

Old v New 056

Isn't it great to wake up to sunshine and blue skies, when we have a proper summer in this country. But what about the violent thunderstorms after the heatwave in July? There was one at about 6am one morning and when the storm was right overhead, there was a huge crash which must have woken the whole neighbourhood – but not my husband!!

But that storm pales into insignificance with the events we heard about from Mount Sinai. That passage from Hebrews starts like this in The Message:- 'Unlike your ancestors, you didn't come to Mount Sinai – all that volcanic blaze and earthshaking rumble – to hear God speak. The ear-splitting words and soul-shaking message terrified them and they begged God to stop. They were afraid to move. Even Moses was terrified.' Scary stuff!! Then it continues:- 'No, that's not your experience at all'.

The whole passage is a contrast between the old and the new. It is a contrast between the giving of the law on Mount Sinai and the new covenant of which Jesus is the mediator. It has echoes of the accounts in Exodus and Deuteronomy describing the first law-giving to Moses. It speaks of the

inapproachability of God on that awful mountain. No one was to set foot on the mountain for fear of being struck down dead. The people were so afraid to hear the voice of God for themselves that they urged Moses to go alone and bring the message to them. That was the outward code of the OT. An exclusive holiness that was terrible to touch.

All the terrible and terrifying things have been gathered together from the OT accounts into this passage from Hebrews to stress the shattering awfulness of that scene. And 3 things are particularly stressed. Firstly, the sheer majesty and might of God - and there is no love in it at all. Secondly, the absolute inapproachability of God – so far from the way being opened to him, it is barred and he who tried to approach met death. Thirdly, the sheer terror of God – there is nothing but the awe-stricken fear which is afraid to look or even listen! These are the symbols of God before He wore a human face. The only people who came close to God in the OT were the patriarchs and the prophets and a few notable individuals.

But surely that is not how God wanted things to be. The children of Israel were his chosen people – he wanted them to know him. He was saying 'don't come near until your sins have

been dealt with.' David the psalmist had begun to understand and he knew the Lord as his shepherd – a shepherd who loves his sheep.

I wonder how many of you watch the TV soaps or indeed, listen to the Archers. I'm an Archers addict! How often in one of the storylines, it just comes to something exciting and the signature tune starts – and you have to wait for the next episode to hear what happens next. The OT is rather like that. All people could see were the earthquakes and terrifying storms and God was saying, 'you ain't seen nothing yet. You haven't seen what is yet to be.'

Then in the passage, we come to the difference and God is saying, 'now look at what is to be.' To the Christian there has come the new covenant, the new relationship with God. Then we see the list of the new glories that are open to the Christian to look forward to.

There is the new heavenly Jerusalem, the new creation. This world with all its fears, mysteries and separations, is gone. Life for the believer is recreated and made new. The joy of heaven is such that even the angels break into rejoicing. Waiting there

are all God's elected – those whom He has judged to be faithful. And while there is joy, there must also be awe, because God is there to judge each one of us. And if we are judged to be worthy, we will join all the good people who have gone before us. And finally we are told that the new covenant was initiated by God through Jesus. He made this new relationship with God possible and took away the terror of Mount Sinai. Jesus, the perfect priest and perfect sacrifice made the unapproachable approachable and he did this by the shedding of his blood on the cross. We are told that when Abel was slain, his blood called for justice and revenge, but the blood of Jesus opened up the way to reconciliation and shows us God's mercy. Through Christ, we can have the inner experience of God. What a difference Jesus made. He made possible an intimacy that had never before existed. In the OT, people who touched the Holy mountain would be struck down dead, but people who touched Jesus, the Son of God, were healed. The Jews would not pronounce or spell out the letters in God's name. Jesus taught a new way of speaking to God – Abba, Father, Daddy. In Jesus, God came close.

Now let's put that passage to one side for a moment and consider the message from Luke 13. We might have expected

the healing of a sick person to be greeted with rejoicing, but for those who witnessed the healing in the synagogue, Jesus' compassion was a source of controversy. He was considered to have broken the Sabbath laws.

This is the last time that we ever hear of Jesus being in a synagogue, and it is clear that by this time, the authorities were watching his every action and waiting to pounce on him whenever they got the chance. Jesus healed the woman who for 18 years had not been able to straighten her bent body. The fact that she was a woman and crippled meant that in those days, she had no worth in the sight of the religious authorities and so they would almost certainly have ignored her. The president of the synagogue, who opposed Jesus' healing actions, was a guardian of the rules surrounding what you could and could not do on the Sabbath. He didn't even have the courage to speak directly to Jesus, but instead addressed his protest to the assembled crowd – but it was meant for Jesus. Jesus had healed on the Sabbath and technically that was work and so therefore he had broken the Sabbath. In fact in the 10 commandments, God had only given 1 rule about the Sabbath – 'remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy,' but the Jews had invented over 200 rules in order

to keep it holy! The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. Jesus answered his opponents out of their own law. They hated cruelty to animals and even on a Sabbath, it was legal to untie animals from their stalls and to give them water. So Jesus argued that it should be equally legal to release the woman from her infirmity. Jesus didn't come to abolish the law, but to fulfil it.

