

Two Mountains

I think we don't always appreciate it when things change positively. When a sickness goes away, even if it was only a cold, or when you have a new role, or when you move to a new dwelling place and its got all sorts of things the old place didn't have, or when make new friends and have new connections you didn't have before.

Look back to the Covid lockdowns, when we couldn't meet at church, and then later, when we could, we couldn't sit near each other, we couldn't sing, and we couldn't share morning tea. Isn't it better now?

Remember back to 1998 when we had to boil our drinking water? How often do we stop to appreciate how good it is to drink water straight from the tap?

If you've renewed a driver's licence or a car registration in recent years, have you stopped to appreciate how much easier, quicker, and generally more pleasant than the process was twenty or thirty years ago?

That's not to say that all changes are positive, or that we won't have regrets or sadness, but it's always good to appreciate the changes that are positive - those things that are good in our lives. And be grateful for them.

As we near the end of the letter to the Hebrews today, we find a description of such a change. And it is presented as an image of two mountains.

Mountains are symbolic and important. We use them as landmarks. From the tops of mountains, we can see great distances.

As we read the scriptures, we find that mountains played an important part in God's interaction with his people –Mount Sinai where Moses met God and received the Ten Commandments, Mount Nebo from where Moses saw the promised land before he died, Mount Carmel where Elijah had the confrontation with the prophets of Baal, and the unnamed mountain where Jesus gave his most famous sermon, and so on.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews shares a dramatic image of two mountains.

And it is dramatic: the first mountain is one that is burning with fire; surrounded by darkness, gloom and storm; accompanied by a trumpet blast or a voice speaking terrifying words. A mountain so dangerous to approach that "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death."

In contrast, the second mountain is Mount Zion, which is described as the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem (and we'll come back to both those terms later, Zion and Jerusalem, because they are emotive terms), and on this mountain are thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly and God and Jesus.

The letter to the Hebrews was written in the first century AD to mostly Jewish Christians. That is, Christians who grew up as Jews, but came to recognise Jesus as the messiah, their saviour, and became Christians.

They often paid a price for becoming followers of Jesus - they were ostracized by their Jewish neighbours, and the Roman authorities were no friends of the early Christians, either. There's no doubt that some of the early Jewish believers in Jesus were looking back fondly to the old ways – the traditions that they and their ancestors had long followed. The safety of the Law of Moses, and the rituals of the old covenant. The sacrificial system that may have seemed to offer more earthly security than their new faith in Jesus.

So, in this image of the two mountains, the writer sets out to his readers the contrast between the old covenant and the new, and the danger of turning back to the old ways. He shares with them the hope and joy of staying the course of following Jesus, and encourages us to gratitude to what God has done for us in Jesus.

The writer reminds them that if they turned back, they'd be going back to the first mountain – the one they would have known from the description as Mount Sinai – the mountain where Moses encountered God, and received the ten commandments, but where God could not be approached freely. And if we read the accounts in the book of Exodus, we find that Mount Sinai was enveloped in a cloud, it quaked and was filled with smoke, while lightning-flashes shot forth, and the roar of thunder mingled with the blasts of a trumpet; and fire was seen burning at the summit.

The writer tells his readers – and us today – that it's not about the terrifying Mount Sinai, he tells us that we have come to another mountain, to Zion. To a place of joy, a place of peace, a place where God dwells not on a mountaintop above the people, but with the people. And where the people are secure and free to be the people of God.

Today, we are not likely to be tempted to want to return to Judaism, but we will be tempted to fit in more with the world around us. To live lives that are acceptable to others and to seek the security that the world seems to offer.

I understand one of the fundamental rules of mountain climbing is this: You can only climb one mountain at a time. You have to choose which mountain you want to climb. In the context of this passage, the choice of mountain for the Hebrews, and for us, is clear.

