

Who Breathes Fire into the Equations?

a sermon preached on

The Reign of Christ

23 November 2008

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by Fr David Moore

parish priest

Lecture: Ezekiel 34:11-16,20-24; Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25:31-46

Today's gospel is obvious enough, so as to require little explanation. The standards we employ by which we judge people's status is overturned by Christ who reigns over all creation. Our assumptions about who's 'in' and who's 'out', who's 'sheep' and who's 'goats', couldn't be more wrong! Self-righteousness and self-satisfaction turn out to be among the worst of sins, possibly even a 'sin against the Holy Spirit' which cannot be forgiven.¹ So I'm going to pass over all the detail about feeding the hungry, and clothing the naked, and caring for those in need and visiting those in prison, and the surprise which both sheep and goats experience. Instead, I want to reflect today upon just one aspect of today's parable. Indeed, just one image.

This is the fourth time I have preached from this gospel parable, which the lectionary gives us on this feast day in the Year of Matthew. It has occurred to me that there is one image here which I have steadfastly avoided – the fire! It has suddenly struck me this time around that it's a bit like not talking about the elephant in the room! "Then [the Son of Man] will say to those at his left hand [that's the goats, we recall], 'You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and all his angels...'"²

There it is, the eternal fire – the very subject I have preferred to avoid. The eternal fire prepared, furthermore, for the devil and all his angels! This is exactly the kind of religious language to which I have had a very strong aversion. 'Fire talk' is the domain, I tell myself, of frothing-mouthed, narrow-minded religious fundamentalists – not tolerant and thinking persons like me! Fire talk belongs to an Ancient Near Eastern world view, I tell myself, to be taken as seriously as its three-decker, earth-centred cosmos and seven-day creation. Well, I realise I can no longer ignore the elephant in the room. There is no getting around the bald fact of the parable. The fire, the eternal fire, cannot be avoided. This means that the eternal fire must have something to do with good news, gospel!

In order to be able to take seriously the eternal-fire-as-gospel two distortions must be dealt with – the church's use of fire as a club with which to bludgeon people into church attendance and submission, on the one hand, the humanist, liberal-minded and tolerant mindset which denies the reality of fire on the other. These are both distortions.

The former is readily caricatured, the butt of many a joke, the church's appalling crime, the cause of a great deal of suffering. Fist-shaking preachers with floppy Bible in hand and sulphurous, moralistic and judgementalist smoke rolling off the tongue are the real destroyers of the mission of the church. The attempt to harness or control the fire for self-centred purposes, including the purposes of church and state expansion, inevitably leads to horrendous violence and destruction – Western history has not recovered from the crusades, the witch hunts, the Inquisitions, the colonial missionary invasions, the Holocaust. Decent-minded humanists are

¹ Luke 12:10

² Matthew 25:41

absolutely right in their critique of the church insofar as it continues to harbour and tolerate this kind of religious distortion in its midst.

But the paradox is that the position taken by decent-minded humanists is actually just as destructive – though of course in our post-enlightenment, post-modern, technological and democratic world we are blind to its effect, I suspect. The denial of the eternal fire may well have done more to alienate the human soul from its Divine source than any loss of church self-confidence or attendance. Humanist repression and denial of the Divine fire inevitably leads to alienation – the educated and technologically-advanced West, cut off from the Divine fire which is its ground, is depressed, anxious, lost, root-less and empty, in spite of our vast wealth, consumption, gadgetry and entertainment.

Whilst I readily recognised many years ago the first distortion, now I have to admit that I failed to take account of the latter. I have been wrong to banish and ridicule the eternal fire as a piece of archaic and primitive religion which has no place in a modern and enlightened society. I was wrong! The Fire cannot be denied. Indeed, without the Divine Fire there would be no life whatsoever!

