

Hold on to the Vision

A story-sermon based on Peters letter .[2 Peter 1:16-21] The letter was sent from Rome across the Aegean Sea to churches all over Asia Minor. Our imagined story tells of the arrival of Rufus – the letter bearer - in the Graeco/Roman city of Pergamum - modern Bergama in Turkey.

A late, humid afternoon. People were dwindling away from the Pergamum marketplace, aware of a rising wind behind thundery clouds. Glimpses of the dark, distant sea showed white crests of distant waves. Rufus remembered where to find the woollen store. Close beside the pillars of the great world-renowned library it was hard to miss. He pressed himself between heavy bales of cloth as Felix appeared through a forest of woollen hangings and rugs. Friends from years past they were excited to meet and greet each other.

What are you doing here in Pergamum? Felix asked. He led the way into his tiny office space.

Just passing. I've been up into Galatia with a bundle of letters – well copies of one letter really – from Simon Peter in Rome. Haven't you seen a copy yet?

Felix scoffed. *Not if it's from Peter!*

Rufus was surprised at his friend's response.

Oh, it's nothing against Peter. We would love to have a word from him. It's just that we don't often see things like that. I presume our elders make them disappear before we hear about them. There'll be things in the letters they don't want us or themselves to hear.

Rufus nodded, looking concerned. *Then it really is as Peter has heard. There are divisions in the church. The false teaching Peter has written about?*

Yes. Sadly, we're in two meeting groups now, although we do get together for occasional times of praise when most of us can forget our differences. I'm glad Peter knows. Felix led Rufus out of the store. Securing the door behind him he dropped coins into the hand of his watchman.

I'd like to know what he said. Do you have another copy of the letter?

No, Rufus chuckled, but I've heard it read so many times I can tell you almost word for word what he says. In fact, I was with Peter when he wrote it.

You will stay a while Rufus. We have a prayer time this evening and the friends will love to hear you tell them about Peter and his letter.

Rufus took Felix's arm. *I thought you'd never ask!*

The two men walked uphill in the shadow of the great temple of Artemis, reminiscing about their first meeting in Galilee and hearing Jesus. They had shared the events of his crucifixion and resurrection in Jerusalem and worked together when Felix entertained Paul for a while here in Pergamum. As they drew closer to the Temple its huge columns felt like a dark shadow across their lives and their work.

Artemis is still popular here then, commented Rufus. And in Rome.

You'll see there's a huge annex to the temple now. Felix pointed. Emperor worship. We are expected to pay our dues as well as our taxes. That's another point of division in the church. Some of us refuse. We've got away with it so far, but it's all getting harder. Simon, one of our older friends, was imprisoned recently. He'd been reported for speaking out against offering sacrifices to Augustus. He died in prison. No-one was ever told how. We're not too badly off at the moment, but if our numbers grow things will change. We have members in fairly high places but most of us still have to be careful what we say and do. We are a little protected because the city depends on our trade in woollen goods and the rich dyes we bring in for them.

Many of our people have been persecuted and put to death in Rome. Rufus added dolefully. I'm afraid it will be worse now Nero is in charge. The church growing there worries many of the ruling classes. To defy the emperor can mean certain death.

Sunlight bounced off the great Greek columns as they passed lighting up a backdrop of surrounding pines and olive groves.

There's a grove, over there to the left. Felix pointed. I go there sometimes to be quiet and remember. It's just like Gethsemane. Do you remember? Where Jesus often prayed. They walked on in silence over the hill top to an outlying hamlet of dwellings and farms, coming at last to the smallholding and country house where Felix lived and had his woollens workshops. The looms were already silent. Joanna and Eunice were in their garden tending a rainbow of colours – orchids and verbascum, all securely fenced against wandering goats. After further warm greetings Rufus followed them all into the house.

You've arrived at a good time, Felix told Rufus. Our friends are meeting here shortly for prayer and a meal. We do this when we can. Others in the church don't all join us but it's good to be able to share what we believe without being criticised all the time.

Soon the others began to arrive – Claudia, Chloe and Dorcas with Marcellus, Linus and Simon the stonemason. They prayed together. Rufus was especially interested to hear them praying for the city, for the Emperor, for their dissident brethren – prayers of forgiving love like the Master taught them. It was a simple meal, beginning with remembering Jesus among them by sharing bread and wine. Then, relaxing as the light faded and lamps flicked in the room Felix called on his friend. *Now Rufus. The moment we've been waiting for. Tell us all about Peter and what was in that letter you carried. The letter we should had seen!*

Rufus was quick to respond. In his quiet, thick voice, he told them first about Peter. *He just calls himself Peter now – without the Simon. He's holding the church together in Rome, but it's not easy and there's a lot of opposition from everywhere, from some Christians, from Jews and Romans. We're never sure who we can trust, or who may betray us. Peter's looking very weary. He*

believes he may not be with us long. He's a target for all our opponents in the city. The emperor's spies and informants are everywhere. Many of us are in hiding much of the time and, sadly, a considerable number of men and women have surrendered their lives for Jesus. However, faith is strong and God's people are rejoicing even in tragedy. Peter believes there will be many, many more martyrs soon. That's why he wants the Lord's people to be strong in faith and love and to make their witness even in the face of death. And especially to resist being divided by their different views of what they believe. That's what the letter was all about.