Mount Sinai is scary. I can't help but think of Mount Doom in the Lord of the Rings when I read the description: Fire, darkness, gloom, storm, trumpet blast and a voice that speaks terrifying words. It is dangerous, it is unapproachable, it brings death. Even Moses said, "I am trembling with fear," in the face of this mountain.

Sinai was the symbol of the old covenant – it was where the old covenant was inaugurated. Sinai, was where the law was given.

And then we have Mount Zion in Jerusalem as the symbol of the new covenant, because it was in Jerusalem that the new covenant was inaugurated and where the law was

satisfied and fulfilled, in Jesus. Jesus said, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.” (Matthew 5:17)

The writer describes Zion as the city of the living God and the heavenly Jerusalem. Zion and Jerusalem have some baggage in the language of modern times, but he’s not talking about the literal, physical city of Jerusalem that you can go and visit today. In the traditional Passover meal, one of the final toasts is “Next year, in Jerusalem.” I always remember Rabbi Daniel, who shared Rosh Hashanah with us here a couple of years ago, explaining that toast as not meaning the strife-ridden, divided city that we see in the news, but the everlasting city of God which is to come.

In the description of Mount Zion, there isn’t the fear and the gloom of Mount Sinai, there is no death mentioned. Instead, it’s joyous and festive. It’s not dangerous; but it’s safe.

And in this place, this heavenly Jerusalem, the writer tells us that “You have come to God”.

You have come to God. Isn’t that a stark contrast to the description of Mount Sinai where we were told “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death”?

It’s very much the imagery of Psalm 46, which we looked at in Max and Rosemary’s memorial service, “There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her, she will not fall;” (Psalm 46:4,5a)

In this place, we have come to God. And to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

We can understand the ‘mediator of a new covenant’ part, but the ‘sprinkled blood’ part is a bit odd. We can look back to the story of Cain and Abel in Genesis chapter 4, and see that after Cain had killed Abel, God said to Cain “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.” (Genesis 4:10), so the blood of Abel cried out to God for justice, , but Jesus’ blood, shed for us on the cross, paid for justice.

The writer tells us, with certainty, that we have come to God. Not that we might get there if we do the right things or say the right things or pray the right prayers, but that we have come to God. It is, as they say, “a done deal.” We’re not facing Sinai anymore – we, who are followers of Jesus, are part of the heavenly Jerusalem, part of the kingdom of God. And as Paul said when he wrote the Romans, “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:38-39)

The writer tells us, “You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant”. We’re there. Look around and see how good it is, and be joyful. And look at Mount Sinai, and see where you have come from, and appreciate how much better off you are, and give thanks.

It is always tempting to turn back to Sinai, though. Sometimes it feels like it might be easier or more comfortable to turn to the law and tick things off and perform rituals and so on. But know that if we try to do that, we will always fall short.

We're warned to "See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?"

Just because we're part of God's kingdom, just because we have safety in the heavenly city, doesn't mean that we can stop listening to God.

Today's passage, and the chapter, ends with the simple statement "for our "God is a consuming fire." Which is a quote from the book of Deuteronomy (4:24) and which is itself a warning against forgetting the covenant.

He says, "Our God is a consuming fire", not "Our God was a consuming fire". God is a consuming fire at Zion just as God is a consuming fire at Sinai. We have to realise that the awesome God of Sinai is still the awesome God of Zion. "But wait!" you might say, "Hasn't that changed? Aren't we living under the new covenant? Don't we have the kind and loving God of the New Testament, rather than the harsh and vengeful God of the Old?"

No. God hasn't changed. God hasn't lowered God's standards. What's changed is us. We have been raised up. We have been raised up, made right with God, by the sacrifice of Jesus. If we're judged by who we have been and what we have done, we should be trembling before the fire and smoke of Sinai... but instead, we're welcomed into God's city.

God hasn't become less holy, but we have become holy. We need to understand that. We need to remember that. We should celebrate it. And we should be thankful for it.

So lets look back and see how far we have come, how much better of we are, by the grace of God.

Amen