

38. 14<sup>th</sup> August, 2016.

Jer. 23:23-29. Psalm 82. Heb. 11:29 – 12:2. Luke 12:49-56.

Over the years many passages from the bible have become very familiar – even to knowing them off by heart. But, you know, there is always something new to find, things that haven't registered before.

Do you, like me, have a picture of Jesus in our minds – one who loves, forgives and strengthens – one who preaches peace – one who opens his arms wide to welcome us? But in our gospel today we read of Jesus saying “I came to bring fire to the earth” plus all that implies.

Before we look at that in detail, let's take a look at that word **FIRE**.

**Fire** can have so many different effects – it can be extremely destructive in a bad sort of way, i.e. forest fires, house fires, - look at the great fire of London in 1666, but it can also be cleansing. Yes, that particular fire destroyed London, but it got rid of rats and disease (the great plague). Forest fires can allow new growth – a refreshing of the ground. Fire used to be used to disinfect instruments, (I can remember my mum lighting a match to sterilise a needle that she used to get a splinter out!) It can be very welcoming by warming us, for cooking etc. It has a refining purpose too – as in melting metals like gold, silver etc. etc.

There were different ways fire was used in the Old Testament and different reasons.

God spoke to Moses through a burning bush, sacrifice by fire was a very frequent occurrence, both to God and to other gods. The Israelites were guided by a pillar (smoke by day and fire by night) to show that God was with them.

Do you remember the story of Shadrack, Meshack and Abednego who wouldn't follow King Nebuchadnezzar's orders and fall down and worship the golden image he had made. They were put into the fiery furnace and were not burned because God was with them. “There was a fourth person in with them whom Nebuchadnezzar likened to the Son of God. - Now Nebuchadnezzar worshiped idols. So I have another question. How did he know what the Son of God looked like? Anyway - good came out of that fire because the king was changed completely.

In our Jeremiah reading God is saying “Is not my word like fire, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” God is talking to Jeremiah and looking at the difference between “false prophets” and prophets of God. The false prophets are leading the people up the garden path as it were, and probably making a lot of money from it. In a way we still have that today. There are still people who have the gift of prophesy but there are also charlatans like some mediums and fortune tellers that make a lot of money from gullible people.

Have you heard the expression “He/she is on fire”. It is when someone has great energy and the will to achieve something and goes at it hammer and tongs as they used to say. A bit like a few of us did with the church garden!

And in the New Testament:- What about the tongues “as of fire” that came to the apostles at Pentecost? The apostle's hearts were on fire with the Holy Spirit and amazing things happened.

On each of these occasions fire was used by God to achieve a purpose. Some he used to teach, some he used to give instruction and some to completely change peoples' hearts.

So let's take a look at our gospel reading. At first reading it seems actually quite frightening. But, remember, Jesus is the Word of God and we look back the Jeremiah's reading: “Is not my word like fire, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?” So here we have the Word bringing fire to the earth.

When I was researching for this sermon I came across this quote:

*“Three men died and were waiting to receive entrance through the Pearly Gates. The first man said to St. Peter, “I was a preacher of the gospel, serving faithfully for over 50 years”. Peter told him to step aside for further consideration. The second man said, “I was also a preacher of the gospel; I served my church faithfully for 40 years”. Peter told him to step aside for further consideration. The third man stepped up and said, “I was not a preacher, just a government worker with the Revenue Agency for 6 months”. Peter told him to step right in. The first minister objected, “Why does he get to go in before two ministers?” Peter said, “The truth is, in six months the Revenue Agency agent scared the devil out of more people than either of you did in a long lifetime!” Obviously no fire in their preaching!*

Jesus' harsh words to the crowds about not being able to interpret the signs of the times were a good wake-up call for those who were gathering to see the spectacle of this upstart preacher-man from Nazareth, but not quite seeing that He was the long-awaited Messiah. These words were meant to remind them of what was important. That is, to re-orientate their lives to ever be seeking what God is up to right here, right now.

In Mark 13:7&8 we read:

*And when you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed. This must take place, but the end is not yet. For nation will rise against nation and kingdom against kingdom. There will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. These are but the beginning of the birth pains.*

Looking around at the world today it would seem that that prophesy is already being fulfilled. Just how bad can it get?

But - we also read:

*<sup>32</sup> 'But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. <sup>33</sup> Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come.*

Jesus says in the gospel “*why do you not know how to interpret the present time?*”

What we need to do is to interpret God’s Word – Jesus, and just how are we do that?

At one of our Tuesday services the following part of the reading struck me. **Isaiah 7:1-9 – take heed (listen) be quiet, do not be afraid. If you do not stand firm in faith, you will not stand at all.**

It all comes back to that phrase “read, learn and inwardly digest” – to listen, to have conversations with God through prayer, in that way we get to know Him better and if we do that then we can be open to God speaking to us and working within us.

Also, in doing that, we can allow God to break us, remould us, and refine us..

So, we go back to the words of Jesus “I came to bring fire to the earth”.

Yes, that fire can divide – it can cause friction within families, communities etc.

I’m going to read a passage from Malachi that really explains what God’s fire is like:

*“Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.”*

His is a refiner's fire, and that makes all the difference. A refiner's fire does not destroy indiscriminately like a forest fire. A refiner's fire does not consume completely like the fire of an incinerator. A refiner's fire refines. It purifies. It melts down the bar of silver or gold, separates out the impurities that ruin its value, burns them up, and leaves the silver and gold intact. He is a refining fire.

There will be an end time, and we will have to answer to God. . We so need that refining fire.

It isn’t until we have been completely changed and are on fire for God that we can work effectively for him.

The thing is – we have to *want* to be like that. Those of you who were at breakfast yesterday heard Peter say “you have to want to achieve, you have to persevere, and sacrifices have to be made if we want to fully serve God.

But let’s remember – God has persevered for us, and Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice for you and for me.

We read in Ps. 119:105 *Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.*

Jesus – the Word – is also the light of the world and can shed light on his word.

So we pray: Break me, melt me, mould me, fill me, use me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me. Amen.