

Hebrews 12: 19- Earthquakes and Kingdoms

When you buy vegetables from the supermarket that come wrapped in plastic, have you ever wondered what happens to them once you go over the sell-by date? Have you ever watched what happens in your fridge at midnight as the date slides by, and as the vegetable is claimed by the dark side of the force! Well, I realised this week, what happens to broccoli when the date is passed. It goes slightly brown, and you have to shake all these bits out of it, so that what you have left is worth eating. But shaking the thing up is the only way to get all the dead bits out of it.

Being shaken is the subject of the Hebrews reading. The earth is to be shaken once more, so we read, but we belong to a kingdom that cannot be shaken!

In the kingdom of God, nothing can be shaken! Now, I don't mean to criticise the Bible, but I struggle to understand what the author means. Does that mean the kingdom of God is an utterly impregnable, unconquerable, unshakeable kingdom? I don't think so. This makes it sound like an empire, just like any other. It makes it sound as though we are the ones who are right, who cannot be shaken – and everyone else is mistaken. It sounds like a recipe for disaster, and may even cause you to question the emotional intelligence of the writer to the Hebrews. Because Christians in today's world are shaken, and churches in today's world are shaken. And those Christians and those churches that believe they cannot be shaken, are quite scary.

Rather like the people of Jeremiah's day, who when faced with political and military upheaval, demonstrated their maturity and wisdom by saying, don't worry – we're in Jerusalem, the city of our God, the holy place. We have the temple of the Lord, no-one can defeat us! Have you ever seen the film, Zulu? A very military film about the British Empire. And a little outpost is surrounded by Zulus, and the situation looks hopeless, so they quote psalm 46, which the Sgt Mjr claims could have been written by a soldier. And the psalm celebrates Jerusalem, and says God is within her, she will not fall. But Jerusalem did fall, on more than one occasion. That mountain that could be seen and touched, could also be defeated, destroyed, utterly shaken! Wake up and smell the coffee!

What does it mean to say that the kingdom cannot be shaken! Does it mean that because the Gospel is true that our belief in it can never be shaken? Does it mean that because we have the Holy Spirit, that we can never be shaken? Though many of us would not use that language, some of the language that we do use suggests that this is our belief. Sometimes when you listen to Christians who face very difficult circumstances, they will end the tragic descriptions of failure and difficulty with the claim that 'but God is good'. And very often, But God is good – implication – I cannot be shaken. If you read the psalms, you realise that the psalmists would never do that. They inhabit the disaster, and ask, where is God, why do you distance yourself from trouble?, why do you abandon your people? The psalmists allow themselves to be shaken.

Well, if we think that the kingdom of God is something that we have to build, and it is a kingdom that cannot be shaken, it sounds like a justification for the kind of Christian arrogance that is a million miles from grace. And you hear in our songs, in our prayers, in our preaching – that we must extend the kingdom, and work for the

kingdom, and establish the kingdom. And this is the language that has to be used when participation in the Kingdom of God is mistaken for Christian empire-building!

As if the kingdom of God was something that could be extended. The kingdom of God is nothing other than the Kingship of God, and that cannot be extended or enlarged or built. Jesus is King – end of story. The kingdom of God is the recognition that Jesus is King.

Who was it that said, “God himself could not sink this ship?” That’s right – it was the builder of the Titanic! Because the fact is, as Jesus has warned us, if our priority is to build bigger barns, to extend our kingdom, to hoard up our treasures – then an earthquake is coming – and our little empires will be shaken. In fact, the whole of the ministry of Jesus was about a forthcoming earthquake, the greatest earthquake that ever overtook the people of God – the destruction of Jerusalem. But, says the writer to the Hebrews, the Jerusalem we come to now is not this kind of earthly empire!: “You have not come to a mountain that can be touched.

(when you read about a mountain in these passages it is always the same place, Mount Zion, where Abraham took Isaac, and where centuries later, Solomon built a temple, the mountain where Jesus himself was sacrificed. ... So Hebrews tells us, you have not come to this earthly mountain – Jerusalem after all, was destined to be destroyed by the Romans in AD70. But you have not come to some earthly place - You have come to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God.”

Perhaps the reason that this kingdom cannot be shaken, is that it is not based upon the same power structures as other kingdoms. What’s the hymn – so be it Lord, thy throne shall never, like earth’s proud empires pass away. It cannot be shaken because its foundations are not concrete.

Now, concrete foundations are no protection from earthquake – and I think I’m right in saying that Japan is probably one of the earth’s worst places for earthquakes. In fact, it wasn’t until 1968, that architects dared to build taller buildings in Japan – because they could not make them earth-quake proof! Even modern concrete earthquake proof structures, are brought crashing to the ground in the worst earthquakes.

But there is one kind of very tall building in Japan, which has stood for centuries without being destroyed by the worst of earthquakes. They are pagodas, ancient temples, usually over a hundred feet high, with up to five storeys, delicately balanced upon one another – the whole thing looks as though it shouldn’t be able to stand anyway – but somehow, when an earthquake comes, these ancient temples survive, and their survival is often attributed to divine powers.

Actually, it is the structure of pagodas that enables them to stand. Architects are now modelling buildings upon this ancient design. Each story of the building is utterly self-contained, almost like boxes, stacked upon upon another, that enables them to move sideways as the ground shakes. They are all attached by a central column, which itself moves with the quake. They have a built-in flexibility – no need for foundations. They are quite literally, temples that cannot be shaken! Sure, they stand on the ground that shakes, but as structures they cannot be shaken. As Christians, we

are temples that cannot be shaken! But what does it mean to be structured like a pagoda?

Well the kingdom of God is not based upon prior commitments we have made, nor upon aims and goals that we might choose to adopt, or the hopes and dreams that we might choose to chase. Too often, we commit our lives to a certain direction, to a career path, to a character type, to a set of beliefs – that means that we use these prior beliefs to judge and weigh up the Word of God when we encounter it. And easily, we base our Christian belief upon other commitments, to family, to career, to political visions, to moral beliefs. But then something happens that causes those things to be shaken – we encounter an earthquake through bereavement, through family crises, through unemployment, through health, through anything that we had unwittingly staked our hopes upon. And the earthquake comes, and all that we have built comes crashing down.

This is precisely what we saw in the Gospel reading: that some religious folk knew that there is to be no healing on the Sabbath. So when someone comes along, and calls their wisdom into question, it shakes them! Some prior commitment somewhere to another set of rules, deafens these antagonists to the word of God and blinds them to the kingdom of God. And so they condemn Jesus for healing this poor woman on the Sabbath. Sabbath laws were taken extremely seriously – observing the Sabbath was one of the marks that made you a real Jew! But even something this honourable was a prior commitment, that actually blinded many to what God was actually doing here and now.

A kingdom then, that cannot be shaken, is one that recognises the King at work. So the writer to the Hebrews says that we have come to the mountain of the Living God! A kingdom that cannot be shaken is one that is based not upon anything or anyone that can at any time be taken from us.

A kingdom that cannot be shaken is a living commitment to the living God that would enable us to encounter him here, and now today. This a theme that the writer to the Hebrews has already raised, when he was writing about Sabbath. He says that God set aside a certain day, calling it ‘today’. A kingdom that cannot be shaken is a readiness to encounter God here and now.

And that here and now, can include the darkest, bleakest, most difficult of circumstances. It is perhaps, especially in such circumstances that we encounter the kingdom of God.

How can we sing the Lord’s Song, in a strange land?