Rufus paused, aware that this was the moment the small church here had been waiting for all evening.

Peter knows much of what you have told me over supper. How many people compromise their belief, even to the point of denying the Lord in order to save their jobs or ease the burden of their taxes.

And to increase their chances of promotion and wealth said Marcellus with a meaningful nod to Felix. We're a prosperous commercial city. Being an outspoken Christian can spoil the chances of wealth and promotion.

Rufus continued. *Peter sees the worst problem being how people twist the faith and scripture to suit themselves and they end up denying the truth of Jesus as Son of God and Saviour of the world.*

Yes! It's because they don't want to upset the Jews. Silas spoke confidently. And because they're afraid the educated Romans and Greeks will laugh at them. It was just the same in Corinth when I was there.

Peter was so upset about this teaching, said Rufus. Because they then use it to excuse all sort of sordid, immoral behaviour and even believe they can get involved in temple worship as well as following Jesus. He said they teach that the Cross is just a story. It was really a mistake and shouldn't have happened. That pleases the Jewish Way people. They don't openly preach Jesus rose from the dead. They say that's just a fabrication.

We know it isn't Felix blurted out. We were there!

They say that many of the miracles which have followed us since the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost are like fairy stories too.

*So, what **do** they believe? Asked Linus*

I think, from what Peter said, Rufus tried to explain. They want to please the Jews mostly. They say that Jesus came to fulfil the Law. He was a teacher who brought the Law of God to life again for us. He made it clearer than the Pharisees and scribes what it means to love God and love your neighbour.

That's true of course, Linus said. But you can't leave out the Cross and Jesus' sacrifice for us. Take away the resurrection and what about the life we share in Jesus?

But they don't stop there do they. The women rarely joined in the conversation but Joanna was in her own home and felt very strongly on the subject. They have all sorts of ideas about loving your neighbour she said, which means not upsetting the temple priests or their prostitutes - not buying meat that's been offered for sacrifices - turning a blind eye to dishonesty when it puts money in their own pockets too .. Joanna caught Felix's eyes and realised she had said enough. Felix changed the conversation. So, what then did Peter tell us to do about all this Rufus?

Rufus was very quiet for a while. Then in a different tone of voice in which Felix felt he recalled something of the Master's voice he answered. *I can see Peter writing. If you had been there you would have no doubt about Jesus and Peter's faith in him, his words, his Cross, his Resurrection, his Spirit with us and in us... He said it all as we wrote it down for him Then he stopped and a sort of glow like early dawn spread over his face. We had seen it before. Many times. "I was there," he said, gazing in front of him like one looking into pictures in a fire. "James and John were with me. We had climbed high up into Tabor, among the majestic oaks and early flowers. Jesus went up higher into another clump of trees to pray alone. Suddenly a light drew our attention to him. We hurried towards it. Jesus knelt there. It seemed he was filled with a glory light. Then we saw two figures beside him. We learned later they were Moses and Elijah, the great men of our faith - representing law and prophecy. It was all coming true and they were preparing Jesus for his suffering and victory. It all came to an end as a mist shrouded the mountain and when that cleared Jesus was alone - just himself again. He told us to keep it all to ourselves until he was no longer with us. Ever since that day the experience has lived with me, Peter told us. Behind all my memories of his death and resurrection and the miracles and wonders we have seen. It leaves me with no doubt that he was and is truly the Son of God, the Christ, the Saviour of the world.*

Rufus was silent for a moment then looked round at them all. *In Peter's mind Rufus told them, he climbs that mountain every day. He told us that it is that vision of Jesus which holds him true to his faith and his mission. That's what Peter really wanted to get across to all of us - why he wrote this letter, It's Jesus - Son of God in glory - who holds the church together. We must keep him at the centre to be right in our teaching, empowered for our mission. We must keep him as the glorious Lord at the heart of our lives, living in his presence and waiting for the time when he comes again. When the whole world will see his glory and the power of his love. It could be any moment! Peter wants us to climb like him, every day at least and in our thoughts and prayers alone and together to get closer to the glory of Christ, the truth and the life. In that*

mountain-top experience there can be no disunity, only mercy, forgiveness and love as we wait for the coming of his glorious Kingdom.'

A longer silence ensued and those who raised their heads would have seen a glow on the face of Rufus. A flickering, dying candle bathed his head in a circle of light. They were all praying their own prayers, thinking of the forgiveness and peace which Jesus asked of them and which could bring healing and new life to their church.

Eventually, Felix spoke. *Thank you, Rufus. We are glad you came. The Lord brought you. He did not want us to miss Peter's letter.*