

THE TWO MOUNTAINS

Hebrews 12:18-29

The Preacher has spent much of his time explaining why the new and living way that is Jesus is so much superior to the old way. Although there have been a number of implicit challenges included in this sermon so far, we have been left to draw these out for ourselves. Now, as the Preacher draws towards the end of his sermon, he does what all good preachers should do, he makes the challenge explicit.

In these final verses the preacher lays out a simple scene for the congregation. They are on a journey when they come to a fork in the road. One way, a broad, well trodden road is signposted 'Sinai'. It's an inviting road, downhill most of the way with plenty of cafes, pubs and resting places on the way. The other looks difficult. It's up hill and rough with no sign of a service station. It is signposted 'Zion'. "Now" asks the Preacher, "Which way will you go?"

Before he asks the congregation to make their choice he sets out a description of both destinations. To those with some knowledge of the Old Testament there would be some confusion. Both places are God's places. Both places are places of blessing, but the Preacher has been saying that Sinai is now a negative sign, a symbol of everything that can go wrong with a religion when it is separated from the high-priestly ministry of Jesus (7:1-10:39).

So what's wrong with Sinai? Isn't this the mountain of the Lord? The Preacher answers in 12:18-21. It is a place of fear. We come to Sinai as perpetually unclean sinners, and so the holiness of God revealed there is a holy terror. To touch Sinai is fatal. Even an animal that strays onto the mountain must be destroyed (Exodus 19:12f). Sinai is filled with sights and sounds that fill us with terror. Even though a fire blazes there, it is still a place of darkness and gloom, (12:18, see Deuteronomy 4:11f; 5:22f). Lightning flashes, thunder rolls and trumpets blare so loud they frighten the wits out of anyone and everyone there. (12:19, see Exodus 19:16). But the trumpet is nothing compared to the voice (12:19). Even Moses shook with fear at the sound of God's voice (12:21).

The good news is that this is not where we have to go. "You have not come to [Sinai]... but to Zion." (12:18,22). The Preacher chooses his words carefully here. The word used for 'come' is a favourite word of the Preacher and is perhaps, better, translated 'approach'. The Preacher uses this word when he talks about the boldness and confidence that is ours as we approach God. "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence" (4:16) "[Jesus] is able to save completely those who come to God through him." (7:25) Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith" (10:22).

So what do we find when we approach mount Zion? In 12:22-24 the Preacher talks about Zion using four pairs of descriptions:

- *The Mountain and the City (12:22)*. In the Old Testament the earthly city and mountain (Jerusalem and the Temple mount), were symbols of the ideals in government and worship. They spoke of prosperity and peace. Now, under the new Covenant they are even more remarkable, for now they speak of heavenly ideals – of the rule of God. Whereas approaching Sinai was a terror, with the fear that God’s word would bring death, here on the heavenly mountain is the city of the living God.
- *Angels and the firstborn (12:22-23)*. The preacher tells us about the citizens of this heavenly city. The first thing you’ll notice are the angels. Not just a few, mind you, but “thousands upon thousands” of angels. And not the angels of art and modern myths and imagination. These are ‘joyful’ angels – singing, dancing, laughing angels. Gone is the gloom and the darkness of Sinai – now it’s time to party. Here too, you will see many people. These are the “church of the firstborn”, those who belong to Jesus, who is the true firstborn (1:6). And how do we know who belongs to Jesus? It is those “whose names are written in heaven”. The Preacher does not explain further what this phrase means so I suppose they already knew. Perhaps they would remember Jesus’ words, “Rejoice that your names are written in heaven” (Luke 10:20) or maybe they know something of “the Lamb’s book of life” (see Revelation 21:27f) Furthermore, whose names are written in heaven come not merely into the presence of God, but into membership of his family. All those enrolled in heaven are the firstborn children of God who, through their union with Jesus, the firstborn, have received a birthright that is not to be bartered away, as was Esau’s (12:16).
- *The judge and the acquitted (12:23)*. In Zion’s court there is only one verdict – “Not guilty”. Those who come to Zion have already come to Jesus who has “made perfect for ever those who are being holy” (10:14). On Sinai the laws are tough and the judgements harsh – no one can stand under them. Everyone stands condemned on Sinai and receives a sentence. But on Zion the judge has sent his son who has already carried the sentence on our behalf.
- *Jesus and the sprinkled blood (12:24)*. Of course, there is blood on Zion and there is blood on Sinai, but is not the same blood. On Sinai there is the blood of violence, tragedy and perpetual sin. There is Abel’s blood that cries out for vengeance. There is the endless flow of blood sacrifices that “were not able to clear the conscience of the worshipper” (9:9). On Zion there is “sprinkled blood” of Jesus (see 9:11-14) that was offered “once for all” (10:10). It is blood that can “cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God” (9:14). By his blood Jesus has become the mediator of a new covenant (see 9:15-22), a covenant of forgiveness, a covenant in which “those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance” (9:15).

There is worship every day, all day, in the heavenly Zion – but not the type of worship service we are all too familiar with. There is no guilty conscience pricked by haranguing preachers. No daily sacrifices are required – the one, perfect sacrifice has already been made. Down on Sinai Abel’s blood speaks a word of unfulfilled justice, but the only blood-words spoken on Zion are these: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.” (Matthew 26:28)

So, which road are you going to take? Sinai or Zion? Following a description like that, who in their right mind would choose Sinai? Had the Preacher finished there

the congregation would sing a rousing, “We’re marching to Zion/Beautiful, beautiful Zion/ We’re marching upward to Zion/ The beautiful city of God. But the Preacher is not after an emotional response, so right at this last section he pulls them back and tells the congregation to think again. Zion too, we are told is a place of shaking and stern warnings. So is Zion no more than a redecorated Sinai after all?

No, they are an eternity apart. On Sinai, the mountain of the old covenant, fire and earthquakes are destroyers, burning up everything in their path and shaking the foundation of everything we thought safe and secure. On Zion, under the new covenant there is also shaking, but now it is shaking of the dust and grime that defaces a work of art. The earth is shaken not to destroy it but to preserve it “so that what cannot be shaken may remain”. (12:27) On Zion, God is a consuming fire, but it is a refiner’s fire that consumes “everything that causes sin and all who do evil” (Matthew 13:40-43).

This is an important theological point. The Preacher is not preaching two gods; one from the Old Testament, a vengeful, legalistic god; the other a sweet, but dotty old man who runs around giving everyone treats. They are the same God, holy and awful. So is this good news or bad? It depends on whether you are gold or dross; dust that can and will be shaken off or the precious object hidden under all that rubbish.

Before we make our choice we need to count the cost. If, under the old covenant, refusal to listen to God was so thoroughly judged, how much more so under the new covenant. The Preacher is sure his congregation will make the right choice, and for the right reasons. They will follow Jesus into the heavenly tabernacle and “so worship acceptably with reverence and awe”. (12:28)

The chapter, and the sermon ends with a powerful phrase: “for our God is a consuming fire” (12:29). Is this statement meant to get us singing a doxology or hiding under the pews? Maybe the Preacher wants to leave it like that. After all, God’s word is a ‘double-edged sword’ (4:12). So the words are left hanging in the air – “our God is a consuming fire”. Apart from God’s mercy we are stubble and these are terrible words. But we are not apart from mercy. These words are therefore words of hope and a promise of holy and saving purification.

So the Preacher folds up his sermon notes and takes his seat. The church secretary takes his cue and steps to the front to bring the notices. But don’t switch off, these are notices like you’ve never heard before.

Amen.

Kevin Dare
Beeston Baptist Church
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