

The Incendiary Fellowship

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on 13th Sunday after Pentecost, August 17, 1986. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 20:7-13, Psalm 10:12-18; Hebrews 12:1-2, 12-17; Luke 12:49-56.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

"I came to cast fire upon the earth," Jesus said. He didn't come merely to show us a good example. He didn't come merely as a teacher and a healer. Nor did he come to throw cold water upon the earth. He came to set the world on fire and to change the face of human history. At the beginning of his ministry John the Baptist said that *Jesus would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire*. On the first Easter morning the two disciples walking to Emmaus spoke of *how their hearts burned within them* as the Risen Christ explained the Scriptures to them. ~~On the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended upon the disciples like tongues of fire.~~

Fire's a fitting symbol of the Holy Spirit. Fire warms us. It gives light. We cook with it. It provides energy and power. Fire destroys combustible material but refines metal by burning off the impurities. Human civilization couldn't possibly exist without fire. Neither can the Christian church exist without the fire of the Holy Spirit.

There've been basically two great revolutions in the history of humankind. The first revolution took place, anthropologists say, about 25,000 years ago, during the fourth great ice age, when our human ancestors first tamed fire. This revolution forever divided humankind, like a sword, from the rest of the animal kingdom. Perhaps one of our early ancestors snatched up a burning branch from a forest fire. All the other animals ran in terror, but our human ancestors were fascinated by this frightening phenomenon. They stopped and stared

in curiosity. They drew close to examine it and then discovered how to use it. And so fire was brought to humankind. As the weather hardened and the glaciers descended our human ancestors squatted in the open around the fire. They used fire as a weapon. They frightened wild animals with it. At night they built it up and all gathered closely round the fire for warmth and protection and there they told stories of God and their ancestors remember^{ed + passed on} from one generation to another. With the light of torches our ancestors painted, on the walls of caves, works of art that are still exquisitely beautiful. Later, as the glaciers subsided, our ancestors discovered the secret of smelting and we left the stone age and entered the age of Bronze and Iron. Then our ancestors began to fire bricks and build houses. And so civilization was born. And without fire it wouldn't have happened.

The second great revolution in human civilization came with Jesus of Nazareth. He came to cast fire on the earth; to ignite us with his fire, to rouse us, to deliver us from complacency and a placid peace, to disturb us and to send us into the world with the sword of the Spirit which is the Word of God. He came to fire a revolution that would be even more influential than that first revolution at the dawn of human history. In the first revolution our ancestors gained a foot hold on civilization. In the second revolution Jesus came to cast a revolutionary fire on the earth that would eventually destroy the kingdoms of this world and purify his children like a refiners fire.

But where's the fire today? Where's the promised revolution? We can see signs of that revolutionary fire in the past. The Christian faith, against all odds, spread like wild-fire throughout the Roman Empire, disrupting government and ancient customs, inciting riots and turning the

world upside down, threatening vested economic, political and religious interests. From Jerusalem, where the fire originally fell, it spread to Europe, Asia, Africa and finally to the new world. Martyrs died in the fire. When the English Reformers, Hugh Latimer and Bishop Nicholas Ridley, walked to the flames on October 16th, 1555 Latimer turned to his friend and said, "Be of good comfort Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God's Grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out." In the 19th and 20th centuries the flames have spread around the world. The light of those flames shines in the darkness and the darkness has never been able to put it out.

In fact, the fire rages in some parts of the world, destroying the impure and refining the precious. People feared for Christianity in China after the revolution in the forties. They were afraid the fire would go out under persecution and the intense indoctrination of Chairman Mao. But when China opened the door a bit and let Westerners in we've discovered that the church has been refined and that the fire burns brighter than ever. The church in the Soviet Union is still aglow after nearly 70 years of materialistic atheism. I visited Guatemala in 1984 and saw the fire raging there. I saw Presbyterians working side by side with Roman Catholics to spread the fire of justice and salvation to the downtrodden Indians.

But is the fire raging among us? Is the fire in our hearts? Is there the fire of indignation when we see injustice? Is there the fire of love for Christ that draws us to worship and praise him with his people? "If I say, 'I will not mention God, or speak any more in God's name,' (wrote Jeremiah) there's in my heart as it were a burning fire shut up in my bones." Could we say that? Is there the fire of commitment that touches

our lips and minds and pocket-books as well as our emotions? Has the fire gone out? Was it ever there?

