A Tale of Two Mountains
Hebrews 12:18-29

I don't know what you're like at making decisions but Su and I can be terrible prevaricators. When we were medics and someone's life or some baby's life was on the line, no problem, we could face and make rapid decisions. But when it comes to ourselves and some of these 'do we / don't we?' decisions of life, we are not exactly what you would call decisive. And we'll talk around the decisions and the pros and the cons and we'll come close to deciding this, but then one of us will say, 'yes but what if…?' and then we're back to square one, and the danger is we can just vacillate, and wobble between the choices.

Now we excuse ourselves by saying, 'yes, but the reason we're like that is that sometimes it really isn't clear is it? And there are pros and cons on each side.'

But when it comes to matters of eternity, and how you and I are to approach God, and relate to God, the writer of Hebrews says that there really is no excuse for wobbling, or dithering, because the choice is really clear.

And he's coming to the end of his letter, and he's been writing to his friends precisely because some of them are wobbling. Opposition to their Christian faith is growing, and they're facing an increasingly hostile environment in which to be a Christian, and so going back to Judaism – which after all was a protected religion, seemed, at least, appealing.

But the writer's having none of it. And in what is really his final encouragement to them to stay strong, he tells them just how stark the choice before them is, and he does so be telling them, the tale of two mountains.

The Party of Grace
Now, at the risk of gross oversimplification that will have all you literary types squirming, Charles Dickens' story, 'A Tale of Two Cities', which is set in the French Revolution, contrasts the fates of a group of individuals, whose lives are entwined as they have to travel between London and Paris. And London is the place of peace and security and dreams of what might be; whilst Paris is in turmoil, where their lives are in grave danger, a place of threat, and murder, and intrigue, and lawlessness and revolution.

And the writer paints just such a contrast here, except rather than a tale of two cities, it's a tale of two mountains. Mount Sinai and Mount Zion. And these two mountains represent the Old and the New Covenants: two very different ways of approaching and encountering God, the two options the people he's writing to were wobbling between. Do they stick with Jesus and the gospel – Mount Zion, or do they go back to Judaism and the Law – Mount Sinai?

And first he describes Mount Sinai. It's the place where Moses received the Law. Except he doesn't name it, he just describes it. V18: it was a place of 'blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest' and there were trumpets sounding in the darkness and Exodus tells us the noise of the trumpets grew louder and louder and there was this disembodied voice speaking words, words which left the people of Israel begging that they hear no more. And whilst Sinai was and is this physical mountain you can touch, no one could touch it, not even an animal, on

pain of death. And so overwhelmingly awful was the whole event that even Moses was left terrified.

And that, the writer is saying, is what you are tempted to go back to, to the Law. But what Sinai and the Law tell us is just how unapproachable, and terrifying a holy and righteous and transcendent God is. And it screams out: stay away, don't come any closer. Trespassers won't be so much prosecuted as exterminated. And it tells us that there is this infinite distance between a holy God and unholy, unrighteous men, and that if we want to approach God, we have a serious problem on our hands. Because in the face of God's holiness and justice and anger at sin, we just aren't worthy to come.

But the writer says, 'look that's not the mountain you've come to'. V18: 'For you have not come to what may be touched [to Sinai]… [v22] But you have come to Mount Zion.'

And what a contrast! You see, if Sinai speaks of alienation and death and the unapproachableness of God, then if you know the Psalms and the prophets, you'll know that Mount Zion is the embodiment of all the hopes and dreams of God's people.

And whilst he paints the Law and the Old Covenant as this storm enveloping Sinai, he paints the Gospel, the good news of all that God has done for us in Jesus, as being like a giant celebration on Mount Zion. V22: 'But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering.'

So gone is that sense of fear and dread and separation and alienation. And in their place is this entering into God's joy, entering through the gates into His city. And the terrifying sounds of storm and trumpet and disembodied voice are replaced by the sounds of angels and saints in celebration. And the terrified tribes of Israel, cringing at the foot of Sinai, are replaced by the assembly of those whose names are written in heaven. And the sheer unapproachableness of God is replaced by full access into His presence, as he is surrounded by worshippers.

