

What wonderful readings. In a way the Bible can be seen as an account of the the history of humanity's search for God and for answers to life's big questions. It was written over about 1000 years. As we read we can watch faith in the one triune God evolving over 1000 years.

In the Old Testament we find a group of people in the middle east developing their ideas about God and formulating what we still recognise as the Jewish faith. As we read we can see the balance shifting over time from ideas of a smiting punishing God to a loving merciful God unchanging and unchangeable.

Let's Look at our Exodus reading – the people gathered round Mt Sinai – God's presence manifest in awful ways – thunder, lightning, thick cloud, deafening trumpet blast, smoke, earthquake. People and animals that get too close are to be stoned to death. Talk about terrifying.

It sounds like a perfect storm - a phrase being used more and more these days.

The phrase was awarded the top prize by [Lake Superior State University](#) in their 2007 list of words that deserve to be banned for overuse.^[1]

If we move to our reading from matthew we find another perfect storm about to swamp the boat in which Jesus and the disciples are sailing. The sea of galilee isn't like the ocean – it's a freshwater lake only about 13 miles across at its widest. But storms are always frightening and storms on water in a small boat more so. Imagine riding waves in a craft which is out of control – the boat lifted up on a wave and dropped back with a smack. And the rocking from side to side, no extra buoyancy in the boat. Even with flotation strapped to your person it would be terrifying. In the heavy rain visibility is poor and you lose sight of the shore. The cloud is so thick you lose sight of the sun. You lose your bearings – All you can do is hang on.

But as their faith fades they turn to Jesus in desperation. And peace and calm are restored.

Let's return to the idea that the Bible is the story of faith development. We see that in the gospels there is a paradigm shift. Jesus embodies a step change and shows us what the God of love is like.

That shift enables the writer of Hebrews to contrast the life of faith **now** with how it used to be. The writer says

You have **not** come to something that can be touched – a blazing fire, darkness, gloom, tempest, sound of trumpet. You have come to Mt Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem - and to innumerable angels in festal gathering and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect - and to Jesus , mediator of the new covenant.

That must be heaven!

So what about hell? People are commemorating the 700th anniversary of Dante's death this year. Dante's inferno is one of the sources for many of the ideas that people today have about hell. They do not have a biblical origin.

We have just said in the apostles' creed "He descended into hell". What can that mean? Pope Benedict XVI explained that since Christ went into hell, that means hell "is hell no longer . . . because love dwells in it."

Pope John Paul II, not known as a liberal, reminded people that heaven and hell are not physical places at all. They are states of being in which we dwell either in a loving relationship with God or one of separation from the source of all life and joy.

To finish here is an excerpt from a conversation between St. Silouan (1866–1938), an orthodox monk and a hermit.

There was a certain hermit who declared to Silouan with evident satisfaction: 'God will punish all atheists. They will burn in everlasting fire.' Obviously upset, St Silouan said: 'Tell me, supposing you went to paradise and there looked down and saw somebody burning in hell-fire—would you feel happy?' 'It can't be helped. It would be their own fault,' said the hermit. St Silouan answered him with a sorrowful countenance. 'Love could not bear that,' he said. 'We must pray for all.'

Our next hymn picks up some of the themes we have just been thinking about so let us stand to sing Immortal Love for ever full,