

Hebrews 12: 18-29 — The mountain of fear, and the mountain of joy

The letter to the Hebrews feels very different to the other letters of the New Testament. Sections of it have been part of the lectionary for some weeks now, but I have been focussing on Luke's gospel. So to pick up on Hebrews requires a brief summary of the context and what has happened so far, to make sense of today's reading. We'll do that first, then look at the passage itself, before thinking about how we could read this again for our own lives.

We don't know who wrote the letter, but the target audience is clear: they are Jews who became Christians, but are now facing persecution after the great fire of Rome in AD64, and are abandoning their Christian faith and reverting to their Jewish heritage because by doing so they will suffer less persecution. The whole letter is therefore a sermon, a unified exhortation not to abandon the grace they have found in Christ, and the bulk of this exhortation is made through a series of contrasts, demonstrating Jesus's superiority in every single way.

1. Thus, in the first few chapters, Jesus is contrasted with the angels (who were understood by Jewish tradition to have been the intermediaries in giving the law of the Lord to Moses on Mount Sinai). But Jesus is superior, because he is the radiance of God, the very imprint of God's nature. Angels can tell *about* God and his laws, Jesus can *show* God and his laws. And *show* is better than *tell*.

2. Similar contrasts are made by contrasting Moses, who led the Israelites to the promised land, with Jesus, who leads his people into a new covenant and a new creation.

3. Furthermore: the priesthood laid out in the Mosaic covenant is temporary and imperfect, but Jesus's priesthood — his capacity to act as intermediary with the Lord is perfect and eternal.

4. And: while the Old covenant required the regular practice of sacrifices that enacted our desire for reconciliation, Jesus, the lamb of God is the once and for all sacrifice, the last word in God's lasting grace towards us. That's something like 8 chapters of Hebrews covered.

Having set up these contrasts, the letter exhorts its readers by the example of an army of Old Testament heroes of the faith who endured so much hardship for the sake of the hope they had in God — usually without ever seeing the fruit of their hopeful endurance. Finally, as the last in this line of role models, the writer offers Jesus himself, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame.

This gets us to Hebrews 12, and this contrast between two mountains that we have read today. The first, while never naming it, is Mount Sinai, the mountain on which the law was given. He describes it in ominous terms — fire, thunder and storm, darkness and gloom, reflecting what Exodus tells us, that the mountain was so holy that if even an animal set foot on it, it would die. Don't flee to that mountain, he is saying! Move on, make your pilgrimage to the other mountain — Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God! Here are angels in joyful assembly, here is assurance of salvation, here is God the judge of all (who will therefore deliver justice on our oppressors) and here is Jesus, who is the one who has made this new relationship with God, whose death on the cross is the undoing of the world's violence, symbolised here as the blood of Abel (the first murder victim).

The first kingdom, the promised land, could be destroyed by violence and earthquake; the second kingdom, God's coming kingdom is impervious to these things. Always in sight in the whole of this letter are, firstly the superiority of Christ and the Christian faith in every way. Secondly the violence and threat that come within the territory of being a persecuted minority. But always the writer to these fearful Jewish Christians compassionately but urgently recognises the danger, but thinks its worth it — in the same way that Stephen, James, Peter, Paul and others never blanched at the threat of martyrdom.

A subtle but important detail here is that the writer doesn't name Mount Sinai, but does name Mount Zion. The effect he is seeking to create is a reversal of what we think to be more real, and hence more important. Mount Sinai is a real physical place you can go to. But our writer wants us to understand that that is only temporary — even the rock of Sinai is impermanent, while the Kingdom of God is eternal... and hence more real. Flee from the impermanent — head for the kingdom of God, founded on the promise of Jesus and his forever-grace!

The second subtle detail is that implicit here is a concept of pilgrimage: we are moving towards God, we are heading for the promised land (think Martin Luther King). Sinai wasn't a destination, but a waypoint. Jesus is leading the exodus to a new and better place.

Now, though as Christians we are not broadly persecuted in this country, this passage still speaks to us. We nonetheless struggle with temptation and with the practice of prayer, so we can use this letter to guide us — using contrasts and role models to remind ourselves to persist in faith.

So against the temptation of materialism we might say:

Stuff is nice, nice clothes and modern technology can win you compliments, or they can be convenient. But these things don't last: fashions change, clothes wear out, technology breaks. Why not work for something permanent and meaningful?

We could urge ourselves towards greater altruism, simplicity and less distraction in our faith — and know that we would be right.

Or perhaps the issue is the challenge of maintaining faith and prayer when there *isn't* a challenge to make you dig your heels in. In such a situation, the writer to the Hebrews would remind us that prayer is 'the practice of the presence of God', and that so many of us give up time in God's presence for time in the presence of the television, which does not love us, nor answer our petitions, and which rarely inspires us to new levels of kindness.

Above all, against modern temptations, we must remind ourselves of God's unconditional love for us, that we feel more alive and wholesome when our spiritual lives are healthy, and that there is greater joy and meaning to be had in responding to God's love with love than any other purpose.

Hebrews urges steadfastness in the face of danger and temptation. How will we remain steadfast in the face of the worry and distraction that leads us away from God in these days?

Amen.