Now, just think about this. Because the writer's interest is not in geography is it. It's not, 'Well, you've got Mount Sinai down here, in the desert, and that's a bleak place I can tell you, but up here we've got Mount Zion, much nicer.' No. He's talking about two different ways we try and approach God, and it's the difference between law and grace. And Sinai represents law.

You see, if you try and save yourself, if you try and make yourself acceptable to God by keeping the rules, or thinking that if you just do this or that and he will accept you, Sinai is what you get: darkness, and fear, and turmoil and that feeling that you have never done enough, that you can never do enough, that God is distant and terrible. Whereas Zion represents the Gospel of God's grace to you, that invites you to a party that you don't deserve to be at.

Last Saturday was Adrian and Celina's wedding down in Marseilles and it was wonderful for a whole host of reasons. And me preaching in French was not one of them! But one of the many beautiful touches, was that for dinner each of the guests had their names written on a small square stone, and to find your place you just had to find the one with your name written on the stone.

And in contrast to Sinai and the Law and trying to make yourself acceptable to God and always failing to make the grade, the gospel is this invitation to come, to come and join the party of God's grace and to find your place at the table for the feast. And if, for the Psalmists and the prophets, Zion represented all the hopes and the aspirations of the people, the writer is saying, look, it's here, in God's grace to you in Jesus, and not in law keeping, that you will find all that you are really searching for.

And it's here that you will find true completeness. You see, if you think you have to make yourself acceptable to God and earn his favour, you never arrive, do you? There is never that moment of completeness, 'I've done enough, I've reached my goal.' But the writer says that on Mount Zion, are the spirits, v23, 'of the righteous made perfect,' of the saints of old, who lived by faith, who have reached their goal, who have been made perfect. Not through what they have done but through what God has done for them. And it's only by coming to Zion and to grace, that you'll know that sense of completeness and finishedness, that enough has been done to make you acceptable to God.

But you've got to ask the question, haven't you, what makes the difference? Because the Writer is clear that whichever mountain you go to, you are coming to the same God and He hasn't changed, He is still, v23, 'the Judge of all.' So why does one approach to God end in fear and alienation, and the other in joy and celebration?

Well, the writer tells us. When you come to Zion, you are coming v24, 'to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.' When the Law was given, Moses was the mediator and he trembled with fear. But now Christ has come, the mediator of a new covenant. And at the cross Jesus has taken upon himself all the alienation and punishment that our sins deserve under the Law. The storm that enveloped Sinai enveloped him. Which is why he cried out from the cross, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' Why? Because he was alienated from God so that we might be reconciled to him, so that rather than us being unable to draw near, we can approach God boldly, and with confidence and with joy.

It's like someone invited to a Wedding Dinner, who feels unworthy to be there, 'I don't deserve to come. I mean I've let you down as a friend, and I can't afford a gift, and I haven't got anything smart to wear.' And the bridegroom says, 'but I want you to come, and I've done everything to enable you to come, so come, and find your seat at my table.'

You see, when Cain murdered his brother Abel, God told Cain that 'The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground' (Gen 4:10). And that blood

cried out for justice and for vengeance. But the Writer says that the blood of Jesus speaks a better word than justice or vengeance. It speaks of love and grace and mercy and forgiveness. It says that the one who doesn't deserve to come can come.

Now you can hear all that and think, that's great for a non-Christian to hear: that we're saved by grace and not by works. And that's right. But interestingly, he's not writing to non-Christians is he? He's writing to Christians, and especially to Christians who are struggling, who are tempted to given in and throw in the towel, or tempted to drift back into thinking they've got to save themselves. And he's saying, 'no, true joy, true completeness, and the ability to stand when trials come, is only found at Zion, it's only found in knowing that Jesus has already done everything you need.'

Which is why, and this is our second point, you don't want to decline the invite.

Don't Decline the Invite

Now, one of the things that marks Hebrews out as a letter are the warning passages. On the one hand this letter is filled with these wonderful passages where we get a feel of the big, pastor's heart the writer has for his friends, and on the other he follows those passages up with stark warnings to them not to fall away. But as any of us parents know, there's no contradiction there, is there? I mean if you love your kids there are going to be times when as well as encouraging them and telling them, 'you can do this, everything is going to be fine', you also warn them of the consequences if they take a certain course of action. That's what love does, doesn't it?

