

## **The Fire of Love**

**1 Thess 2: 1-8; Mt 22:34-46**

**Last Sunday after Trinity Chester Cathedral 10am**

I remember very clearly the time when I fell in love with God. The exhilaration tinged with anxiety, the realisation that I was no longer in control, that my life and well-being lay in other hands. It is the same, of course, with our human experiences of falling in love- the passion, the excitement, the surrender of our autonomy. Mostly that stage does not last; we cannot sustain that level of intensity, but if the relationship is real and lasting, taken seriously and worked at, the love changes and deepens and shapes our lives and has a profound creative effect in the lives of others.

Recently I was at a meeting where we were invited to meditate on a painting of the burning bush; it was suggested that we think of ourselves as the bush- on fire, and yet not consumed. It is a good image for our relationship with the living God. Being loved by God, opening ourselves to that love, is transforming; we aren't in control but are caught up in a mystery, an energy, beyond our understanding. Most of the time, maybe, we are less conscious of that than we should be. Each day we may miss a burning bush; each day we may fail to realise that we could be a burning bush to someone else- a revelation of the living, loving God. We settle for something less intense, more controllable.

Jesus is asked which is the greatest commandment, but he answers by giving two- first, loving God and then loving our neighbour. Loving God comes first. To really do that we have to open ourselves to the unknown- the God of the burning bush. The Bible

is very clear- God cannot be contained within any framework of ours; God is not comfortable or cosy. We think that we need consolation, a sense of belonging, a belief system that works for us, with clear guidelines. God knows that what we need is to be transformed by love. We meet God when we are able to let go our preconceived ideas and venture into the unknown. That is much riskier- we haven't learnt to cope well on the whole, with uncertainty, and not knowing- that profound strand of authentic Christian spirituality. We would rather wrap our arms around ourselves defensively than open them to the fire of God's love.

The route is prayer- fulfilling Jesus' first commandment; love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind. Opening ourselves to the mystery of divine being- letting God be in us. The fire of love will burn us, the parts of ourselves that need cleansing and healing; we will face the truth about ourselves and there is nothing comfortable about that. But if we dare, we will also discover that we are utterly forgiven, and loved and able to be channels of love for others. That is truly transforming. As we shall shortly sing in our offertory hymn  
Still let me guard the holy fire  
and still stir up thy gift in me

In our human relationships we do not and cannot, know the depths of any other person- however close, however much we love them. Each of us is a mystery, a unique individual person. The French writer Simone Weil said that 'the heart of a moral relationship to another human being is hesitation.' What I might call a simple courtesy, and respect for the difference of others, which flows from a heart and mind routed in God's love.

In his novel 'Human Traces' Sebastian Faulks attempts to look at the history of what it means to be mad. The central character, Thomas, devotes his life to trying to find a cure for human madness, without much tangible result. He speaks of the need for a different perspective on life- not seeking to find answers but – I quote- 'believing that we are the most fortunate species ever to have lived...in this universe or any other; and that it is our duty each day therefore to appreciate our astonishing good fortune by caring for the insane who pay the price for all of us, and by turning our healthy lives, so near as we can manage it, day by day, into an extended rapture.'

Among those of us gathered here today there will be some of us who are happy, excited by life, and some of us deeply anxious, or grieving, frightened, angry or unsure where life is leading us. That is the reality of human life, the wonder and the terror of it. Christian faith does not shirk this- it is all there in the scriptures. But too often we have longed for answers to the problem of living instead of recognising that what we need is the otherness and the fierce beauty, the passionate love of God. Once we experience that then whatever our state we *can* turn our lives into an extended rapture- responding to the burning fire of God's love, replacing fear and anger with compassion and hope. Then we will, all of us, be able to love our neighbour- whoever and wherever- as ourselves.

St Paul expresses it clearly and beautifully:

So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.

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