

Challenge and Compromise – the journey continues. Many of you will be aware of the writings and speaking of Richard Dawkins, Professor of the public understanding of science. His central theme nowadays is the conflict between religions and the face of science. He sees atheism as the only intellectually credible position and he would say abolition of religion would be a sign of human maturity.

We are not going to explore his viewpoint today but my reason for starting with it is first to commend a book by **Alister McGrath**, a biophysicist who is professor of historic theology at Oxford: **Dawkins' God – genes, memes and the meaning of life**. It is a magnificent and academically rigorous rebuttal of Dawkins and if you feel you need something slightly more challenging than Clive Cussler or Joanna Trollope to read on a plane or sitting by the pool on your holidays may I commend it to you.

The second reason to mention this is to introduce the today's theme of **Can we compromise?** – which is the theme and challenge running through applying John's letters to the churches at Pergamum and Thyatira in our lives today.

We are going to ask ourselves whether we can compromise on some of our cherished beliefs to make them more acceptable to the society within which we live. Dawkins suggests that any concession that his scientific viewpoint could make with religion would be nothing short of appeasement, and intellectually cowardly.

However there is no doubt that some in the established church are showing equal cowardice by talking about a "new convergence" in the disciplines of religion and science, opening the way to new "insights and understandings."

No doubt the word "challenges" will replace any statement of "problems" in the argument, and in the end, I suspect the appeasers will write a paper of many pages stating and achieving absolutely nothing other than a waste of trees to make the paper.

But for this morning, we will confine ourselves to the question of whether we can compromise our beliefs to make the gospel more acceptable to society, and if so, what will be the result.

Those of you who have been able to be present over the previous monthly studies in this series will know by now that John (the theologian) is writing to seven churches in Asia Minor, representative of the growing early church in that area and by the use of the word seven, meaning completeness, he, with the assisting power of the Holy Spirit is speaking to us as we see similar challenges and criticisms and encouragements to our own situation here today. Next week we will complete our studies of the letters to the seven churches in Asia Minor allowing us to move forward into the difficult area of the second vision of John concerning the Last judgement.

Let me ask you a fundamental question at the beginning.

Do you & I look at the scriptures from the viewpoint of the history and experience of the world we live in or do we look at the society and culture round about us in the light of Scripture?

The question is "from which viewpoint do you look at the world"?

Is it from the world's viewpoint looking at the Bible and faith? ---or ----is it from a Faith viewpoint looking at the world around us?

The answer to this question is absolutely fundamental to our lives as Christians because it also brings to a focus the witness we make to those round about us.

Let's then look at both points of view.

Take first as our starting point the society within which we live and then view from that point the beliefs and standards promoted by all the branches of the Christian church. I think being brutally honest we will soon be struggling in a quicksand of different opinions, practices and rituals. This is indeed how the world is looking at us in many Western countries.

To take an obvious example, few can have missed the reports of the Bishops of the of the Anglican Church meeting in Lambeth, and have perhaps concluded that the only subjects they were there to discuss were the appointment of a gay bishop and women bishops.

Incidentally, I think many of us feel it offensive that these two very different issues with such different implications are almost taken together in the media reports. I am sure that there were many other important

matters which were being discussed but only these two captured the interest of the media.

From the viewpoint of what we must call "society", we would surely wonder what on earth these strangely garbed individuals were worrying about.

The law protects individuals from discrimination on the grounds of gender or sexual orientation. [The law currently protects individuals from being discriminated against on the grounds of their sex. Such protection is set out in the Sex Discrimination Act 1975 and the Equal Pay Act 1970.][Employment Equality (Sexual Orientation) Regulations 2003.]

From our temporary viewpoint in society, we might feel the church is therefore dragging behind the new enlightenment that has enshrined these laws. If gay priests or appropriately trained women wish to become bishops then let them go ahead, just as in any employment situation, there should be no discrimination. Further, in view of the fact that there are currently few actively gay candidates for elevation to the bishopric, and relatively few women priests who wish to become bishops, we should perhaps be advocating positive discrimination in favour of these groups to redress the balance of history.

If you continue in that position observing the issue from the world's point of view and read the Scriptural basis of the objections to such a step, it becomes very easy to say that the Scriptures are hardly relevant to anything in our modern lives.

