

## **GOSPEL SEEDS**

**May, 2005**

*Biblical reflections to encourage us in the work of evangelisation*

### **THE HOLY SPIRIT, FIRE OF GOD'S LOVE**

*Jesus said, "I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were blazing already. There is a baptism I must still receive, and what constraint I am under until it is completed! (Luke 12:49 –50)*

*When Pentecost day came round, they had all met together ... and there appeared to them tongues as of fire which separated and came to settle on the heads of each of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak different languages as the Spirit gave them power to express themselves. (Acts 2:1,3,4)*

In many Pentecost images, floating flames of fire can seem a soft image, providing a glow to keep us warm. They may remind us of the similar use of tongues of fire in adverts for gas central heating – and their association with a homely, cosy, friendly atmosphere. Gas heating is designed to be easily controllable and serve us. God can be gentle but is this how we should principally understand the Biblical sense of fire? Jesus' use of the image in this passage of Luke suggests a very different sense and priority. Here it expresses his passion and zeal, is associated with his death, and is set in a wider passage about the persecutions and trials that will accompany the disciples as they announce the gospel too. Hardly thoughts to relax with while sitting beside a nice warm fire! Pentecost – with its strong sense of God's visitation and presence, fulfils this great desire of Jesus, setting this fire ablaze! Let us explore this further.

*Fire as an expression of God's presence, holiness, action and love.*

In the Old Testament, fire expresses particularly the holiness of God. It attracts but is also to be feared. Moses recognises God in a bush that burns yet is not consumed; he is on holy ground and removes his sandals (Exodus 3:1-6). God spoke and gave the Law out of the midst of a fire on Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:18). This is the Revelation of the living God who offers life yet demands holiness and purity. God's holiness is not inert, but living, and is part of the nature and mystery of God; we cannot remain neutral to it or its calls upon us personally and socially. The response cannot be reduced to a moral code (and less still to moral legalism) yet a clear moral response is part of how we respond by God's grace to his holy presence. In fact, humans need grace – the help of God's Holy Spirit- to act in a holy way. Living morally is part of conversion and a relationship with the living God. It is part of loving God who first loved us; without it we cannot stay or grow in an intimate relationship with God. God makes it possible. Fire not only describes God's holiness but his action to make us holy – and remove sin. Sin is purged and removed in fire. God is a consuming fire (Deuteronomy 4:24): this image conveys consistent and strong opposition to sin. As such, it expresses his jealous love – he wants us to be pure, living entirely for him. God is restless for this to happen ... . Jesus only echoes what is already on God's heart when he expresses his desire to see the earth ablaze!

*God's Spirit of Fire Removes Sin and Brings about Conversion*

John the Baptist, who was very conscious of God's holiness and the need for repentance, referring to Jesus, said: "He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire (Matthew 3:11). He knew that fire was used by God to remove sin (Matthew 3:10). He knew what Jesus would do – would go to the roots of the problem of our sin. Certainly he expected Jesus

to be judge over sin (Matthew 3:12) but he also recognised Jesus as “the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). Drawing on the role in Jewish religion of lambs as animals sacrificed for the removal of sins – and sometimes consumed by fire – he anticipates Jesus’ sacrifice and death. John the Baptist links all this removal of sin with the Holy Spirit too; both by explicit reference and by associating these statements with Jesus’ baptism when John saw the Holy Spirit descend on Jesus. These ideas are taken up by Jesus himself later. He states that the Holy Spirit will show the world how wrong it was about sin and judgement (John 16:7-10). However, the Spirit can only come if Jesus returns to the Father – by way of his death, resurrection and ascension. Jesus seems to have already taken this idea up when he links the gift of fire with the baptism he is still to undergo – his death (Luke 12:50). Fire often fell from Heaven in the Old Testament to consume and complete the sacrifice. This fire can be understood as the Holy Spirit. The writer to the Hebrews strengthens the link between Jesus’ death, the removal of sin and the work of the Holy Spirit when he describes Christ offering himself through the eternal Spirit so that we can be purified from dead actions and worship the living God (Hebrews 9:14). This is, of course, an expression not just of God’s opposition to sin, but his great love, expressed in this sacrifice and offer of mercy.

All this is in fact part of the Pentecost event. Filled with the Holy Spirit that comes as fire, Peter preached a sermon on the gift of the Holy Spirit, linked clearly to the death and resurrection of Jesus. He unambiguously names sin and calls for repentance of sin. People who repent and are baptised will receive this same Holy Spirit who has already convicted them of the truth of what Peter has preached. The Spirit, while convicting us of sin, offers us mercy and salvation. Three thousand were saved that day (Acts 2:14-41). The fire Jesus wanted was truly set ablaze! The fire continues to blaze! This role in bringing people to conversion is essential to the work of the Holy Spirit, the fire of God. Are we open to this?

#### *The Spirit’s Fire - Being consumed and taken over by God’s love*

The Spirit does not wish our total destruction but only the destruction of sin in us. The apostles were touched by fire but not damaged. He wants our purification and holiness, desiring that our hearts be set on fire with love of God, and that this will never go out, but increasingly consume us and lead us to be sacrifices offered to God in adoration and service. As flames rise to Heaven, the Spirit raises up prayers from our hearts to God. This fire draws us ever on. Pentecost celebrated the giving of the Law, but now the Spirit writes the Law within us, burning it onto our hearts. He caused the hearts of the disciples on the road to Emmaus to burn within them as Jesus explained the Scriptures (Luke 24:32). The flames of this love can become unquenchable, as strong as death (Cant 8:6).

#### *Setting the world on fire - apostolic zeal for spreading the Gospel*

The flames of the Holy Spirit are not just for ourselves. Fire prepared Isaiah for his mission (Isaiah 6:6). The word of God was for Jeremiah like a fire within him that he could not constrain. He had to preach, whatever the cost! (Jeremiah 20:9) There is a cost and a persecution that comes with being set on fire with, by and for God. The world resists it since it knows this fire will destroy its false values and independence. Jesus’ saying about setting fire ablaze is set close to passages about the role of the disciples to speak out, trust and be vigilant and the troubles that will beset them. God’s fire within is much stronger and provides protection from any fire that the world lights without! As a pillar of fire (eg Exodus 13:31) God protected and will still protect his people. God’s Spirit gives us an apostolic zeal and courage – “fire in our bellies” - that overcomes all this and leads us, like the apostles after Pentecost, to help set the world alight the fire of God’s love.

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