

The Book of Revelation

Week #3 – Letters to the Seven Churches

I. REVIEW

A. Outline of Revelation - Past, Present, Future

We saw that Christ in glory commissions John to write the book of Revelation [“Write what you see”] which consists of three parts covering three different time frames, past, present, and future [Rev 1:19]:

- 1) **Past:** The vision of Christ as the Son of Man [Chapter 1].
 - The author is taken up into heaven where he sees God in majesty directing the destinies of the world and the Church.
- 2) **Present:** The current state of the seven churches [what is happening now: Chapters 2-3];
- 3) **Future:** “What is about to take place hereafter’ [the immediate [proximate] future and the remote [ultimate] future: Chapters 4-22].

B. Structure of Revelation

At the start John is taken up into the heavenly throne room where he sees Jesus in the midst of the Churches [inaugural vision of the Son of Man].

Next he receives a series of visions:

- he is given messages to seven churches;
- three times he sees judgment poured out upon the wicked in a sevenfold series of events;
 - The seven seals; the seven trumpets; and the seven plagues [bowls of wrath];
- he is shown who are the key players on the heavenly battlefield;

- he is shown a vision of the final battle, God’s ultimate victory, and
- The final state of Christ’s Bride in eternity.

C. Daniel and the Prophets

The books of Daniel and Ezekiel play an important part in the vision of the Son of man [especially Dan 7: 13 -14], and highlights the importance of knowing the Old Testament, especially the prophets, for a correct interpretation of Revelation.

D. Prophecy

Revelation is a book of **apocalyptic prophecy** dealing with contemporary **and** future events.

E. Liturgy

Revelation must be understood not only in its original historical setting, but also **in the context of the Liturgy**. There is a vital connection between the Mass and the book of Revelation.

- The book of Revelation was written to be read at Mass;
- Blessing for Lector and Congregation [Rev 1:3];

*“Blessed is the one who **reads aloud** the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those **who hear** and **who keep** what is written in it; for the time is near.”*
- The book of Revelation reveals the Mass “as heaven on earth”;
- *“The Apocalypse can never be explained properly apart from Christ’s coming to the church in the Eucharistic celebration” [CCC 1137].*
- Pope Benedict calls Revelation “the book of the heavenly liturgy which is presented to the Church as the standard for her own liturgy.”

F. The Coming of Christ – The Parousia

There are at least three meanings to the word “coming” in relation to Christ in Revelation:

- 1) His coming in judgment at important periods of history [e.g. destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70].
- 2) His coming in his Real Presence [*parousia*] in the Eucharist;
- 3) The Second Coming [*parousia*] at the end of time.

The book of Revelation shows us that Christ’s coming is **past, present, and future.**

II. OVERVIEW OF WEEK #3

John addresses seven Churches in Asia Minor that lie within a 50-mile radius of one another. The letters to the seven Churches, although different from one another, all have the same basic structure.

- They recall one of the descriptions of Christ from the inaugural vision, e.g., Son of Man; alpha and omega, etc
- There is reference to the past, which is contrasted with the present;
- The Lord himself speaks, first to assure the community that he knows their suffering and good works;
- Then he indicts the community for its failings (with the exception of Smyrna).
- Various warnings are given and promises made;
- Then there is an exhortation to repentance and conversion, and
- A reminder that the end, and Christ’s definitive victory, will soon come.

Traditionally, it is held that the Apostle John settled in this area and ministered to these very churches in the latter years of his life.

III. THE LETTERS TO THE SEVEN CHURCHES

Spiritually, the zeal of these churches is declining, with Ephesus in the best shape and Laodicea in the worst.

Sadly, all of these churches from Ephesus to Laodicea eventually fell away from the Gospel. They have been overrun by Muslim forces, and are under their control to this day.

This is a stern warning for Christians of all locations and times, and it applies especially in our time.

Read: Revelation 2: 1-7

[1] "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: 'The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands.

[2] "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear evil men but have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and found them to be false;

[3] I know you are enduring patiently and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.

[4] But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first.

*[5] Remember then from what you have fallen, **repent and do** the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.*

[6] Yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

[7] He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.'

A. To Ephesus: Losing that First love

Background

Ephesus was the most prestigious, cultural, commercial, and religious centre in Asia, and its greatest and wealthiest city. It was a notoriously evil place.

- It had a population of 250 thousand in New Testament times;
- Its famous theatre seated 24 thousand spectators.
- Its temple of Artemis or Diana was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

- Paul founded the Church in Ephesus and later commissioned Timothy to build on what he had done [Acts 19:1-10];
- Both theatre and temple figure in Paul's ministry there [Acts 19].

State of the Church

“The one who holds the seven stars in his right hand,” that is, Christ who holds the Churches in his hand praises the community for its steadfast **endurance** and **resistance to false prophets** [Rev 2:2].

Every Christian should have these two attributes: endurance and holy intransigence.

