

Sermon for 24th August 2025

One of the joys of the Revised Common Lectionary is it takes us to readings we may not often hear or read, or indeed naturally seek out. Sometimes the text speaks immediately to us. Sometimes the text is harder. For me, today's reading from Paul's letter to the Hebrews is one of the later.

I was tempted to use one of the alternative readings as a basis for today's service, but kept coming back to the imagery and mystery of this passage from Hebrews 12.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, many of his disciples expected Jesus to return soon, and certainly within their lifetime. Time had passed and Jesus has not yet returned. So, Paul writes to encourage them to persevere in their faith, even in the face of persecution and day-to-day trials.

The passage in Hebrews 12 comprises two complementary sections.

The first section (v18-24) compares two mountains. While the first mountain is not named, it is clearly Mount Sinai, where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. The second mountain is Mount Zion, a name used to describe the location of God for eternity (the 'city of the living God').

In describing the first mountain, Paul uses words that remind the readers of when God met Moses at Mount Sinai, and God's presence engulfed the mountain with thunder, lighting, smoke and trumpet sounds. At that time, the people of Israel were filled with fear and begged not to hear God's voice as they were frightened and thought they would die (Exodus 20:18).

Paul says to his readers, don't be afraid. You have now come to a new mountain of God, the 'city of the living God', where you will join with 'thousands of angels in joyful assembly'. Paul reminds us that we too have come to this mountain of Zion through Jesus Christ, God's son. And note

the use of the present tense of this scripture; 'you have come', not 'you will come'.

At Mount Sinai, fear had stopped the people from listening to God's voice. Indeed, God is awesome, powerful and mighty. And consequently, the notion of having a direct interaction with God may feel terrifying and overwhelming.

I suspect many of you have read the Chronicles of Narnia by C S Lewis. Aslan, the Great Lion, is a central character and serves as a Christlike figure through the novels. Those who meet Aslan, or even just hear his earth-shaking roar, are appropriately awe-filled. They know Aslan could well rip them to shreds in a moment. Yet when Lucy and the other Pevensie children met Aslan, they look into his eyes they see a kindness and tenderness, determined to show them love. And in that moment Lucy and the others only wish to be with and serve Aslan.

In the same way, Paul warns his readers to guard against an attitude of fear, and to rather listen for God's voice with joy. For in the new Jerusalem, 'thousands of thousands of angels in joyful assembly' (v22).

Hebrews reassures us that God's love is unshakable, unchangeable and unalterable. Paul tells his readers – and us – to continue in faith and do so with confidence in Jesus and his sacrifice for us.

The scriptures call us to continue to obey Jesus and his teachings. And not to consider the gift of eternal life, nor the establishment of God's kingdom, as an intangible far-off thing. Rather, we should keep our 'eye on the prize', living confidently that Jesus' kingdom is here, now and for ever.

And how should we respond to this message? Paul's advice is clear:

"Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe" (v28).

Christian worship is a duty and a privilege, given in response to God's gift of sacrifice and love for us. Regularly gathering in 'reverence and awe' to worship is an integral part of God's call to us.

I know for myself that worship is a critical part of my being. Being able to participate in Christian worship, and on occasions lead it, is a valuable part of my spirituality and helps sustain and grow my faith. Through worship I join in a community of praise, hear and reflect upon scripture, and listen and respond to the call of God.

In gathering joyfully together in worship, we sustain and keep from shaking not only our own faith, but also the faith of our community and those we worship with.

In our own lives, things can at times shake us. We can be shaken to the very core, and it may feel that nothing we value will survive. But the Letter to the Hebrews reminds us that in all this our faith and confidence in God can survive, sustain us, and not be shaken.

Indeed, as Paul writes, God 'shakes not only the earth but also the heavens' (v26) expressly so that the things which can be shaken (that is earthly, temporal things) are removed, leaving only that which cannot be shaken, God's love and Kingdom.

Friends, we have received from God the gift of a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Let us be thankful, and respond by worshiping God with reverence and awe.

Amen.

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