

Bible Reading

Exodus 19: 16-20

On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings and a thick cloud on the mountain and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people in the camp trembled. ¹⁷ Then Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet God, and they took their stand at the foot of the mountain. ¹⁸ Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke because the Lord had descended on it in fire. The smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain trembled greatly. ¹⁹ And as the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him in thunder. ²⁰ The Lord came down on Mount Sinai, to the top of the mountain. And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up.

Hebrews 12: 18-29

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. ²⁰ For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." ²¹ Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." ²² 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, ²³ and to the assembly^[a] of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, ²⁴ and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

²⁵ 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. ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." ²⁷ This phrase, "Yet once more," indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ 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, ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire.

Sermon

...for our God is a consuming fire

Sitting on the naughty step. We talked about it briefly last Sunday, with the boys of the Boys Brigade. It is a place you would rather not be, isn't it? But that does not mean that it is a bad place. For while you are sitting on the 'naughty steps', you may think about the thing you have done that got you there. And when you do that,

maybe you begin to understand why it was not a good thing what you did. And so you learn. Whatever age you are, you never stop learning, about yourself, about others...about God.

Overstepping boundaries is the first step towards doing wrong. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize them.

You know the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden. God had said to them: 'You may eat from every tree, except....' There is the one tree that marks the line that was not to be crossed. So, already in the first book of the bible we learn that God sets boundaries. And then the story of tower of Babel: the idea of having unlimited power, by thinking that a tower can be built that reaches into heaven. That is how, in the story, boundaries are overstepped. Therefore, God steps in, presenting Himself by giving people different languages, causing confusion that ends the overconfidence.

Both our readings of today take us, each in their own way, back to the point in time where God gave the Ten Commandments to Israel. Words from God that set clear limits. Words that set the framework within which God and Israel would work: a framework created by the Creator of heaven and earth. Giving these commandments, God presented Himself to Israel. He presented His Holiness to them, which was an overwhelming, terrifying, unbearable experience for them. Fear made them say these words to Moses,

"You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, lest we die."

²⁰ *Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, for God has come to test you, that the fear of him may be before you, that you may not sin." (Exodus 20:19-20)*

Our New Testament reading refers to this experience by saying:

....you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest ¹⁹ and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. (Hebrews 12:18)

The issue in both readings is the contrast between God's inaccessibility and His accessibility.

What we have come to is not Mount Sinai, with all its terrifying elements, For

you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering (Hebrews 12:22)

Mount Zion exceeds the earthly Mount Sinai: it lies above Mount Sinai and is accessible through something that is not tangible: faith.

Mount Sinai is the forerunner of Mount Zion, the latter being the place where our Lord Jesus Christ is seated at the right Hand of His Father. God's dwelling place can be reached through His Son. It has been made accessible through His blood, which was shed at the cross. The gap between the earth and heaven was bridged by what happened on Golgotha.

The bridging of the gap happened at the specific moment when Jesus died,

It was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, ⁴⁵ while the sun's light failed. And the curtain of the temple was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last. (Luke 23:44-46)

The curtain in the temple was the curtain that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. Only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies. When the curtain was torn, the Holy of Holies opened. After breathing His last breath, Jesus Christ, our High Priest, opened the Holy place of God for people. It is no longer inaccessible for humanity. However, there is only one way through which God can be reached: through Jesus, who is the way, the only way of life.

God, who sent Jesus into the world has not changed. He is still, as it says in our New Testament reading, 'a consuming fire'.

That is why it makes sense, biblical sense, that fire was involved at Pentecost, in the flames that appeared above the disciples' heads, which could be seen by all the Jews and not Jews, who had gathered in Jerusalem for Pentecost.

Our celebration of the birth of the church is rooted in the celebration of the giving of God's Ten Commandments. The law of which Jesus says,

"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. (Matthew 5:17)

God's Spirit that was hovering over the waters in the first bible book is the same Spirit with which He gave the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. It is the same Spirit through which the prophets spoke. It was that Spirit that Christ committed to God when He died and opened heaven for us. That Holy Spirit is the help for the Psalmist when lifting up his eyes to the hills and asking,

From where does my help come?

² *My help comes from the Lord,
who made heaven and earth. (Psalm 121:2-2)*

Amen