
You Have Come to Mt Zion

Hebrews 12.18-24

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 26, 2007 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I want to talk today especially to those who are here for the first time. I want you to engage every sense in your body – touch, taste, smell, hearing, sight – and put them all on red alert so you are ready, eager, actively anticipating what it means to meet God. This is what the climax of the letter to the Hebrews is asking of us. It wants us to be all set to meet God. And when better than now, with the beginning of the rest of your life dawning and all the doors of destiny beckoning you to walk through them.

I wonder what kind of a God you have known before today. I wonder what kind of religion you have been exposed to before you left home for the first time. I've only lived in America for a couple of years, but in that time I've encountered two kinds of religion that you may know quite well.

One is what I'm going to call harmless religion. Harmless religion is where everybody goes to church but no one quite remembers why. Once a critical mass of people in a community start going the attorneys and the real estate people and the personal finance advisers have to go because that's where they meet their clients. Everyone knows that what really matters is family and nation, but church fills in some of that rather large gap between the two, and somehow makes everyone feel better about both. Teenagers start asking awkward questions about why everyone is doing this and why they can't have a long lie-in on Sunday mornings, and parents worry that if their teenagers don't go to church they'll never become good attorneys. So harmless churches invent youth groups. Youth groups are a way of keeping teenagers so tired out by sleepovers and so full of pizza and soda that they won't take the trouble to ask awkward questions.

This is harmless religion because its Jesus is one that embodies everything that right thinking people already believe. Jesus came to bring happy families, good jobs, a steady income, success in major sports, scholarships through college and a healthy economy. What makes it harmless is that it ever more comes to resemble the culture from which it has been called out. In the words of one philosopher, this kind of church has given the world less and less in which to disbelieve. It's a pragmatic, reasonable religion that comes in handy at times of birth, marriage and death (or hatching, matching and dispatching as they're sometimes called). There was a time when it was impossible to imagine charity, goodwill or even democracy without this kind of harmless religion, but gradually, in institutions and households across the land, people have come to question not whether it's useful but whether it's true.

So harmless religion is curiously under threat. But another kind of religion is alive and well. This other kind I'm going to call scary religion. If the god of harmless religion is so benign you half wonder if he's dozed off, the god of scary religion suffers from hyperactivity and hypertension. The god of scary religion is mediated by pastors, teachers and parents who've had a major sense of humor failure. God definitely has a plan for your life, but there's little evidence that God intends to make you happy. Instead there's a whole lot of judgment, guilt, denial, and what other people call anger but in the vocabulary of these circles tends to be called wrath. Sexual desire is treated as a universal menace which must be stamped out at all costs. There are a lot of rules, and most of them are hard to keep, and there's a general feeling that I must be a pretty awful person deep down, if other people, let alone God, really knew the truth about me, and I can develop a depression which is a kind of suppressed anger that I'm just lurching from one moral failure to another and I can never be good enough for God. People sometimes come away bruised by scary religion, because the pastors, teachers and parents who generally mediate it tend not to be accountable to anybody, except their interpretation of scripture and their discernment of the Holy Spirit, and that can lead to some pretty dangerous outcomes. And some politicians have harnessed the culture of scary religion and the fear which it reflects and creates in order to strengthen their electoral power base. And this of course makes people of a different political persuasion all the more suspicious of scary religion. But curiously scary religion is thriving, not just among Christians but among quite a number of other faiths. By the way, the one thing that harmless religion and scary religion have in common is that they both think that the other is to blame for most of the world's ills.

If people reject harmless religion on philosophical grounds, because they can't believe it's true, people tend to reject scary religion on moral grounds, because they just don't want to be part of something that seems so manipulative and controlling and just plain... scary. I wonder whether you've had a close encounter with this kind of scary religion, and how it's left you feeling. What's attractive about it is that it's pretty clear that God matters, God is real and present and urgent and active, and so what you do matters, what you think matters, how you live really, really matters. But the trouble is it's a pretty scary god.

And that's exactly the point where today's reading from Hebrews comes in. The letter to the Hebrews isn't much interested in harmless religion. Harmless religion is a fairly recent invention, based on the assumption that most things that matter in the universe can be brought under human control and understanding. But Hebrews assumes that God is utterly different from us, that God is the creator and we are simply creatures, that we have no vocabulary to speak of God except the vocabulary God gives us, the word of God. Hebrews has no doubt that God really matters, that the mystery of existence, that birth and death, that fear and joy, that desire and dread, that yearning and love are, in the end, all about God. It takes for granted that the thought of God puts butterflies in your stomach, makes you lose sleep, makes you breathless with anticipation and stirs your soul to emotion and passion. The writer and readers of this letter have no iPods, no YouTube, no facebook, no email, no internet, no 24 hour news channels, no ESPN, no cell phones – none of the transitional objects we use to fill up the cracks in our days that might otherwise be spent pondering eternity. The previous chapter of Hebrews is a long list of those who gave everything to God, up to and including their lives – because God had given everything to them, up to and including his life.

