Gawler 9-5-10

HEBREWS 12:18-24

GPS Navigation

I reckon one of the best inventions of recent years is the GPS. I think it's amazing that it's possible to put in a destination pretty much anywhere in Australia and it will give directions on how to get there. The one I use on my phone also gives me some idea of how long it will take to get there and the estimated time of arrival and has proven to be reasonably accurate. Despite the fact that it gives directions to a destination I've been known to not necessarily follow where it tells me to go. I like see it having a nervous breakdown as it realises I'm heading on a different path. A few weeks ago I had to pick something up at 40 something Port Road, Thebarton. I decided on this occasion that I would follow it's instructions because I was interested to see the way it would take me. It eventually took me along South Road to the Port Road intersection. I was a little bit puzzled by that because had I been going to Thebarton, I wouldn't have gone that far down Port Road. However, I stuck with it, and continued to follow what it said – even when it made me turn right and head down Port Road in the Port Adelaide direction. At that point I definitely knew it was wrong. While I would have been interested to see exactly where it was going to take me, I completely ignored it and went to where I thought I should be, and I was correct. I had two possible destinations on that trip: where the GPS was trying to take me (which was wrong), and where I thought I ought to be going (which was correct).

Two Destinations

Today's passage in Hebrews also refers to two destinations, both of which are part of God's story for his people.

Mt Sinai

The first destination was an early part of God's story. Mt Sinai was a significant destination for the people of Israel because it was the place where God gave the law. It's now no longer the destination for God's people because it's been superseded by something far better. The covenant, as outlined in the Old Testament, was right and good, but God has now brought about a new covenant through Jesus that far surpasses the old which was just a shadow pointing to what was to come.

Mt Zion, the Heavenly Jerusalem

Our destination is Mt Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem. This is where we fit in God's story now.

But before we look at both of these, let's briefly go back a few verses.

Hebrews 12:12-13 (NIV)

Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.
"Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.
We saw that living in peace, being holy and not missing out on the grace of God helps to strengthen our feeble arms and weak knees. But what strengthens us even more is coming to the correct destination, living in the story of God as he now intends for us.

YOU HAVE NOT COME TO MT SINAI [18-21]

The ultimate destination for the people of Israel was the promised land, but Mt Sinai was a pivotal point along the way because it was the place where God gave the people the law.

Exodus 19:10-25

The story to which these verses refer is found in Exodus 19:10-25.
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AZTcxMMgkhw
It's not quite the same but I imagine standing at the foot of a volcano like this would have been something similar to standing at the foot of Mount Sinai when the Lord came down. Everything about it says God is not someone to be taken lightly:

- The people had to consecrate themselves.
- They were not allowed to go near the mountain or both human and animal were at risk of being put to death.
- There was thunder and lightning and a thick cloud covered the mountain.

- There was a very loud trumpet blast which grew louder and louder.
- Smoke bellowed up from the mountain like smoke from a furnace and the whole mountain trembled violently.
- On top of that was the voice of God speaking words in such a way that the people begged not to hear any more.

This is quite a dramatic picture and the two words that I think of when I read this passage are fear and holiness. Everything about it emphasises the power, holiness and otherness of God. It had to do with his inapproachability. It left Moses, and no doubt all the rest of the people, trembling in fear for their very lives.

You Have Not Come

But there are some significant words here: *you have not come*! We have not come to that mountain. While that was part of the story of God with his people, and part of the covenant God made, that's not our destination. All of that comes under the old covenant, and God has now done a whole new thing through Jesus. It's right to be in awe of God and pay close attention to his holiness; that's how it should be. But this is more about fear and terror. We have not come to that place; that is not our destination.

BUT YOU HAVE COME TO MT ZION [21-24]

Our destination is the heavenly Jerusalem, the city where God himself is present with his people. These verses have a completely different tone to the ones we've just looked at. It's all about God not only being approachable, but welcoming of us into his presence. Just as the first set of verses kept building a picture of darkness and terror so these verses build a picture of light, freshness and hope. That's why our feeble arms and weak knees are made strong.

Mt Zion

Zion was the central part of Jerusalem captured by David and which became the site of the great temple. It was understood as the place where God was literally present with his people. God is no longer present in an earthly temple but in a heavenly temple where Jesus has now gone on our behalf and into which we are now invited because of what he's done. It is a whole new way in which he is present with and to his people and through which the holiness we couldn't obtain under the Mosaic covenant has been achieved.

The City Described

Whenever we go away on holidays to a place we haven't been to before I always like to have a good look around within the first day or so. Wendy is usually recovering from the trip so she's happy to sit and read or write and I'll have a bit of a look around. I enjoy seeing new things, checking out buildings, getting some idea of where things are, getting a feel for the countryside. That pales into insignificance compared to what we see in the new city of Zion to which we come.

- The city is full of angels who were not now give the law but celebrate the fact that what the law was not able to do has been accomplished through Jesus.
- The firstborn, those who already have been redeemed by Jesus' blood, are already there and waiting.
- To come to the city is to come to God as the judge of all people. This is not something to be feared but rather celebrated because it means that there will be justice and everything will be put right.
- It is also to come to the spirits of righteous people make perfect i.e. people who have come to the full expression of humanity and are perfectly complete.
- In this city Jesus is the crowning glory, the one through whom the new covenant has been established. His blood does not call for vengeance as did Abel's but for full pardon and cleansing. This is grace.

This whole section is in the present tense i.e. it's saying that by faith we have already come to this holy city; we are already citizens. This is our home and in prayer and worship we are already welcome before God's throne and have a taste of what that's like.

I wonder if there are times when we still come to Mt Sinai:

- Relate to God on the basis of rules and regulations.
- See him as a God who is totally other and so we can't connect with him.

- Cringe when we hear his voice – that's if we even seek it out in the first place.
- See him as a hard task master.
- Are afraid of him in the sense of being terrified.

If that's what we understand God to be and is the basis on which we relate to him, then there will be fear, doom and gloom because there's very little light in that picture.

But we have not come to that mountain.

- We have come into the very presence of God in the company of thousands of worshipping angels.
- We stand in the company of others of the family of God.
- We know and experience the justice of God.
- Our conscience has been cleaned by the blood of Jesus i.e. we know what it is to be forgiven.

This is the mountain of grace, welcome and healing.