And so the writer warns his friends one last time. In view of all that God has done for them in Jesus, v25: 'See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven.'

So, just as surely as God was speaking through the Law at Sinai, he is speaking now through the gospel of grace. And if rejecting God's law had consequences, how much more will turning your back on grace. You see if we reject grace, what we are really embracing is law and judgment. If we reject grace we are really saying that we think we can earn our own way, and that we will take upon ourselves the consequences if we fail to do so; but what we find is that rather than paying our way we just get further and further into debt.

So the writer says, hey, don't turn your back, don't close your ears to God's offer of grace to you in Jesus. Don't take those consequences of alienation and separation from God upon yourself. Jesus has done it for you. To reject grace, is like a person leaving the warmth and safety and community of a celebration party, to go and fend for himself outside in a howling storm.

And the reason the writer gives is that there is going to come a day when everything in your life gets shaken out: v26, 'at that time [when the Law was given at Sinai] [God's] voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once

more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens."' At Sinai it was just the ground which shook, but there's going to come a day, the writer says, at the end of the ages, when not just the ground, but all creation is shaken, and when that day comes, only what is unshakeable will remain.

Now these guys knew all about shakey times. I mean, they were living through uncertainty, when they didn't know what might happen next. And you and I don't have to live long before we experience the same kind of thing: when it feels like that relationship or that job, or your health, which you thought was certain and dependable is rocking like a paper house in an earthquake. And of course that shaking that we face in life, distressing and consuming as it is, is nothing in comparison to this cosmic shaking the writer says will characterise the end.

And when times of shaking come, or when that ultimate shake out happens, you need something more reliable, something stronger than your own resources or your own moral efforts. You need something unshakeable – something that will stand in the shaking. And the writer says that is exactly what Jesus offers you. You see, it's Jesus, and his grace and his love for you, that never changes, that doesn't shift with the ground, or bend with the wind. It's his unshakeable commitment to you, and purposes for you, that gives you the stability you need when everything else is shaking. And it's the only thing that will endure the ultimate shaking. In the writer's words, v28, it's the 'kingdom that cannot be shaken.'

Now, when that dawns on us, when God's undeserved grace and commitment to us in Jesus sinks in, the writer says it's inevitably going to transform the way we think and live.

The Overflowing Heart

V28-29, 'Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire.'

There's something right isn't there, almost natural that when you receive a gift, you thank the person who gives it to you. And when you realize it cost them, and you know you really don't deserve it, but you know they're doing this for you because they love you, that doubles that feeling of indebtedness and gratitude and thankfulness. It has this way of increasing your love for them in return.

And the writer says that's just how it works with God. As we realize his gift to us in Jesus, as the cost of it, as the love it expresses, sinks in, we'll find gratitude - heart-warming, joy-bringing thankfulness - welling up in our hearts. In the face of grace, your heart cannot stay cold and hard. It cannot stay unmoved.

Now, if instead of Zion and the party of grace, you head down to Sinai, and and go for Law and try to pay your own way, your life won't be marked with gratitude will it? Rather, if you think you're doing ok, especially if you think you're doing better than others at making the grade, there will be pride, not gratitude. Or if you think you've got to work for God's favour, but you look at your life and you

realize the mess you're in, there will be guilt, not gratitude. It's only as we realize it's grace, that we get to receive this unshakeable kingdom, this secure future as his gift to us, that our lives will be increasingly transformed by thankfulness.

And thankfulness he says, leads to worship, the overflow of the heart. Now, when he talks about worship, as we'll see in chapter 13, he doesn't just mean what goes on here on a Sunday. Yes it's our lips, what we sing and say, but it's also our lives, lived out in worship to him. And because it's built on grace and gratitude, it never loses sight of who God is. It never makes him less than he is. It never turns grace into something cheep, or makes God into our little lapdog.

It's marked by reverence and awe of him who is a consuming fire. But it knows that this great and awesome God is also our heavenly Father who has done everything we needed to rescue us, and bring us into his city and into his house, and seat us at his table, for the feast, the party of eternity, in honour of his Son.

So, whether it's these friends he's writing to, or you and me, there really is no reason to wobble between choices. If it is acceptance, and peace and purpose, and completeness and security and forgiveness we are looking for, it is only found in one place and one person, and that's Jesus.