

**St Bene't's sermon 22/8/10 HC**  
**Jer 1: 4-10; Heb 12:18-29; Luke 13: 10-17**

**Introduction**

What would you say were the key events that have shaped who you are - your beliefs, your behaviour, your goals in life?

I am sure that on the individual level we would have fascinating and very different stories to tell. About when God called us to serve him - as Jeremiah does in our Old Testament reading. Or perhaps when Jesus came and healed us from some sickness of body, mind or spirit - like that woman crippled for eighteen years.

Yet there are also common events that shape us - not as individuals, but as Christians. We share a common story, with central events that continue to shape our common life. Just as those affected by 9/11 or the floods in Pakistan - for generations to come their families might say that has made us who we are. The event might also be a future one: a revolution for a Marx, a reformation for a Luther, a cross for a man of Nazareth.

Indeed, I might suggest that the more we progress in the faith, the more our individual lives become shaped by the great events that were determinative for the people of God.

Two such momentous events are central to the message of our epistle this morning, Hebrews chapter 12. It is an extraordinarily vivid, carefully constructed and weighted passage, possibly the climax of the whole epistle.

The two events are bound up with two mountains. They sum up in brief the entire story and vocation of the people of God.

**Two mountains**

1. The first mountain is located in the past: Mount Sinai - where God first made his covenant with his people, and Moses mediated the law.

The unforgettable power and glory of the event is evoked by seven potent phrases

You have not come to

1. something that can be touched,
2. a blazing fire,
- 3 and darkness,
- 4 and gloom,
- 5 and a tempest,

6 and the sound of a trumpet,

7. (climactically) and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them.

- God spoke the ten commandments to all the people, but they then begged Moses to be their mediator

2. The second mountain in Mount Zion - not the earthly height that now holds the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, but the future heavenly dwelling place of God.

The phrases lengthen, their number increase, the mood shifts.

From God in terrifying solitary holiness we are set amidst a wondrous festive throng

But you have come

1 to Mount Zion

2 and to the city of the living God,

3 the heavenly Jerusalem,

4 innumerable angels in festal gathering,

5 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven,

6 and to God the judge of all,

7 and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,

and (the climax):

8 to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

The beginning and end of the journey may be mighty mountains, but at the very heart of time and space is a cross on a hill.

**The old and the new covenant**

Now there is a temptation to dismiss Sinai as past and passé. Behold - what a dismal scene, what gloomy symbols (fire and darkness and tempest). How unlikeable the emphasis on trembling, terror and fear! What a relief to come to Mount Zion, to its joy and fellowship, to a new covenant and a better word.

Yet if we wish to do this, we shall be surprised and dismayed, for this is not what our author does. The God and Father of Jesus Christ, who now dwells in the heavenly Zion, is the same God who spoke to Moses on Sinai. He remains the Judge of all. The passage ends with an affirmation that 'our God is a consuming fire.' - that fire which was so evident at Sinai.

The contrast is not between the character of God (the ancient heresy of Marcionism), but of time - for the crucial event that makes all the difference is nothing other than the cross of Christ.

Sinai is forbidding and terrifying because of the sinful character of Israel. Even Moses cannot see God's face. The story of Israel is the story of sin - but also of looking forward to a new covenant. By which is meant not a brand new covenant, but a fresh way of establishing that relationship between God and his people that will no longer be spoiled by sin.

What is required is a qualitatively different kind of mediator - Jesus, the son of God. And a better sacrifice than any available to Moses and Israel - the blood of Jesus spilt on the cross. Through Jesus, the saviour and forerunner, Jews and Christians alike become citizens of Zion.

What an immense privilege! What an immense responsibility! And therefore, what folly to turn our backs on so great a salvation.

For this is the practical conclusion of our author's argument. It is not an argument of opposites ('not Sinai but Zion') but from the lesser to the greater:

Heb. 12:25 See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not escape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!

The 'Hebrews' to whom the author is speaking may well be Christian Jews who have been expelled from Rome and returned to the land of Israel. They are now attempted to abandon their faith and return to what they are familiar with: the Sinai of old.

No! No! No! warns our author. Do you not understand the unparalleled privileges that are yours because of what Christ has done! And the fearful danger of rejecting this final and supreme expression of the grace of God.

### **Implications**

Now I'm aware that many of you might be struggling with our author's argument - for we are not first century Jews (though I keep try-

ing!). But here are three points that we may take to heart

1. At the heart of Hebrews is the affirmation that all who believe in Jesus are God's covenant people. As such the story of Abraham and Moses, of Sinai and Zion - this is our story. The more that story becomes real for us, as we immerse ourselves in scripture, the more we will discover the truth and glory and excitement of the author's argument.

2. The purpose of the passage is a warning against abandoning the immense privileges of faith in Christ. This is a temptation to all of us. As I look around and see the all-consuming nature of our late modern materialist culture, how easy and natural it would be to stop going to church, and to do what I want. But our author warns us about the consequences: in Christ alone is forgiveness and joy, rich fellowship with the saints (that's us here) and to a hope that will not disappoint. Where else on earth can we find such great gifts?

3. Thirdly and finally. This emphasis on the grand Christian story is no novelty. For it is what we hear each week in our great communion prayer, which spans creation to last things - and with the cross of Christ always in the centre. So there is an opportunity for us to respond, to come and say, yes, - this is my story, this is my song. And so, in offering acceptable worship with reverence and awe, to give thanks for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

Thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Philip Jenson