They tested evil men like the Nicolaitans, who came into their community to spread error and falsehood, and rejected unorthodox teaching.

[The Nicolaitans were followers of the heretic Nicolas].

Nevertheless orthodoxy [doctrinal purity] is not enough. Catholics can pride themselves on being orthodox in such a way that they become uncharitable to their brothers and sisters in Christ.

In Ephesus, it seems that the struggle to maintain doctrinal purity has caused their first love to grow cold, and they have become judgmental of one another in the community.

Truth is essential, but it must lead to love!

Path of Return – Remember, Repent, Do

- Remember the state from which you have fallen!
- Repent! To regain that first love, repentance is necessary. If not, they will lose their lampstand [i.e., experience divine judgment].
- They need to fall in love with the Lord and their brothers and sisters all over again.

B. To Smyrna: A Slandered Community

Read: Revelation 2:8-11

And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write: `The words of the first and the last, who died and came to life.

*`I know your **tribulation** and your **poverty** (but you are rich) and the slander of those who say that they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.*

*Do not fear what you are about to suffer. Behold, the devil is about to throw some of you into **prison**, that you may be tested, and for ten days you will have tribulation. Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.*

He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who conquers shall not be hurt by the second death.'

Background

Thirty miles north of Ephesus, Smyrna was fiercely loyal to Rome and a centre of emperor worship.

It was the most beautiful city in Asia, and had a large Jewish community openly hostile to Christianity.

The Jews persuaded the people of the city to persecute Christians.

This is what Jesus is referring to when he says, “*the **slander** of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan.*”

The point is simple: Anyone who persecutes the Church is not a “true Jew.” The slanderers are probably Jews who have publicly accused the Christians of being hostile to the state religion, of refusing to say, “Cesar is Lord.”

The most famous Christian martyrdom that occurred in Smyrna was that of St. Polycarp in February 155A.D.

State of the Church

The Church in Smyrna was in trouble and further trial was imminent.

They were suffering persecution, poverty, and pending, short-term [ten days] imprisonment.

To all the Lord says, *“Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.”*

Application

Jesus applies this lesson to Christian suffering. We are warned that persecution is coming, but comforted in knowing that the period of suffering is short compared to the eternal reward awaiting us on the other side. In the end those who persevere will receive something much greater than earthly comfort – the crown of life.

This is a lesson for all of us who are tempted to compromise or hide our faith, in an effort to make our lives easier. After all, who wants to be labelled a “radical” or “rigid?”

The Second Death

In verse 11 we find the term “the second death.” This refers to the destruction of the soul in hell [Rev 20:13-15] – a fate far worse than physical death – the first death.

Each Christian is given a choice like Adam: earthly life or supernatural life.

To choose earthly life means to choose a death far worse than physical death. It is to choose the second death, which takes place in the lake of fire where the wicked *“shall be tormented with fire and brimstone . . . and the smoke of their torment goes up for ever and ever; and they have no rest day or night”* [see Rev 14: 10-11].

Apostasy is a greater evil than death!

C. To Pergamum: Allowing Idolatry

Read: Revelation 2:12-17

“And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: ‘The words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword. ‘I know where you dwell, where Satan’s throne is; you hold fast my name and you did not deny my faith even in the days of Antipas my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.

But I have a few things against you: you have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, that they might eat food sacrificed to idols and practice immorality.

So you also have some who hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, with a new name written on the stone which no one knows except him who receives it.'

Background

Pergamum, forty-five miles northeast of Smyrna, was both the administrative and cultural centre of Asia Minor.

It was famous for its library which contained over 200,000 parchment rolls, second only to that of Alexandria in Egypt. The word *parchment* is derived from *Pergamum*.

It was famous for its worship of *Asclepios Soter* [Asclepios the Saviour], the snake-god and god of healing, patron of the famous school of medicine established there. The emblem of Asclepios was the serpent.

The Emperor Augustus was worshipped as a god. Refusal to worship Caesar was a crime of treason.

Christ's description of the city as the place where **"Satan's throne is"** and where **"Satan dwells"** may be related to the fact that so many gods were worshipped there, especially the snake-god Asclepios.

State of the Church

The Christian community has held fast to the faith despite persecution and the martyrdom of one of its members, Antipas [*my witness – my faithful one*].

Yet all is not well in Pergamum.

There are those in the Christian community who hold to the teaching of Balaam and the Nicolaitans.

Balaam appears in Numbers 22-24 as a "seer" [false prophet] who encouraged Moabite women [*Balak* was the king of Moab] to seduce the men of Israel into sexual and idolatrous sin.

Similarly, the Nicolaitans have invited the Christians to eat food sacrificed to idols, and to practice fornication.

Path of Return

Jesus calls the church to repentance [Rev 2:16] – **“Repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and war against them with the sword of my mouth.”**

The sword of Christ is the word of Christ [Hebrews 4:12].