How can we get the fire burning? At the dawn of human civilization fires had to be constantly guarded and tended. Once out they were hard to relight. Fuel for the fire would be searched for continually. And the fire of God that Jesus cast upon the earth must also be guarded and tended or it will go out.

So many things threaten to smother fire. For one thing, fires die out for lack of fuel. No fire can burn without fuel, not even the fire that Jesus cast upon the earth. But that's what happens to so many of us. We burn out. We work hard for the Lord, we put our hearts and souls into it. We worry about God's kingdom as it finds visible expression in the church and, if we're not careful, we deplete our spiritual resources and quench the flame of faith.

I've never met a person who's given up on the Christian faith overnight. I've never come across someone who's said, "I woke up one morning and decided I no longer believed in God, the Bible, the Church, or the hoped for Kingdom of God." I *have* met people who've dropped out of a once-vital faith after months or years of exhausting work in the church. I've met people who've slowly oozed out of a right relationship with God. Through neglect and inattention they've stopped tending the fire, they haven't fueled the fire, and the flame in the soul has gone out. Bible study and prayer, private and public worship, Holy Communion... these and more slip from view. In time the fire dies. It doesn't have any fuel.

If that's true of you I hope you'll face the problem. Christian friends can be so much help in renewing the fire of faith in our hearts. If you drag a blazing log off a bonfire it'll burn for awhile but soon die down and burn

out. But if you put that charred log back on the fire it'll blaze again. When we stay away from Christian friends, from worship, from Holy Communion, from opportunities to pray and study and work together for Christ the fire burns low and even goes out. Don't let the fire burn low! Don't let it go out! It's so much easier to keep it going than to relight it.

Fire not only burns out for lack of fuel, we can intentionally put it out. Water puts out fires. I hope that none of you ever settles for a watered down Christianity. In a recent book, David H.C. Read, pastor of the prestigious Madison Avenue Presbyterian church, lists a surprising number of intellectuals over the last fifty years who've shocked their contemporaries by embracing the Christian faith.^A A remarkable thing about these conversions is that in nearly every instance the faith accepted wasn't a watered-down version but the historic Christian faith.

I hope none of you settle for a kind of watered down, cultural, nominal Christianity that's safely confined to the private side of your life; that costs nothing and risks nothing. When deeply held Christian convictions are bartered away, the flame of devotion to Christ is dampened.^A When Christian values are sullied in trade-offs for popularity, power or security, it's like pouring water on the flame of faith. So many of us have forgotten how to say, "No!" to questionable things which, like water, quench the fire of the Spirit.

Jesus came to cast fire on the earth: fire, the symbol of purity, the symbol of power; fire for cleansing, for energy; fire, illuminating, energizing; clarifying the vision, making the pulses of our souls beat, and making eternity a reality. Keep the fire burning! Keep the revolution going! Whatever the pressures and whatever the cost, keep the fire burning! What would this world be without fire? What would the church

Pastoral
Solo members
C.S. Lewis
Malesherbes
idea of
T.S. Eliot

when we remain silent when we should speak.

be without the fire of the Spirit burning brightly in each one of us.

There's a saying of Jesus that's not found in our canonical gospels. It's found in the apocryphal Gospel According to St. Thomas. "He that is near me, said Jesus, is near the fire, and he that is far from me is far from the Kingdom." Here's the secret of keeping the fire burning. Nearness to the living Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit; nearness to him day by day and not only on Sundays, nearness to him in prayer and sacrament and everyday Christian service. This is what keeps the fire burning.

"I am come to send fire on the earth," said Jesus. Even so, come Lord Jesus, through the Holy Spirit, come to each one of us, and set our hearts aflame! Amen.

Let us prayer:

Thou, whose purpose is to kindle:
Now ignite us with Thy fire;
While the earth awaits Thy burning
With Thy passion us inspire.
Overcome our sinful calmness,
Rouse us with redemptive shame;
Baptize with Thy fiery Spirit,
Crown our lives with tongues of flame.