

All consuming fire

Hebrews 12. 18-end.

Preached at Littlemore Parish Church Sunday 26th August 2007

There must be few words more powerful, more able to instil panic in a crowd than a cry of “FIRE”. Listening to the news about the blaze last weekend at the Penhallows Hotel in Newquay, I was horror-struck at the ferocity and speed with which it engulfed the building. It took more than 100 fire-fighters to contain it, and the rescue and recovery efforts were delayed because the four-storey building completely collapsed. It was truly an all-consuming fire. While one man died attempting to escape, two others are believed to have been lost in the flames, but so far only suspected remains have been discovered in the debris. Fire is terrifying.

As a parent, I know one of the first lessons we teach our children is to respect and even fear fire. “Don’t touch – hot, hot”. But flames are so beautiful, so mesmerising: they draw your eyes deep into their centre. I can’t think how many winter evenings I have sat gazing into a roaring open fire, hypnotized by its fascinating dancing flames. Indeed, our candles here in church do more than provide a little heat and light, they enhance our liturgy and symbolise Christ, the Light of the World.

Some people would say humans’ ability to tame and use fire is, along with language, what distinguishes us from all other animals, perhaps what makes us ‘in the image of God’.. Not only have we used fire since time immemorial for cooking and heating, but also for creativity and destruction: the birth of smelting metal defines the end of the Stone Age, and the arrival of the Bronze Age, followed by the Iron Age. The production of almost all of our tools and weapons requires fire.

In this morning’s New Testament lesson from *Hebrews*, God is described twice in terms of fire: firstly a ‘blazing fire’ – a reference to the terrifying revelation of God descending on Mount Sinai when the Ten Commandments were delivered to Moses – and then at the end as a ‘consuming fire’ – a description used in Deuteronomy chapter 4 . ‘The Lord has taken you and brought you out of the iron-smelter, out of Egypt, to become a people for his very own possession... Be careful not to forget the covenant that the Lord your God made with you, and not to make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything that the Lord your God has forbidden you. For the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God.’

For the ancients, God inspired fear... we still sometimes speak of ‘God-fearing men’ when describing certain sorts of people. The Israelites were full of fear when Moses was on Mount Sinai. The writer of Deuteronomy reinforces the authority of God’s Covenant and Law by recounting the utter destruction that disobedience will bring. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews was writing to

a group of Christians who were brought up in this tradition, for whom God continued to be a consuming fire, to be worshipped with awe and reverence.

It is an age-old accusation against religion that believers are merely blackmailed into faith for fear of the consequences if they don't: the curse of hell-fire and damnation. But how different is the true Gospel of Christ, a message of love and reconciliation that is available to all. This is the Gospel that the writer of *Hebrews* is proclaiming. He is contrasting the experiences of drawing near to God under the Old and New Covenants: under the Old Covenant the Israelites trembled in fear at the foot of a shaking, smoking Mount Sinai, literally unable to approach the presence of God. Under the New Covenant, Christians come to the unseen heavenly realities and set foot on the true Mountain of God, Mount Zion and the Heavenly Jerusalem, the Kingdom. Jesus is proclaimed as the mediator of this New Covenant.

Again, Jewish tradition is recalled in referring to the blood sprinkled for the remission of sins which counteracts the blood of Abel, spilt by Cain, which cries out for vengeance. The promises of the New Covenant found in Jesus are what are being offered to the Hebrews and to us. It is in Christ we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken. We are able to stand in God's presence.

Later in the service, Rachel will sing an aria from Handel's *Messiah*. The words from the Old Testament book of Malachi are: "But who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appeareth? For he is like a refiner's fire"

The answer is simple: all Mankind is saved by the Messiah. As a refiner's fire, God has purified us in Christ, and is able to re-shape and transform our lives, and the world.

In his poem *The Priesthood* George Herbert reflects on his vocation, and in that spirit of reverence and awe spoken of in today's lesson, he humbly addresses God:

"But thou art fire, sacred and hallow'd fire; And I but earth and clay."

In this Holy Eucharist let us thank God for his blessings, and worship him with reverence and awe. We may be but earth and clay, but through Christ we can be modeled and re-formed and fired to be holy vessels to be filled with his Holy Spirit.

As we look up in church today, we can see the beautiful mobile created for Pentecost, reminding us that the Holy Spirit descended as tongues of fire upon the Apostles, empowering his Church and continuing to inspire us today. Let us kindle this sacred and holy fire in ourselves and share it with one another and take it out into the world. Amen.