

Come Holy Spirit ...

... fill the hearts of your people and kindle in us the fire of your love

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service on 18th August 2019 by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, in Beverley Minster.

Luke 12:49-56

Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people and kindle in us the fire of your life.

Amen.

Well on Friday I took a wedding, rather a damp one unfortunately, but the groom was a fireman and all his crew were there in uniform to provide a guard of honour at the end. So the bride and groom went out under an arc of firemen's axes and it was all very reassuring being surrounded by firemen, except that the couple had chosen as their bible reading a passage from The Song of Solomon: "Many waters cannot quench love, neither can floods drown it." It seems there are some kinds of fire you can't put out and some kinds of flame no fire brigade can help you with. And maybe that's the kind of fire Jesus is talking about in the Gospel reading when he says, "I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled."

I wonder, what do you think he was talking about?

Some kinds of fire are just plain destructive, aren't they? I think of the forest fires reported in the news from around the world this year in Canada and France and India; fires that have been truly terrifying because they seem to eat up everything in their path. But fire can also be used more constructively: think of its use in industry to purify and refine, and to make something new. So in the steel industry they use blast furnaces to produce temperatures of over 2000 degrees centigrade in order to burn away the impurities in the iron ore. And in an oil refinery they use fire in a very controlled way to refine the crude oil and make oil and petrol and plastic. So fire can burn things in order to be creative. And at home you might use fire to generate heat, to stay warm in winter or to cook food on a stove or in an oven. And a fireplace in the living room can be a

homely thing, providing a welcoming atmosphere and drawing people together. And of course we use candles in worship, because a single naked flame can be a powerful symbol of light and can also provide a gentle and restful focus for prayer and meditation.

So fire also has this symbolic value - it can be a sign of something else. I began this talk by praying, "Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your people and kindle in us the fire of your love." So there we're thinking not of a literal fire, but fire as a picture of God's love: warming; creating energy; giving life; comforting but also cleansing and healing and burning away whatever isn't needed in our lives. And in the Bible, fire is often a sign of God's presence: think of Moses at the burning bush encountering God there; or the Lord leading the people of Israel through the wilderness by a pillar of fire; or the day of Pentecost when flames danced over the heads of the apostles as a sign of the presence of the spirit.

So when Jesus says, "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled", I wonder whether you hear that as a good thing or a bad thing; something to look forward to, or something that makes you want to run away; is it a promise, or a warning? Maybe it could be all of those things. It's possible that the fire Jesus is talking about is indeed the fire of God's presence, the fire of the coming judgment which will burn off some things: the things which are spoiling God's good creation and which are spoiling people's lives; a fire that will purify and refine the world; as well as being a comforting life-giving fire that fills us with experience of God's love and the knowledge of his presence in our lives and gives us the desire to see his kingdom come and to work for justice and mercy and peace.

But fire is always dangerous. Jesus speaks here of being under stress until he has gone through a baptism, not a baptism with water, but a baptism of fire, by which he means his death on the cross where the sins of the world will be consumed and burnt away. In the old testament fire was often used as a way of offering sacrifice: burnt offerings of grain or meat expressed a desire to offer everything to God, to be consumed without holding anything back. And Jesus does that on our behalf on the cross, offering himself

as a perfect sacrifice so that all the world can be forgiven and purified and made holy and be made a temple fit for God's presence.

And I don't know about you but I find that quite challenging, because if Jesus's baptism of fire is going to mean anything for you and for me, we have to be willing to go through our version of it: as Jesus offered himself in love, so that the sin of the world could be 'burnt-off', as it were, on the cross, so you and I are invited to offer up our lives to be given over to God's love - and that means not living for ourselves but following Jesus himself. And that's why Jesus says he hasn't come to bring peace but division, because not everyone wants to enter the 'fire' of God's love.

It is a bit daunting: it will change us; it will overwhelm us and take control of our lives. And it does require courage to embrace the love of God, not least because it may place a strain on relations within our own families, and certainly *[place a strain on relations]* with the world around us with its very different outlook and values. Jesus said, "I came to bring fire to the earth and how I wish it were already kindled." Jesus is going to walk into the 'furnace' of the Father's love and he invites you and me to go with him, cost us what it may. Because in the end we have no choice, if we are to be true to ourselves and also to our Creator and redeemer, the God of love. As the poet William Blake put it in his poem Pentecost:

Unless the eye catch fire, the God will not be seen.

Unless the air catch fire, the God will not be heard.

Unless the tongue catch fire, the God will not be named.

Unless the heart catch fire, the God will not be loved.

Unless the mind catch fire, the God will not be known.

So come holy spirit, fill the hearts of your people and kindle in us the fire of your love.
Amen.

Reading Texts

Luke 12:49-56

⁴⁹ "I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! ⁵⁰ I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! ⁵¹ Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! ⁵² From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; ⁵³ they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law." ⁵⁴ He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you immediately say, 'It is going to rain'; and so it happens. ⁵⁵ And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens. ⁵⁶ You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"