

*Trinity 13 2013*

Depending upon your film and literary tastes, 'She who must be obeyed' will put you in mind of either Rumpole of the Bailey or Ursula Andress, dazzling star of *She*.

It was the latter that rather surprisingly came to mind as I read the passage from Hebrews. This 1960s Hammer film was about a lost tribe in Africa, with the immortal Queen 'She who must be obeyed', who had for 2000 years violently oppressed her hapless slaves. It absolutely terrified me when I first saw it. It was a film about love and jealousy, and revenge. This was a brutal bloodthirsty queen, and anyone who looked upon her could reasonably expect a very nasty end. It ended with Ursula Andress suddenly aging and disintegrating as she entered the mystical blue flame of immortality for the second time, while the male hero attained immortality and was left longing for the time when he could undo this and die and escape into oblivion. Not a happy film!

Memory of this fairly awful film surfaced because of the way the writer to the Hebrews describes Mount Sinai.

We are used to reading the Old Testament, and of Mount Sinai as the Holy Mountain. It was after all the place where Moses met with God. But here, it is described as a place of darkness and fear. Anyone who touches Sinai, any animal that strays on to Sinai, will die. It is a place of terror, where lightning strikes, thunder shakes the ground, fire rages. It is a place steeped in blood. Even Moses trembled when he approached. The people in Exodus are so afraid that they beg Moses not to allow God to speak to them because it would kill them. Above all things, they want to avoid coming to God's attention.

Sinai is their holy place. A place of judgement and dread. It is all they know. Their whole image of God is based upon this knowledge, and so their mind set says we must appease this angry God, we must make sacrifices, we must at all costs remain subservient, in fear and trembling, heads bowed like the slaves of *She who must be obeyed*. This is the Old Covenant, the law, the do's and don'ts that can become enslaving.

But there is a choice says the writer of the letter to the Hebrews. We don't have to go to Sinai; that does not have to be the model for holiness. There is another mountain, Mount Zion.

Mount Zion, in earthly terms, was associated with David's reign, a time set up as the ideal, the golden age of prosperity and peace. Under the new Covenant, there is a heavenly Zion, the new Jerusalem, the city of the living God. This is nothing at all like Sinai. Here there are angels, innumerable festal angels. Angels gathered in celebration, making music, perhaps dancing, joyous,

issuing a great outpouring of praise. No fierce beings intent on harm, but more like a party, a wedding feast. Given the choice, who would not choose Zion over Sinai. Here the firstborn of the new covenant live, and God is judge. Yet this judgement is not like that of Sinai, it does not involve casting people into a furnace. All who come to the heavenly Zion come through Jesus, who takes their imperfections and makes them perfect. This is done through the sprinkled blood of Jesus. In other words, his sacrifice made him the mediator of this new covenant, a covenant of forgiveness and mercy. Unlike Abel's blood, or the blood of any crime, which lingers on in memory, causing at worst revenge killing, or lingering hatred or resentment, the blood of Christ enables a completely new start.

If you stopped reading at verse 24, you would be left with this wonderful rosy image.

But suddenly, in verse 25, just when we thought it was going to be one long party, and we've decided that Zion definitely is better than Sinai, the writer take us back to the fire and brimstone. We hear that Zion too is full of fire and shaking. But this is different. This is not punishment. This is the making perfect, the shaking off of all the dirt, the fire that gets rid of all impurities. This is how we can be made perfect, through Christ.

But fire and shaking, even with so good a purpose, are not for the faint hearted. This refining will change us, permanently. Only a fool would not be in awe. And we begin to realise that Sinai and Zion are not two different mountains. There is only one God, but there are different ways of worshipping him. We can be cringing in fear and trembling, a state that is so crippling that actually makes us almost hate God, unable to look at him, convinced that he will punish us even when we have absolutely no idea what we have done wrong. Or we can full of awe, and respect, nervous, afraid even, but trusting, able to look God in the eye knowing that he loves us and is always just.

Those are the two possible responses. Two routes up the mountain. Two ways of seeing God. Two ways of worshipping him.

The chapter ends with the phrase 'Indeed our God is a consuming fire'. It is not the fire that destroys – we will not crumble like Ursula Andress in the film - nor is it a fire that imprisons us in an eternity of our own making, but it is a fire that changes us, enabling us to enter into that kingdom where angels dance and sing with pure joy. These words, 'our God is a consuming fire' become not a threat, but a promise. We will be made new, made perfect, and able to come face to face with our God. That is some promise. Amen.