Jesus is warning the Christians of Pergamum not to be like the generation of Israelites who fell into sin just before they entered the Promised Land.

These Christians are at the threshold of “the new heavens and the new earth” which John is about to see come down from heaven.

Application

It is so easy to be seduced by the prevailing culture.
(Everybody is doing it, so why not me?)

How often today do Christians justify their involvement in sin because it is culturally acceptable – fornication, adultery, divorce, abortion, homosexuality; the idolatry of money, power, pleasure?

It is all around us and hard to avoid. We live in a pagan society and face the same temptations the Christians of Pergamum did.

But Jesus is uncompromising [Rev 2:16]. Christians must break with the prevailing culture. We must be steeped in the **word of Christ – the sword of the Spirit** – if we are to see the dangers and change the culture.

Refusing to “go with the flow” may not mean martyrdom, but it might mean risking rejection or ridicule.

The Word of Christ

The word of Christ is the antidote to the poison of false prophets and teachers.

The word of Christ [God] *convicts us of sin, and invites us to return to God with the assurance of salvation.*

The Hidden Manna

Christ promises two things to the one who overcomes: the hidden manna and a white stone.

Manna is an allusion to the miraculous bread – the bread from heaven - God gave his people in the desert. The manna here stands for Jesus himself, the Bread of Life. The “hidden” manna is Christ who is hidden in his Real Presence in the Eucharist.

The White Stone

A white stone was sometimes used as a pass or admission ticket to a royal feast or banquet. In a jury trial it meant a vote of acquittal.

Christ acquits the victor before the judgment of God and gives admission to the marriage feast of the Lamb.

D. To Thyatira: Tolerating a False Prophet

Read: Revelation 2:18-29

"And to the angel of the church in Thyatira write: `The words of the Son of God, who has eyes like a flame of fire, and whose feet are like burnished bronze.

"I know your works, your love and faith and service and patient endurance, and that your latter works exceed the first.

But I have this against you, that you tolerate the woman Jezebel, who calls herself a prophetess and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.

I gave her time to repent, but she refuses to repent of her immorality. Behold, I will throw her on a sickbed, and those who commit adultery with her I will throw into great tribulation, unless they repent of her doings;

And I will strike her children dead. And all the churches shall know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve.

But to the rest of you in Thyatira, who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, to you I say, I do not lay upon you any other burden; only hold fast what you have, until I come.

He who conquers and who keeps my works until the end, I will give him power over the nations,

And he shall rule them with a rod of iron, as when earthen pots are broken in pieces, even as I myself have received power from my Father; and I will give him the morning star. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'

Background

Thyatira lies some forty miles southeast of Pergamum and was the least of the seven churches mentioned. The city was a centre of trade noted for smelting, weaving, and dyeing.

Because of this it had an extraordinary number of trade guilds [associations, labour unions?]. Each guild had a god whom all the members were required to worship.

This worship often included immoral sexual conduct and the eating of food sacrificed to idols – practices condemned by the apostles at the Council of Jerusalem [Acts 15:19, 29].

Failure to follow these practices could mean both social disgrace and financial disaster for the Christian objector.

The State of the Church

The letter begins with high praise for the good works of this Church. They have grown in *“love and faith and service and patient endurance.”*

But there is also severe criticism [Rev 2:20]. The problem of this church is not so much external persecution as it is false teaching.

The source of the problem is a woman of the community who is a prophetess named Jezebel [after the wicked wife of Ahab, king of Israel – Jezebel was accused of idolatry and witchcraft].

The Jezebel of Revelation is seducing members of the community *“to practice immorality and to eat food sacrificed to idols.”* And, despite many warnings, she refuses to repent!

Jezebel was probably teaching that a Christian could accommodate himself to the world, that he could still be a Christian and take part in idolatry and sexual sin.

Jesus uses the threat of punishment to encourage Jezebel and her followers to repent. But if she does not, she will be

afflicted with a grave illness, and her followers will suffer intensely, even die.

Application

The warning of Jesus remains applicable today. Sometimes we refuse to detach ourselves from certain sins, and so we try to justify ourselves by multiplying our good works.

We try to bargain with God, thinking we can continue to sin, as long as we “pay God his due.” But as Jesus said, “*No one can serve two masters . . . You cannot serve both God and mammon*” [Mt 6:24].

“*Choose today whom you will serve*” [Deut 30:19].

Preparation for Week #4 (Revelation Chapter 3):

Review

1. *The Apocalypse* – notes by Archbishop Collins (handout)
2. The Four Senses of Scripture (handout)

Read

1. *Revelation to St. John* – Ignatius Catholic Study Bible
Chapter 3 – The Seven Letters (cont’d)
2. *Coming Soon: Unlocking the Book of Revelation* – Finish
Chapter 5

Discuss

1. Study Questions 1-6 at end of Chapter 5 of *Coming Soon*.