It is clear that the people in the synagogue and others like them, loved their laws more than they loved people. They were more concerned that their own petty little laws should be observed than that a woman should be helped and healed. How often are we like that? Churches often have a poster outside saying 'Welcome', but a cynical friend of ours said perhaps there ought to be a PS – 'so long as you like what we like!' There are many church folk who are more concerned with traditions, - 'we've always done it this way!' - than they are with the worship of God and the caring of the flock. We become too involved in structure and organisation and fail to see the bigger picture of life or look for what God might be leading us to do for him. In the world and in the church, we are constantly in danger of loving traditions more than we love God. We sometimes have an inability to move forward with him.

Now for a silly story! A protestant moved into a completely Catholic community. Being good Catholics, they welcomed him into their community. But also, because they were good Catholics, they did not eat red meat on Fridays. So when their neighbour began barbecuing some juicy steak on Friday, they began to squirm. They were so annoyed that they went to talk to him about it. After much talk, they convinced him to become a Catholic.

The next Sunday, he went to the priest and the priest sprinkled holy water on him and said, 'You were born Protestant. You were raised Protestant. But now you are Catholic.

And so, the next Friday, as the neighbours sat down to eat their fish, they were disturbed by the smell of roast beef coming from the neighbouring house. They went over to talk to the new Catholic because he knew he was not supposed to eat beef on Fridays. When they saw him, he was sprinkling ketchup on the beef saying, 'You were born a cow. You were raised a cow. But now you are a fish!

Philip Yancey, the Christian author, grew up in a strict, fundamentalist church in the southern USA, and tended to view God as "a scowling Super cop, searching for anyone who

might be having a good time—in order to squash them." He jokes today about being "in recovery" from a toxic church. "Of course, there were good qualities too. If a neighbour's house burned down, the congregation would rally around and show charity—if, that is, the house belonged to a white person. He grew up confused by the contradictions. He heard about love and grace, but didn't experience it much.

For Yancey, reading offered a window to a different world. So, he devoured books that opened his mind, challenged his upbringing, and went against what he had been taught. A sense of betrayal engulfed him. He said "I felt I had been lied to. For instance, what I learned from a book like *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Black Like Me* contradicted the racism I encountered in church. I went through a period of reacting against everything I was taught and even discarding my faith. I began my journey back mainly by encountering a world very different than I had been taught, an expansive world of beauty and goodness. Along the way I realized that God had been misrepresented to me. Cautiously, warily, I returned, circling around the faith to see if it might be true."

Back to the Hebrews passage. We mustn't think that this is simply a contrast between then and now, or between Judaism

and Christianity. The fundamental difference is between what passes away and what remains. The writer is urging his Christian readers that their future is not with the earthly Jerusalem, and by remembering Sinai involves recognising that God is giving a better way through Jesus, the Word, the mediator of the new covenant. We must focus on the things that matter because they will last.

The songwriter, Matt Redman, took time out from composing and music and began studying the true meaning of worship, and the song, 'When the music fades' followed as a result of his searching. He was thinking about what was left when everything else had been stripped away.

When the music fades, all is stripped away,
And I simply come;
Longing just to bring something that's of worth
That will bless your heart.
I'll bring you more than a song,
For a song in itself, is not what you have required.
You search much deeper within
through the way things appear:
You're looking into my heart.

I'm coming back to the heart of worship,
And it's all about you, all about you Jesus.
I'm sorry, Lord for the thing I've made it,
When it's all about you, all about you Jesus.

A little girl came downstairs one Christmas morning and gasped when she saw the pile of parcels under the tree, She said, 'I never thought he would bring all that!' Have we grasped the enormity of God and his love for us. The Hebrews passage is saying – look how big God is. Have we lost our sense of awe of him?

Ask yourself, 'Is my worship just hymns, prayers and readings on a Sunday morning or is it a time to get my batteries recharged?' If so, that is not enough. True worship mustn't end at the church door. It should be how we live and speak each day of our lives. What really matters is that we must love our awesome, mysterious God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength – and then love our neighbours as ourselves.

Jeremiah 31 v 33. The Lord says, 'The new covenant that I will make with the people of Israel is this: I will put my law within

them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.'