**Hebrews chapter 12 selected verses from vs 18 to 28**

**The mountain of fear and the mountain of joy**

**18**You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; **19**to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them ... **22**But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. ...

You have come to God, the Judge of all ... **24**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 to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven? **26**At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, ‘Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.’ **27**The words ‘once more’ indicate the removing of what can be shaken – that is, created things – so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

**28**Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe.

Do you feel as if the pillars of your world have been shaken?

It think it probably feels that way for a lot of people with all that’s happened this year so far. Ways of working have changed. Travel plans have been disrupted, celebrations cancelled and new and inventive ways have had to be found to allow people to meet and speak to each other. Thank goodness for the technology of mobile phones and the internet and video conferencing. For it feels as if the structures of our whole way of life have been shaken. Our society, our economy, even the church.

Question, is it always a bad thing when structures are shaken, when old ways of doing things are swept away? Was it sensible or sustainable for people to sit in traffic for hours every day to commute to work, to be permanently frazzled with no work life balance? Was it sustainable, ecologically, for people to take a six hour flight to an exotic city just for a weekend break? Was it sustainable for cities to be hollowed out by tourism and for Air bnbs to deny affordable housing to local people?

Our very society has been shaken. A death in the USA has had repercussions here, as Britain faces its colonial and slave trading past and owns up to systemic racism from the very top tier of Government all the way down. Like any seismic shift, it’s going to cause some deep structural change. In terms of justice and equality, it’s not before time.

For years our economy has relied on people working zero hour contracts with little job security; people now often defined as keyworkers. Care staff, NHS staff, binmen, shop assistants, cleaners. Perhaps a new appreciation for those people who are often unseen and disregarded who do the jobs nobody really wants to do is also no bad thing.

Lastly, the structure of the very thing that binds us all together – the Church - has also been shaken. I’ll come back to that in a bit. First a story.

By way of background, I've taken to listening to a variety of podcasts, from sermons to science, from humour to history, particularly ancient history. And there was one story that particularly struck me, about a particular city. You’ll have heard of it. It was called Nineveh.

Nineveh was one of the greatest cities of its time, a city of the mighty and terrifying Assyrian empire, a city so large it’s described in the book of Jonah as needing three days to get across it. It was beautiful with magnificent buildings, wonderful decorations and amazing gardens. It would have been regarded as impregnable with vast walls and towers. It was unthinkable that such a city could ever fall, much less be forgotten.

But in about 350 BC, a Greek general called Xenophon was taking his troops though Persia back to Greece. He stopped by some ruins one day, and marvelled at the size of them. He realised this must have been a mighty city, a city such as he had never seen, because there were no cities like it in his day, and there wouldn’t be for another couple of hundred years. But when he asked the tribes who scavenged a living among the ruins what city this was, they didn’t know. Historians now know that that pile of ruins had once been the great city of Nineveh and yet the people who lived there had no idea. The memory of the great and feared Assyrian empire, in what had been their greatest city, was completely wiped out.

But just look at what does stand unshaken from that time, indeed from a time long before Xenophon, and before the Assyrians too, because there is something other than ruined walls and broken clay tablets which remains with us. A small group of people in a little strip of land to the east of the Mediterranean Sea developed an understanding and a relationship with God, the stories of which are still with us today. That relationship, that faith journey developed over time until, two thousand years ago, it came to fulfilment in Jesus Christ and from that moment comes the faith we have today. Think of that. How much do we have that is two thousand years old? Any objects of that age will usually be in a museum. Yet we have a faith and a church that is robust and growing. We don’t keep it in a museum and visit it as a curiosity because it is a living thing, with roots that go back even deeper into time. The King of Persia, Cyrus the Great, once called himself ‘King of Kings’ but he died and passed into history, and the Persian Empire also fell. But Jesus who we worship as King of Kings and Lord of Lords has carried the name for over two thousand years and will carry it for ever.

The way we do church has been shaken. But it has not been destroyed. The way we do things is different, that’s all, but it’s still Church. There is still preaching and prayer and pastoral care and worship and it’s been widely reported that the dispersed or virtual church is actually growing; reaching out to people and meeting their needs in new and imaginative ways.

From our Hebrews reading, let us always remember when things are changing around us, when the very structures of our lives seem to be falling apart, that God is eternal and reigns for ever, always has and always will. Events will occur which will shake us up. Illness will strike, people, both good and bad, loved and hated, will fall away and die; organisations will fail, governments whether good or bad will equally pass away. But we hold fast to a God who promises a kingdom that will not be shaken, that is eternal and which will never pass away. When everything else has been shaken, this remains.

I’ll finish with two verses from the hymn: All my hope on God is founded (H&P 63, STF 455)

Human pride and earthly glory

Sword and crown betray our trust

What with care and toil we fashion

Tower and temple, fall to dust.

But God’s power

Hour by hour

Is my temple and my tower.

Still from earth to God eternal

Sacrifice of praise be done

High above all praises praising

For the gift of Christ his Son.

Christ doth call

One and all

Ye who follow shall not fall.

**Let us pray**

Loving God, we thank you that when the pillars of our world seem to crumble around us, you are eternal and your Kingdom can never be shaken. Thank you for the hope of eternity which you have set in our hearts. We pray for all who are greatly shaken and who are troubled, for all in our country and the wider world who face great changes in their lives, for better or for worse. Be with us though all this, we pray.

Amen.