They were written between 2000 and 3000 years ago, in the first instance as a record of the history of a nomadic agrarian tribe wandering around the Middle East, chronically unsuccessful politically and in war, leading them to be enslaved or overthrown or dispersed. Not exactly a success story to follow.

On top of that, as a document, it is difficult to find independent evidence for which part of the Old Testament is the writing down of an oral tradition of allegorical tales that are common to many religions that arose in and around the Middle East, and which is true historical reporting.

Equally the New Testament from the world's viewpoint just tells the story of an itinerant artisan preacher who only had a publicly recorded history for three years in an area of the Middle East jointly run by Roman

conquerors and corrupt Jewish quislings. It tells that he was put to death and should really never have been heard of again. His ragtag group of largely unlettered followers then set out to convert the rest of the known world and their activities are recorded in a series of letters.

But, and still from society's viewpoint, whatever belief or unbelief we have, can anyone deny the impact that Jesus has had on the social, spiritual, political, legal framework of society throughout the world. Millions of lives have been influenced by that one life, and despite the attempts by critics who remind us of all the failings of the church as an organisation, in human terms the overall impact of Jesus' short life is incalculably positive in terms of social cohesion, the development of human rights and the provision of care for those in trouble.

And yet despite this fact, from society's viewpoint it is now so unfashionable, so uncool to believe that these happenings 2000 years ago have any relevance whatsoever in the way we might behave and live our lives in the 21st century. So society says ---let the Anglican Church do what it wants, as long as it adheres to the current law and leave us alone to enjoy the material blessings that we have from living in the 21st century.

But that is life from society's point of view, and proposing it makes me quite uncomfortable. We as Christians should not be looking at the world in that way.

If we see society from the viewpoint of Scripture, from the viewpoint of Jesus, the Word of God, we very quickly come to a different conclusion.

John is commanded by God to write to the churches in Pergamum and Thyatira from the point of view of the Word, of Jesus Christ. He sees that they were subject to enormous temptation to compromise their standards on things that would not be foreign in any current debate on behaviour, particularly on matters concerning sexual immorality and social behaviour. He sees from the viewpoint of scripture their souls are greatly at risk.

Although in our past studies we have emphasised the threat of instant death that these churches were under in relation to the Roman Emperor and indeed have in many ways identified with them as a struggling group, we have now to see that the greater threat was present inside these churches with a potential to overwhelm them from within.

Let me digress to an illustration. As we are continually being reminded, our world is filled with bacteria, many of which are essential to our bodies' health when located in the right place. Whenever you eat, you introduce harmful bacteria into your system and so your intestine needs to be very good at keeping them at bay. Your body kills these invaders with stomach acid and, if that doesn't work, it overwhelms it with so-called friendly bacteria. So we live in partnership with these healthy bacteria that live in our gut.

But when bacteria get from the outside world into the body in areas where they should not be – through the gut wall or through a skin break then they can overwhelm the defences, causing abscesses, blood poisoning and death.

So it is with a church under threat both from within and without. The most dangerous situation for us is for our enemy to get within our defences where it can multiply and cause disease and death whilst our soldiers are busy looking around for things outside ourselves that we perceive as a threat i.e. in the world or from other religions.

Both the churches at Pergamum and Thyatira were in this situation with external and internal threats to their health. After some compliments as the faithful part of their witness John confirms that he understands their immediate situation. In the case of Pergamum, John writes in verse 13 **“I know where you live - where Satan has his throne”**. Now that is not John saying accusingly “I know where you live and you cannot hide and you are living with Satan”.

No! ----He is saying that he knows that the city of Pergamum was the centre of Greek paganism with temples to Demeter, Dionysus , Athena and Orpheus.

He is also saying that the most immediate external threat was the cult of the Emperor, which was emphasised by the Temple of Augustus which stood on a rocky peak on the approaches to the city where all travellers could see it, and presumably be fearful.

John is saying that he knows their circumstances and he praises them for not renouncing their faith even since the days of Antipas the faithful witness who was martyred for his belief.

But he is going on to say that they are now at risk from the heretical teaching within of Baalam in the case of Pergamum and Jezebel in the case of Thyatira.

In both cases the specific offences are of sexual immorality and of eating food offered to idols and as you will see later, these specifics call into question the whole matter of compromise in faith matters.

