

Sunday 17th August 2025. Trinity 9. Benefice Holy Communion Ampleforth.

“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!”, says Jesus in today’s Gospel. Disturbing words at first sight.

There are frequently reports in our news these days of terrifying, life-changing fires that are out of control and consuming everything in their paths, as far away as Los Angelis or Canada but even very near to us at Langdale End above Scarborough.

Metaphorically we use the word fire to emphasize destruction but also renewal, or purification. It has a dual meaning.

In Scripture, fire also has this dual meaning. There is fire that is good. For example, the burning bush that appeared to Moses in the wilderness, from which the Lord called him to free His people from Egypt. The pillar of fire that led God’s people safely through the wilderness at night. The chariot of fire that led the great prophet Elijah to heaven at the end of his ministry. And at Pentecost, divided tongues as of fire appeared among the apostles, filling them with the promised Holy Spirit, and giving birth to the church. But fire in Scripture is not always positive. John the Baptist also warns people that every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

So, what kind of fire was Jesus referring to here? One thing is that all fire has in common, and that is that it changes things, whether it is lighting up a room, or burning down a building, fire changes things around it. Jesus too came to earth to change things. But the fire He speaks of is not one of destruction, but of transformation: the fire of

the Holy Spirit. It is a fire that burns not forests or buildings, but rather the pride, selfishness, and sin within us, clearing the way for new life to grow.

When Jesus was teaching, the first thing he said was, “Repent and believe in the good news.”, which quite literally means to change direction. Jesus came not just to die for the world, but to change the world. That is still his mission, and the mission of the church and us ; as we are here to be changed, and to change the world and that is not always going to be easy. Jesus says: “I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed!” He knows that the change he has come to bring will be resisted, and that ultimately it will cost him his life.

Jesus goes on in this passage to then say something staggering, “*Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!*” Jesus clearly came to bring peace to the earth, so what does he mean when he says that he has come not to bring peace, but division, and that even families will be divided by him? Maybe he is referring to a kind of false peace, that can dampen the fire of the gospel, the kind of ‘peace’ that demands that we all agree with each other; that can be used to intimidate people and keep them quiet that makes any kind of change impossible. That is not peace, that is control, the false peace brought with an enemy occupation of a people, or in relationship where a passive acceptance occurs brought about by intimidation, coercion, criticism, bullying, reluctance to change, which is all about fear.

Jesus didn’t come to bring us this false peace. He knows that when up his mission and he frequently tell his disciples he will be in danger and be killed. Following him will get us into trouble, we will say things and do things that are resisted. The change that he came to begin, can be

divisive, it can even divide families. But the world is divided, is riven by divisions in every part of society. We tend to think that politics divides us, and that our faith should unite us, and both things are true, but not always. Followers of Jesus are supposed to be like Jesus, and this means that sometimes we will be called to live in such a way that people around us resist what we are trying to do.

If the mission of Jesus was simply peace, without any possibility of division, he would never have been crucified, and if you and I are going to set the world on fire with the love of God, then we too will have people resist us. We too will sometimes be called troublemakers, like the prophets of the Old Testament, or in my son's case at school, 'God botherers'. But that is what we are called to be, to bring the fire of God's love and power to strive for justice and peace throughout the earth, and to participate in bringing God's kingdom here.

Jesus longed to see the world ablaze with God's love, a love that sets hearts on fire with purpose and compassion. His own heart burned with that very fire for His Father, and He invites us to burn with it too. We often pray, "Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in them the fire of your love." Perhaps we say those words because we know the flame within us flickers low and we long for it to be rekindled. That is what we pray for today.

Thanks be to God. Amen.