

Ninth Sunday after Trinity – 14th August 2022
'I have come to bring fire on the earth'

I think we have all have seen newspaper and online pictures of Britain from the air showing a parched brown land and seen or read about firemen fighting fires in Leytonstone and Yorkshire, all over Europe and even in Siberia.

And yet I remember that forty or so years ago every summer the wheat stubble was set on fire to burn off old straw and any lurking disease, and when we arrived on Exmoor in the Augusts of the '60s & '70s for our annual holiday, the gnarled black remnants of burnt gorse branches were a reminder that the thick prickly gorse had been purposely burnt to allow the soft shoots of young heather to grow unhindered by gorse. In those days the great British summer was overcast and wet, and wildfires were seldom a problem.

But today we are all aware of Government advice not to use disposable BBQs and to take care in our tinder dry land to avoid fires and so it is incongruous to hear Jesus say, 'I come to bring fire on the earth and how I wish it were already kindled.' I think the incongruity is intentional. In the dry climate of the first century Holy Land every summer was as dry as this. The risk of fire was real and without easy access to water fire could be uncontrollable. Jesus says he longs for his baptism – but does he mean by that his own death? And is his longing mingled with dread? Is it a longing that it should soon be over, or is it intentionally ambiguous – the fire that is to be kindled might also be the fire of the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of Jesus, which is let free a Pentecost?

The Gospels of Matthew, John and Luke all record John the Baptist's prophecy: 'One is coming who will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.' And throughout the Old Testament, fire is a sign of the presence of God. That symbolism continues right up to the day of Pentecost with the descent of the Holy Spirit as tongues of flame.

Just as fire can be for us both servant and enemy, so the Holy Spirit is greatly to be desired and greatly to be feared. 'Make me continent and chaste Lord – but not yet,' as Augustine of Hippo famously prayed. The Holy Spirit can bring desire, fear and division. Some of us were talking a week ago with a refugee from Tigre in Northern Ethiopia. He told a simple, terrible story of his experience of genocide a few months ago. He is a Christian who saw Christian family and friends tortured and killed until his mother was convinced, with good reason, that he would be killed if he stayed in his own country. We heard of his chaotic, unplanned journey across Europe until he arrived in England. He is a baptised Christian and already that has separated him from his mother, his family and his country.

Jesus well knew the power of the Holy Spirit to bring division. Like fire it is powerful and dangerous. By the time Luke's Gospel was written Jewish families had been expelled from Jerusalem, the city had been destroyed and there was division between Jews who had become Christians and those who remained faithful to Old Testament belief. The times seemed to be fulfilling Jesus' prophecy.

But Luke also records that Jesus spoke of our inability to interpret signs. We can forecast the weather, but we can't see and follow the signs of the kingdom of God.

We presume to insure our property and buy return tickets trusting in the stability of the future but we don't invest in our spiritual future – by repenting, letting go of the sin that 'clings to us so closely' and by giving away our possessions to the poor.

I wonder what he would say to the current contenders for leadership of the Conservative party, or to any of our political leaders. I think it would be along the lines of, 'You hypocrites, you play actors! You think you are clever enough to apply your knowledge and experience of the economy to forecast the results of tax cuts and rebates. Why don't you use your knowledge and experience of the Holy Spirit to order your behaviour and inform your plans for governing in ways of justice, mercy and peace?'

And if that resonates with us, shouldn't we be making the same comment about our own lives? We plan for our future and worry about drought and famine and war – but actually we can't stop the grass browning of the wildfires spreading. The only thing we have control over is our own behaviour.

God requires us to live justly, love mercy and walk humbly with our God. When are we going to start to do that? If not now, when?