics and we pull ourselves up and resist them; there is a kind of backs-against-the-wall kind of attitude; "we will not be beaten down" and even the militant atheist attacks only serve to make Christians pull together.

There is another statistic that I find more concerning: it is an old statistic, but I have no reason to think that it is any better now, indeed it may even be worse. It is a statistic that came from the Bible Society some years ago after it did a survey of Christians in Scotland and our Bible reading habits. The survey told us that only one in ten Christians in Scotland read the Bible regularly. It didn't define 'regularly' as far

as I remember, but that statistic fills me with certain amount of alarm. If we go back to our values debate and we want to stand by our Christian values, how do we know what these Christian values are unless we read the Bible? We have already seen a number of debates where this is the question at its heart: what place does the Bible have in the life of the Church? How do we hold to the values of the Bible alongside the values of the world in which we live? The concern for me is that we've already made compromises that may well undermine the Christian life and witness of the Church from the inside!

The parable of the sower is all about listening for God's word. Jesus told it about His ministry; it works as a picture of ministry and mission in 21st century Scotland. Some people suggest that Jesus was watching a farmer at work in his field as He spoke, a visual aid for people to see while Jesus told the story. This is not the precise sowing of your garden or modern seed-sowing equipment; this is about broadcasting seed by the handful and leaving it to the wind to take the seed to all kinds of places. There are four of them in the story: some seed falls on path, and the path is as hard as stone and the seed just sits on the top and the birds come and eat it; there is no fruit there! Every field has a pile of stones in the corner, put there by the farmer after he has lifted them out of the field; there is a little soil on the stones, but not much and the seed starts to grow, but the sun dries it up and it dies; there is no fruit there. Some seed falls among the weeds and the weeds are stronger, choking out the seed and there is no fruit there. Some seed lands on the best soil, it grows and prospers and produces fruit a hundred times over.

Jesus explains: "Path hearts" hear but the devil snatches away the seed and no faith comes. "Soil among the rocks hearts" hear and begin to believe, but times of testing come and they fall away; they give up faith because the root is not deep enough to sustain faith when life is hard. "Weeds hearts" hear and believe, but other things become more important, life's worries become too much and their faith does not mature. There are "Good soil hearts": *"those with..." (Luke 8:15)* There are three stages: hear, retain, persevere and so produce fruit. Hear: we listen, we read the Bible, and there are all kinds of ways by which we can do that now. We retain what we hear, we keep it in our minds and let our minds and attitudes and values be shaped by what we hear, by the distinctive voice of Jesus. We persevere: keep reading, keep listening, keep retaining the word and keep living it out. It is not easy to be Christian in our society, but the challenge for us is to believe and to keep believing.

Are we Christians who know what we believe, Christians who know what we stand for, Christians ready to stand for that faith against all threats? This is the kind of Church Jesus wants us to be and the kind of Church Scotland needs us to be. Let's not hide away in a corner, frightened of the world; let's not give up what is precious and valuable to us in our Christian faith, compromising with the world; let's live out the Christian faith in our world, distinctive as Jesus' people, showing the world the values of Jesus. This matters hugely! The greatest threat to the future well-being of the Church is not from outside, not from the militant atheist agenda, not from secular society - the Church has resisted and overcome all of these in the past and will do so again. The greatest threat to the future well-being of the Church is from the inside, with people being enticed to go a different way. Christian life and faith is dynamic, full of purpose and hope, full of grace and energy; the Christian life and faith has much to offer us and our world and people need to hear about and know about Jesus and need to see Jesus in His people. That's why this matters; it matters so that people know Jesus; and they will know Jesus when they hear about Him and see Him in us. *"those with..." (Luke 8:15)* Hear, retain, persevere!