

Proper 16

Hebrews 12.18-29

I cannot give you a more exact description of its appearance than by comparing to a [pine tree](#); for it shot up to a great height in the form of a tall trunk, which spread out at the top as though into branches. ... Occasionally it was brighter, occasionally darker and spotted, as it was either more or less filled with earth and cinders.

The words of Pliny the Younger, writing to the Roman historian Tacitus. There were many eyewitnesses to the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79AD and the stories would have spread throughout the empire but we have this one written record of what happened. Pliny was watching from across the bay of Naples in the town of Misenum. It was early morning but all they could see was a dark cloud sometimes pierced with what seemed like sheet lightning. He describes what must have been a mini-tsunami in the bay. Neighbours shouted to one another; they decided they must escape so they took to the road, Pliny with his mother who was so overweight and unfit that she urged her son to abandon her and save his own life. He grabbed her hand and continued onwards. Ash began to fall from the sky, so thickly that like snow they had to brush it off to avoid being engulfed in it. They survived and even later in the day returned to their home as conditions eased. Those across the bay were not so lucky. Tens of thousands died through the heat or the gas or the collapsing buildings as the cloud of rock-bearing ash above them collapsed and deluged them with fire and brimstone. For over 1,500 years their bodies and their half-destroyed buildings, their artefacts and even their food lay buried and preserved underneath layers of volcanic ash and debris. Where bodies decomposed voids were left that later archaeologists filled with plaster to reveal their exact form on the moment they died. Unlucky for them but eerily lucky for us as Pompeii and Herculaneum provide us with the best evidence we have of what the Pax Romana looked like in everyday life. The Pompeii exhibition at the British Museum is a fascinating insight into how they lived, how they conducted their business, what they ate and drank, how they made love and practised their religion.

The exhibition is partly laid out as one of the villas. You enter through the atrium, the entrance hall. In the centre was the impluvium, the shallow pool that collected rainwater and where presumably they could wash their feet. There too was the lararium, the little household altar where you could burn incense to your gods, including to the emperor when you would make your confession of Caesar as Lord. Much of the life on view we can relate to – it is touching or funny, whether it be the emotionally charged portraits or the pub scenes with their inevitable slightly lewd but humorous conversations and episodes. But there is a darker side too – the idolisation of power. Nike was a favoured god, the god of victory (he lives on today on sports clothing and equipment). But victory in the first century involved the demonstration of power in the amphitheatre (with all its violence and human and animal cruelty) and the cult of sexual potency, power and prowess. In the courtyards around the sleeping areas are extraordinarily graphic erotic scenes, some I guess harmless enough, but some celebrating sexual domination and abuse. Depictions of male genitalia were used in an apotropaic way – that is, to ward off evil spirits. Sexual and gladiatorial domination was the way of Nike – of victory over foes and evil spirits.

We know from graffiti that there were Jews living in Pompeii, but they were recent arrivals it seems, perhaps from the destruction of their own city Jerusalem nine years earlier. Their homes would not have included the household shrines or the imagery. In other parts of the empire where they had become established much earlier they would have built synagogues and they would have attracted Gentiles who saw in their religion a purer monotheistic religion and a higher moral code. These were the groups that were to be evangelised by the new Jewish sect that welcomed Gentiles as equal members, the people of the Way that were soon nicknamed Christ-ians after their founder. There is no evidence of this movement having reached Pompeii. What the Jewish community thought of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius is perhaps preserved in one piece of graffiti that says 'Sodom, Gomor'.

Sodom and Gomorrah were the biblical cities destroyed by fire and brimstone, a divine judgment upon their wickedness.

How did the new Christian movement receive the stories of destruction from the bay of Naples? They undoubtedly contributed to the prophetic and apocalyptic imagery that was going the rounds. Such events were seen as signs of the End, as a part of the cosmic drama that was moving towards its conclusion. But they weren't the End – in the little apocalypses of the gospels and in the book of Revelation the encouragement to those early Christians was not to see these as the final judgment, not to be overly alarmed, but to keep their eyes fixed on a greater reality and a unshakeable hope.

And that brings us to our epistle from the letter to the Hebrews. We do not know who wrote it or when it was written, although it may well have been after these events (and also, for Jewish readers, the more cataclysmic events around the destruction of Jerusalem in AD70). The greetings at the end of the letter, however, suggest that it was written to Christians in Italy, perhaps in Rome. If so, they would have known all too well the story of Pompeii as well as the warnings that led up to the great destruction, a serious earthquake in AD62 that destroyed many buildings in the city and many smaller rumblings that occurred in the following years. Pompeii has been severely shaken before it was finally destroyed.

Some of the ancient biblical language about Mount Sinai reads like a combination of an earthquake and volcanic eruption. The writer to the Hebrews speaks in that tradition of the blazing fire, the darkness, the gloom, the tempest. 'Indeed so terrifying was the sight that Moses said "I tremble with fear".' At that time, he writes, God's voice shook the earth and it seemed to our early Christian forebears that this time both the earth and the heavens were being shaken. Our writer sees this shaking as a removal of all that is passing away to reveal what is unshakeable, what cannot be shaken. If the earthly Jerusalem and its temple have gone, so be it. Our faith is not dependent on that. We come to worship in a heavenly Jerusalem where there are innumerable angels in festal gathering – more of that is a few weeks' time, 'to the assembly of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

And those first Christians in the Roman empire grew in number, despite periodic persecution, some of it very bloody. They had no special buildings for the next two hundred or more years. They congregated in Roman households which they entered through the waters of baptism and where their household shrine or altar was a table where they offered and remembered the sprinkled blood, where their earliest creed was 'Jesus is Lord' (in direct opposition to the imperial cult of Caesar), where they rejected Nike, the god of victory and replaced both the images of the sword and the phallus with a different sign of victory, the sign of the cross. They put their faith not in Roman imperialism, but in a crucified and seemingly defeated messiah, they celebrated a love that was not primarily erotic but was about giving without counting the cost – they even used a different word for it, agape or in Latin, caritas, Charity – and they put their hope not in the shakeable things of this world but in what is left when everything else is shaken away, the kingdom of God.