

Hebrews 12 v 22: 'But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...'

One of the delights of the book of Hebrews is the almost constant presentation of the Old Testament in the context of the Good News of the New Testament. It helps us to understand the significance of parts of the OT, and how they prepare the ground for the NT.

A wise old lady in York once said to me that 'the OT is the picture book of the NT'; and so it is. For example, the picture of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, out of slavery into freedom, is a great picture of most of what the NT concept of Salvation in and through Jesus Christ conveys. The picture of Ezekiel's valley of dry bones brought to life by the wind of the Spirit is a great picture of exactly what the Holy Spirit can do for you and me today; bring to us God's life in abundance.

The snag is that we Anglicans have lost our familiarity with the OT. We seem to think that the Gospel and Epistles are all that is needed for contemporary Christianity to flourish, so that is all we use in our main meetings for worship, that is, at our weekly Eucharists. We Anglicans are losing familiarity with the pictures and concepts that inform the theology of NT writings. We are losing familiarity with the essential Jewish quality of some NT writing.

Today's Epistle is a case in point.

The writer to the Hebrews, in today's passage, talks about two mountains; one which Moses came to, and one to which the readers of this Epistle have come.

Without an OT understanding, you could not conclude much from the passage beyond that the first mountain is 'gloomy and scary'; but the second mountain is 'party-time'! As we, the readers of the Epistle, have come to the second mountain, we are better off than Moses who had to make do with the first.

That interpretation is a bit thin, given the riches that an understanding of OT can bring to the passage.

While the first mountain is not named, it is clear that it is Mount Sinai, *the mountain of the Law*, which the fearful Moses alone ascended amid fire and tempest to receive the Law. The children of Israel cowered in the foothills, keeping themselves and their animals well away.

The text is full of OT quotes describing the giving of the Law. The mountain 'blazed with fire' (Deut. 4v11). There was 'darkness' and 'tempest' and a scary voice no-one wanted to hear and a blast of a trumpet (Ex. 19v19). All of the awe-inspiring authority of the heavens backed up the importance to Israel of the giving of the Law.

To this mountain, Mount Sinai, the Early Church readers of the Epistle to the Hebrews **have NOT** come (v18). They have NOT come to the tangible Law-keeping of the Old Covenant, as represented by Mount Sinai, the mountain of the Law.

The mountain the readers of the Epistle **have** come to is quite different. They have come to Mount Zion.

Mount Zion in Jewish tradition is the hill of Moriah, *the mountain of Faith*, where Abraham went to sacrifice Isaac, where the great and faithful King David captured the fortress of the Jebusites and renamed it Zion. It is also the likely site of Solomon's Temple, the second Temple and Herod's Temple. Here God was worshipped. Here God is living and active; this mountain is the domain or city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. It is absolutely full of angels and the first-born of heaven, as befits God's dwelling place.

Jesus, mediator of the *New Covenant*, is there; while Moses, mediator of the *Old Covenant* is not.

It is to this spiritually-rich, worshipping community in close proximity to God himself that the readers of the Epistle have come.

It is to Jesus and the New Covenant that the Epistle's first readers have come; not to Moses and the Old Covenant. And, knowing their Jewish Scriptures, the implication must have been crystal clear to them: you are to follow in the ways of the New Covenant, not the Old. You are with Jesus not Moses now. Your life is a matter of Faith, not Law-keeping.

That's a bit richer interpretation of the passage, don't you think!

See how the OT can enrich the NT?

The writer to the Hebrews has already been at pains to point out that **all of the great heroes of Judaism were examples of faith in action**. (Our lectionary has dwelt on the relevant passages in Hebrews 11 in the last couple of weeks).

You will recall that the author defines faith as *'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen'* (Heb. 11 v1), then cites heroic examples of faith in action:

- the faith of Abram in his journey across the fertile crescent
- the faith of Moses and the Israelites in crossing the Red Sea
- the faith of the great Judges of Israel

For all these people, faith was not about keeping the Law, nor even about accepting a set of beliefs; **faith was about trusting God to deliver his promises**, about gaining assurance of hope and conviction without seeing.

Without this sort of faith, the writer to the Hebrews says, it is not possible to please God (Heb. 11 v6).

It is to dependence on this sort of faith that we have **all** come, **if we** are to lead a life pleasing to God.

The writer to the Hebrews probably intended his letter to stir up enthusiasm in his first readers for the Christian Way over Judaism, into which they were in danger of lapsing. After all, it is hard to abandon a set of rules and regulations (into which Judaism had descended) in favour of a constantly deepening practice of faith (which Christianity preached).

If it is right, as it seems likely, that the Epistle was written by Apollos from Ephesus to the Church in Corinth; then that slide into the comparative comfort of Judaistic legalism is exactly what that church was experiencing. Apollos could have seen that first-hand when he visited Corinth with Paul (Acts 14v1), and was so well received by them, before moving on to Ephesus (see HW Montfiore, 1964, ISBN 0-7136-1284-3).

The slide into legalism is something **we all** must avoid. It's hard for us all to abandon the easy concept of following a set of rules and regulations; and move into the uncertain, uncharted, risky life of faith displayed by the heroes of the OT and NT.

But it is to that sort of faith that we are all called.

It is to Mount Zion not Mount Sinai that **we** are all called. It is to Jesus and not to Moses, to calculated risk not mistaken certainty that we are all called. It is to heavenly 'party-time' at the Eucharistic banquet, not to the thunder, gloom and despondency of legalistic rule-keeping that we are all called.

It is to a life pleasing to God **based on faith**, living out day by day 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' that we are called.

May God help us all to make that life of faith a daily reality, remembering daily that **we too 'have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem...'** Alleluia!