I think it is worth pointing out that the matter of sexual immorality comes up again and again in Revelation. Whereas the likely cause of the problem in these two churches is very specific heretical teaching by two individuals, part of the group of so-called Nicolaitans, later in the book of Revelation, in the final battle between good and evil, John's vision takes him to see a woman sitting on a scarlet beast (chapter 17) *"the woman was dressed in purple and scarlet and was glittering with gold, precious stones and pearls. She held a golden cup in her hand, filled with abominable things and the filth of her adulteries. This title was written on her forehead: mystery, Babylon the great! The mother of prostitutes and of the abominations of the Earth."*

So the churches were being warned about individual sexual immorality but later this is going to be linked into the great wealth of evil that immorality of all sorts generates.

Let us think just a little further about the specifics.

I think we, and indeed some of the conservative elements in the Church of England need to be careful not to single out the issue of homosexuality as in some ways more important than any other form of what sexual immorality.

There are many areas of sexual behaviour that can cause us to sin, or tempt us to sin. As one gets older and perhaps wiser, we may get tired of the fact that the church and society in general seems obsessed with sexual behaviour.

However because it is such a powerful part of human behaviour for good or for ill, the Bible is full of warnings of the consequences of sexual immorality at a personal and church level as well as the community at large.

But whilst we may disapprove of such behaviour, the world says that the norm has changed in regard to heterosexual couples living together outwith marriage.

Do we hold our tongue on that subject even though we know in the light of Scripture it is wrong when it condones what our society considers the norm?

We cannot pick and choose about morality as Christians. If we compromise on some things as (less important) and take a stand on others, where do we draw the line?

The law of the land draws lines about acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. We as Christians have also to draw a line in the sand and say "for us, thus far and no further!!"

But the issue here is deeper than just one or other heresy or sinful attitude.

The issue here is the temptation to compromise in order not to be different; not to stick out in the crowd; not to be seen to be unfashionable; not to put our heads above the parapet.

A teacher in the Bible School in America wrote the following "*when I taught Revelation for a college Sunday school class roughly a decade ago, the churches in Pergamon and Thyatira generated more discussion than all the rest of Revelation combined. Students identified with the pressures to compromise in areas of sexual morality, chemical addictions, silent accommodation of the reigning secularism of the campus, and so forth. Whether Revelation implies the image of sexual immoralities literally or figuratively, the image still serves as a warning against the pressure to compromise with God's will, and in our culture compromise certainly accommodates the values of the world.*"

The second area of heresy in these two letters was the eating of food dedicated to idols.

There are a number of background facts which help illuminate how difficult that problem was for the people particularly of Thyatira. This city was a centre of manufacturing industry. In contrast to most of the other churches we have studied so far, it had no particular religious significance. It was not a centre of Caesar worship or of Greek worship. However, it was a centre of the trade union movement of the day. These were properly termed trade Guilds which were associations for the profit and pleasure of people employed in the wool trade, the leather trade, the linen and bronze trade, and so on. In order to be successful financially you had to be part of the organisation or guild relevant to your trade – if you were not a member you could not do business.

But there was a problem. These Guilds held common meals, often in a Temple and even if not, the meal would begin and end with a formal sacrifice to the pagan gods.

Worse than that, even if there was no such ceremony, the guilds often bought the meat that they would use from butchers who in their turn purchased it from the remains of pagan sacrifices. Such eating of food was absolutely forbidden for Christians and I suspect many of us now, if we knew our meat was arising from such a source, would shop elsewhere.

So that was the problem. You either joined the Guild and took part in these communal meals which were often the prelude to a drunken orgy, or you faced financial ruin.

It seems that Jezebel's line was that they should compromise their standards in the interests of business and commercial prosperity. This advice of course would come with the stamp of her apparent position as a leader and a prophet in the church. This Nicolaitan view proposed an accommodation with the cultural norms of the time. Thus a Christian in that church could eat the meat sacrificed to idols; they could indeed take part in pagan rituals since they were taught "*All things are restored to mankind in Christ. The pagan Gods can be rejected as superstitions from which Jesus had delivered his people. Therefore they need not take a stand.*"

But you know how one compromise tends to lead to another. One commentator suggests that Jezebel was preaching that since Christ is Lord over all things, we can ditch this talk about them and us, enemies and hostile powers; the devil and all his angels for Christ is already out there, ahead of us, incognito, dressed in other religions and cultural forms and known by a hundred names, invoked in ancient deities and saviours, celebrated in rituals far older than Christianity.