And then Hebrews 12 gives a pretty comprehensive account of scary religion. It takes us back to the description in Exodus of the scene at Mt Sinai, moments before the giving of the Ten Commandments to Moses. It talks about absolute terror, in which there is a blazing fire, deep, impenetrable darkness, a heavy, threatening gloom, a terrible storm, an awesome sound of a trumpet, bloodcurdling threats of being stoned to death, and a deafening voice that makes everyone cower and cover their ears and plead for an end to this terrifying sound. The whole scene sounds like a First World War battlefield. What we have here is a description of the majesty of God, the unapproachability of God, the sheer terror of God, billowing smoke and ear-blasting voice and all.

But you have not come to this mountain, we are told. No, *you have come to Mount Zion*, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, innumerable angels in joyous array, to the ingathering of the people of God, to the justice and mercy of God in Jesus Christ. In other words you have come to the greatest and most magnificent stadium, with the Holy Trinity surrounded by myriads of saints and angels, and as you walk out onto the field into the radiant light the whole crowd rise and sing your name and say “welcome home” and you are deeply cherished and tenderly loved beyond your most extravagant dreams.

And every ingredient of this menu shows us the flavor of what true religion – not harmless religion or scary religion – is all about. It's about the city, which means the life of heaven and the life of faith is not just being saved as an individual but about living together as a community. It's about the living God, which means the life of heaven and the life of faith is all founded on Jesus' resurrection. It's about Jerusalem, which means the life of heaven and the life of faith is in continuity with the Old Testament and begins with the Jews. It's about the innumerable angels, which means the life of heaven and the life of faith is all about worship, which is what the angels do all the time. It's about the firstborn, which means everything God gives to Jesus he gives to you and me. It's about God the judge, which sounds a bit scary but in fact means that we can trust that everything that we have put wrong in the world, God will in the end put right. It's about the righteous made perfect, in other words there's a place for those whose hearts ache for God but who for historical, geographical or other reasons haven't found their way into the church. And it's about Jesus.

And at this point we realize how we get from the first mountain to the second mountain, from Mt Sinai to Mt Zion. And that is, via a third mountain. And that third mountain is called Calvary. And suddenly we realize that a lot of the scary imagery of Mt Sinai is present at Calvary, in the description of Christ's crucifixion. Remember there was darkness over the whole land. Remember there was fear. Remember that the crowd went away beating their breasts. And remember that, instead of a booming voice, there was a deafening, and equally terrifying, silence. On the mount of Calvary God in Christ takes the fear, takes the trembling, takes the menacing gloom of scary Sinai and absorbs it, and two days later in Jesus' resurrection gives us instead Mt

Zion, communal life in worship with the company of God for ever. Abel's blood is the blood of vengeance, the blood of scary religion, but the blood of Jesus pleads for pardon, for compassion, for forgiveness and reconciliation, for Zion. And so we can say "you have not come to the mount of terror, of vengeance, of no mercy, of trembling and doom – for Jesus has absorbed that mountain on his own scary mountain. No, you have come to Mt Zion, to the joy of the angels, the company of the saints, and to the presence of the living God."

And so if you're here in Duke Chapel for the first time, I want you to know that this is a place that's not much interested in harmless religion, because everything we do says that either God is everything, or God is nothing. If God is nothing, we shouldn't be here. And if God is everything, every moment we spend together, from the voices of the angels behind me to the words of you saints in front of me, from the reading of a lesson to the saying of a prayer to the taking of an offering, from a kind remark to a healing touch to a thoughtful gesture – every tiny thing we do is a celebration that we have come not to Sinai or even to Calvary but to Mt Zion. Mt Zion is not so much a place as a new existence made possible by the transformation God brought about on Calvary. Meanwhile we are very aware of scary religion. Scary religion contains a truth that God matters and is awesome and will finally judge all people and all things and without Jesus we would be in a pretty frightening world. All those things are true, but in the face of scary religion, of which there is so much in this country and elsewhere, what we at Duke Chapel have to say is "you have not come to darkness and gloom and a deafening voice and trembling fear. You have come to Mt Zion, to the angels and saints and the full reign of God, and to Jesus, whose blood brings not vengeance but the forgiveness of sins and not death and fear but life eternal."

Welcome to Duke Chapel. May it be for you a city of the living God. And may you come to Mt Zion, to the full assurance of faith, and rejoice in God's presence for ever.