

All Saints Talk for Sunday 28 May 2023

Tony Haines - 'Holy Fire, daily provision'

The 5th in our new series 'Journey to the Promised Land'

Readings: *Numbers 11:1-23, Act 2:1-21* : Fire, Manna and Pentecost.

This morning is about fire. I have made a few mistakes in my life, as my wife will confirm. But one of the many mistakes that I made was when I was doing a little bit of a scientific experiment, as a probably an eight or nine year old, with a magnifying glass on a sunny day, in the field just below our house on the outskirts of Birmingham. That led to quite a nasty, and very frightening fire, which my brother and I, and when the two of my friends did our best to try and stamp out. And it took a lot of time, we ran up to the house and got buckets of water and stomped it and it was really very frightening. And that's something which we need to bear in mind when we look at the story that we read, or had read to us from the Book of Numbers. And the Book of Numbers is also in the Jewish Bible called 'In the wilderness'.

Now Claire spoke last week, those of you who are younger and with better minds than me will remember what she spoke about. But she talked about, this is to jog your memories, that God was with people in the wilderness and he proved his evidence of his presence with them by the cloud that went by day and the fire at night. And when they got into the promised land, there was no need for that. Well, there was no need for that because God's presence was most powerfully with them during the wilderness. And it's no good looking back on what might have happened. Looking back to the nice aspects of being slaves in Egypt, where they had cucumbers, and leeks and fish and garlic, and melons. They grumbled and complained, because they were no longer in the place where they have that kind of food.

And that kind of grumbling was something which was going to be contagious and spread as we know it can do. And the Bible says that God's anger was aroused. I have problems with that. And I think probably most of us would. God's anger came. There was fire around the camp as a kind of "you people!". It was a place called Taberah which means a place of burning. The problem we have is that God reminds us so many times in the Old Testament and in the New that he is slow to anger, compassionate and gracious, abounding in love and faithfulness, forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. But this fire was a kind of warning I think. He was terrifying like bushfires can be. I don't know if you've been anywhere near a bush fire or a moorland fire. I don't think anybody here was in Grenfell tower when that awful

thing happened a few years ago, or near Notre-Dame when it suddenly went up in flames.

Warnings though, are important. I had a warning from the police a week or two ago. I was very surprised driving happily along the motorway up to Northumberland in the end. But in Gloucestershire, we were caught by somebody coming in front of us and unmarked car saying get into the inside lane, and didn't know who they were I overtook the car and they ever took me and then made it clear that they were not going to be messed around with so they pulled me into the side and we had a long chat at Gloucester services, and then I was given this. And the thing is it says on this occasion, you have received a warning for the offense shown above which is lack of concentration. How rude I've been driving for almost 60 years. But it goes on to say that in 2019 there were in Gloucestershire 1128 casualties, 297 people who were seriously injured and 20 fatalities in one year in Gloucestershire and then it ends up by saying, make sure that you are not one of those statistics. It was a warning and on the way back, I very very carefully kept in the inside lane, as long as I could. I mean, I was humbled by that and I was a bit shaken and a bit cross. But it was an important message that actually we do need warning sometimes.

Actually the fire around that camp in the wilderness, and it couldn't have been a desert. If it was a sandy desert, there wouldn't have been fire it would have been scrub land. The fire was evidence of God's care and provision for those people. It was a continuing message that "I've led you this far, I've shown you my provision and my protection all the way that you've come, go on trusting me". And it's then of course, that Moses appeals to God "Why did you call me to this?" There were a few little titters around the congregation this morning. Oh, why have you called me to this? How do you expect me to lead such a thankless rebellious group of people I've just about had it, I want to pack up. And then the Lord tells Moses to appoint 70 leaders to support him in his work, share the burdens, because you can't do it all on your own. It's a very good example of delegation. And then it says that the 70 stood around the tent, and the spirit that was on Moses came on all the 70. And they too, started to prophesy, they had some kind of leadership power that God had given to Moses, because the Spirit of God at work then, was at work.

Which brings us nicely to another occasion when fire came. And John read about the story of Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, which is now almost 2000 years old. Now, Peter is going to put up a timeline if that's alright, just a reminder of where Pentecost comes and why it's Pentecost. You can see that 50 days ago today, there was a time in the Jewish calendar of Passover, on the far left, Jesus was crucified at the time of the Passover. Three days later, he rose from the dead. And then he

appeared to many, many people over that next few weeks. And a week ago, Thursday, we remember the time when Jesus was no longer with them. Whatever the ascension means, it means really effectively that Jesus was no longer seen by any of his disciples, and went to heaven. And then 10 days later, a total of 50 days, Pentecost. 50 days-ish, I think I counted it made it 49. But the Holy Spirit comes down.

But Pentecost was a Jewish festival. People had come from all of these places that you'll see around, you can see that they came from as far away as Rome and what we would now call Libya, and Egypt, and Arabia. And all of those places that are north in what we would now call Turkey, and far out to sea to the Far East, that people had come from because of the Jewish people who had been just spread throughout the whole part of the Mediterranean and beyond. And they all came back for that festival. And it was a festival celebrating the Jewish harvest. They have their harvest, not in August and September, like we did. It was a harvest at this time of year in May-ish. And so that's why they were all there, from all the way around the place. Visitors from all the places that news of Jesus spreads in.