In which case the wise and enlightened believer need struggle no longer to distinguish between religions, but can welcome them all as tributaries flowing into the limitless ocean that is God. " And there we are – modern universalism by any other name – forget the fact that Jesus said "I am the Way the Truth and the Life, no one comes to the father but by me".

This approach is **syncretism** – the blurring of religions --- and the world would say that is right for today – a religion that is tolerant, broad minded, worldly wise and inclusive.

Is that right? How to decide?

John spoke of the reward to those who resisted such heresy. He promised to the faithful in Pergamum that they would receive the hidden manna. He was undoubtedly referring to the fact that when the children of Israel were 40 years in the desert, God fed them with this heavenly substance which kept them alive when otherwise they would have starved to death.

But this reference also had a deeper meaning. To a Jew, to eat of the hidden manna meant to enjoy the blessings of the Messianic age. This indeed was reminding them of the Bread of Heaven which we will sing about in a few moments.

John is reminding them that if they refuse to sit down and eat the food dedicated to idols, the day will come when they will feast in heaven upon heavenly food. But the mention of manna and the sideways reference to the coming of the Messiah allows him to remind them that Jesus said "I am the Bread of life (John 6:31-35) .

John finishes the letter to the church of Thyatira with a series of serious threats if they continue in their heresy. Jezebel will be made to suffer and all those who have shared her heresy, if not her bed. Even worse, their children will be struck dead – a reference yet again to a massacre of innocents – a very difficult concept for the act of a merciful God, but God is just and not mocked and persistent disobedience has real consequences not just for the sinner but for those for whom the sinner is responsible.

And what rewards are offered if we stand firm?

The reward for the faithful is the promise of power over those who had treated them so unjustly, and the promise of the white stone----- the tablet that identifies the holder as worthy of praise; worthy by justification of good things; worthy of a new beginning in a heavenly body – all those things we spoke of earlier.

Who is Balaam and who is Jezebel in the church today? Who is preaching compromise with the world, and who is saying thus far and no further? I leave that to your own judgement to decide. None of us is perfect. Jesus knows where we are, but He continues to challenge us constantly with the Gospel.

John tells the church at Pergamum that the one whose words are the sharp double edged sword (referring of course to Jesus) v16 will fight

against them with the sword of His mouth. Jesus is saying He will not stand up in support of them them before God but will use the discerning sword of Truth to accuse them when they come to their own judgement day.

So – can the Christian compromise? You know that our ordination promise as an elder or minister or deacon contains these words:

The Church of Scotland acknowledges the Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments to be the supreme rule of faith and life.

Not the pronouncements of any committee or council.

Not the sayings of the Moderator, or any great preacher or philosopher -- but **the Word of God**.

And if we stick to that I believe we have no justification to compromise what the Word of God says on any matter of substance to our faith because society says we should.

An American commentator wrote "in modern Western Christendom one is almost tempted to wonder at the battlefield has shifted, so that the line now lies between a remnant of radical, witnessing Christians on the one hand, and the rest of the church with the world on the other. Many disciples suffering for the gospel in other parts of the world mourn how quickly the United States (---- and I think we can add Gt Britain there) has shifted from what was in many respects a source of spiritual blessing to the world to a self-centred mission field exporting sexual promiscuity and greed through its entertainment media far more than its Christians are exporting the gospel."

A Pharisee tried to trick Jesus by asking Him what the most important commandment was.

Jesus said, love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and voice and love your neighbour as yourself.

If you or I have a matter of conscience or are subject to pressure to compromise our witness, may I humbly suggest we consider those two commandments as the best greater rule for life?

If anything, whether the seeking of power or influence, sexual satisfaction, or money, or our work, or even social acceptance in this village gets in the way of loving God, not just with the part of your heart that is our religion but ALL of your heart to the exclusion of everything else, then you & I need to review our priorities.

And equally if life goals get in the way of us reflecting God's grace and love to our fellow man and woman again it is a compromise too far.

And those two commandments are the real mission statement for life!!

Not a jumble of meaningless jargon that pleases everyone but means nothing as misdsion statements often are ---but a life changing real mission statement.

The choice is compromise or Christ – I know which way I want to vote – I hope you do too!