The fire was there at the very beginning of the cosmos, penetrating the formless void.³ “In the beginning there was not coldness and darkness: there was Fire.”⁴ The fiery sword protected the Garden and its tree of life.⁵ The bush blazed with Fire yet was not consumed.⁶ The pillar of fire led the Israelites through the Sinai wilderness.⁷ Isaiah was cleansed by the touch of fire on his mouth.⁸ In Ezekiel’s vision the glory of the Lord was like burning fire.⁹ The Christ came baptising with Holy Spirit and fire.¹⁰ Indeed, he came to cast a blazing fire on the earth.¹¹ Everyone, he declared, everyone, will be salted with fire!¹² The Son of Man, in John’s Revelation, has eyes like a flame of fire.¹³

The word ‘fire’ occurs more than 500 times in the Scriptures – it just cannot be ignored! Christ who reigns, salts the whole creation with Divine fire. Christ’s very heart is a heart of blazing fire. The Sacred Heart of Jesus, the tradition tells us, is ablaze with the Divine fire of love.

Taking stock, then, decent-minded humanists are right to censure the church insofar as it harbours within its ranks an abusive and coercive use of fire as threat and bludgeon. But rejecting the reality of the Divine fire is a Pyrrhic victory since it effectively cuts off from the human soul from its source, without which it withers. Without the blazing Divine fire we are separated from the creative forces of the cosmos. Having said that, since the eternal fire is Divine, we can never actually become separated from it. Nothing in all creation can separate us, St Paul might have added, from the blazing heart of the Divine fire.¹⁴ The eternal fire, therefore, works for the completion and wholeness of creation. But if we attempt to use it for our purposes it consumes us, like the priests of Baal.¹⁵

If repressed or denied the eternal Divine fire nevertheless smoulders deep in the roots of our being, underground, out of sight, erupting, bursting into flame when we least expect, illuminating our darkness and ignorance, cleansing and purifying our distorted vision, transfiguring our disfigured image, liberating us from self-centredness. This fire purifies and illumines those who can face it, and consumes those who resist it.¹⁶ “What is it,” the great physicist Stephen Hawking famously wondered, “that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe?”¹⁷ He couldn’t bring himself to ask “Who” is it.

Who is it who breathes fire into the equations?

It is Christ the King, whose heart is the unquenchable fire of Love which blazed before all things existed, and in

³ Genesis 1:1-3

⁴ Teilhard de Chardin P, *Hymn of the Universe*, London: Fontana, 1970, p21.

⁵ Genesis 3:24

⁶ Exodus 3:2

⁷ Exodus 13:21

⁸ Isaiah 6:6-7

⁹ Ezekiel 1:13, 27

¹⁰ Matthew 3:11, Luke 3:16

¹¹ Luke 12:49

¹² Mark 9:49

¹³ Revelation 1:14, 2:18

¹⁴ Romans 8:38-39

¹⁵ 1 Kings 18:20-40

¹⁶ Kunkel F, *Creation Continues: A Psychological Interpretation of the Gospel of Matthew*, New York: Paulist Press, 1987, p250

¹⁷ Hawking S, *A Brief History of Time*, London: Bantam Press, 1998, p209.

whom all things are held together,¹⁸ who alone is able to breathe fire into the puzzling equations of our lives and our cosmos, to transfigure our self-centredness and our self-loathing, to cauterise that which is dead and cancerous and gangrenous in us, to illuminate the darkened paths on which we stumble and grope, to open our eyes and hearts to the world's suffering and need and liberate us from all that we cannot let go, to breathe resurrected life into our suffering minds and bodies, to hold together by the power and suffering of the cross all which is in conflict in us and the world, to gather into one all the nations and ethnic groups and tribes and genders and colours of the world.

It is Christ who reigns within every human heart and soul, who lifted up above the earth on the tree of suffering draws all people to his blazing heart,¹⁹ who quenches our thirst and satiates our hunger in the Divine banquet of the Lamb who was sacrificed before the foundation of the world,²⁰ that all may know the fullness of him who fills all in all.²¹

david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz

18 Colossians 1:17

19 John 12:32

20 1 Peter 1:20

21 Ephesians 1:23