And on this occasion, the followers of Jesus were in Jerusalem. They had been told to stay there until the Holy Spirit would come. I'm going away, said Jesus, but the Father will send another comforter to you, the advocate. And they were in the city where there are hundreds of people speaking different languages. It's as though we were all to be on a Pentecost day now, go into the centre of Bath and hear people ourselves speaking Mandarin or Swahili or Farsi, or Hungarian. It's that because there are so many people from around the world as they do come to Bath.

And Luke, it's interesting, Luke records everything in his Gospel and in the book of the Acts. Luke wasn't there but he's recording what people said was their experience that day. It's a very interesting point really. He'd been told that there was something like a wind came into that place, and something like fire, arrived on people and spread amongst them and rested on them all. So although sometimes, as we said in the first bit fire like I discovered with my magnifying glass can be very destructive and dangerous, it can also bring light and warmth, and also can refine, of course and those people became on fire for Jesus.

The early chapters of Acts, are full of remarkable events, that God works through them by the Holy Spirit. People were healed, people were given huge power to preach, I mean, that day 3000 People became Christians. There were amazing escapes, there was also martyrdom. Just as important was the sharing of their lives and the change of their hearts to give them generosity and care for one another, in a

different kind of way. The Holy Spirit was on them, to give them power, but also in them to change their hearts.

I've been in this church, I was calculating with Nigel earlier on, 33 years since we joined this church. I've never seen people with flames on their head. So I've seen my brother when he came back from a Christian conference, he walked through the door, and I immediately knew something deep had happened to him. And I said, Nick, you've changed. Just his face was aglow with something different than I think maybe it does show in our faces. But many people in this church have been touched by the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, sometimes with joy, sometimes with weeping, sometimes falling down as their prayed for. Some have received the gift of speaking in tongues, some have the gifts of prophecy. And it really should not surprise us because the same God is at work here, as was there on the day of Pentecost. It was prophesied by Old Joel back in the Old Testament days, I will pour my spirit on all people, your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your old men (me) will dream dreams (sleep well) and the young men will see visions.

On Wednesday, it was 285 years to the day that a rather down in the dumps clergyman called John Wesley, went reluctantly to a meeting in London, and he had read some words that changed his life and changed the life of, I think there are 75 million Methodists actively worshipping God in Methodist churches throughout the world. He said "my heart was strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for my salvation. And assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins". And he came out of that meeting full of joy and a changed man.

The only reason we are here today is because that Holy Spirit came at Pentecost. We may not feel that glow. Without the Holy Spirit that Jesus movement would have petered out. It would have been just a nice memory of somebody who claimed to be a Messiah. But the Holy Spirit changed the world. Every one of us could, if we had more information, traced our faith back to Pentecost. It might have been through your parents, it might have been someone who spoke to you in an honest way about how much their faith has changed them. And it made you inquire and you became a Christian, but go back and back and back a bit like apostolic succession, where bishops lay hands on clergyman, their hands have been laid on by lots of people in the past. We are recipients of the same spirit, which came on those disciples all those years ago. And the message of God has changed the world, not just as individuals.

The book that I have recently been reading because it's called 'The air we breathe' it's by somebody called Glen Scrivener. On the back it says 'today we assume that our modern values are obviously obvious and natural and universal. But history tells a

different story. Glen Scrivener takes you on a journey from Genesis to George Floyd.' Remember the black man who was killed by the police sitting on his neck. 'Charting the course of how the Christian revolution shows how it has shaped our world and continues to make sense of the values we hold dear'. And on the front, it talks about our emphasis on consent, on equality, on justice, and kindness. As a society, we believe in those things not all of us practice them. But we do believe in those things, don't we? Whereas, and it was a very Christian revolution at the time of the Romans, because in the Roman times, the emphasis was on the strong man, that you discard the weak and the disabled, women were abused, no one questioned the right to own slaves. And we've changed. And that is partly to do with the power of the Spirit in the power of the gospel, changing our society. And that's why we go on supporting mission because the world needs to know about God's love and how the world can change.

So the fire is the spirit is important. When I have a garden bonfire, there are initially powerful flames that go up and I'm a bit scared that we might burn some of our orchard trees. But later on, it becomes glowing embers. And both carry heat but flames are momentary. The embers last till the morning, sometimes longer. Personally, this is true, I don't honestly feel as though I'm on fire for Jesus in the way that I might have been in my 20s. Like many of us, I plod on, trying to be faithful in prayer, attending church, communion, reading my Bible, going to home group. And those aren't things to be discounted. We can't live on a high the whole time. But I hope that the long lasting embers are going to be alive in all of us over a long time. Occasionally, we do need to give them a prod with a poker or a bellows. I don't know if you've got any of those for your fire at home. Paul reminded Timothy to fan the flames, fan into flame the gift of God.

And elsewhere, he says go on being filled with the Holy Spirit. And that's what we're going to do today of course. We do that by going maybe on a quiet reflective walk, or going on a retreat. Some people we've heard are at Wildfires this weekend. Or praying simply with a friend just to be more alive to God to work in us or going to a home group. In that way, the fruit of the spirit grows in us. The joy, the peace, the patience, the kindness, the goodness, the faithfulness, the gentleness, the self control. Those are the qualities that change our community, change our society and ultimately can change the world.