The Goodness of Fire

May 23rd, 2021

Pentecost

One winter, my friend and I were walking home from a small train station in the countryside through a very heavy snowfall. It was a difficult ascent up the hill because of the snow on the ground, the wind, and the thick veils of the blizzard blowing into us. Suddenly, the way was lit up before us with an orange glow. When we got to the top of the hill, we saw that an old warehouse was on fire. Nobody was harmed, and the fire did not spread anywhere. Others had gathered on the road to watch the conflagration as flames leapt into the dark sky. It was the most terrifying and most beautiful thing to behold—and it was warm, like having a campfire in the middle of a blizzard. One could not resist staring into the flames and the upward drift of sparks mingling with the large glittering snowflakes. It was a vision of warmth, beauty, and true power as the fire transformed the landscape. Where there had been darkness and cold, there was tremendous heat and light.

Throughout the scriptures, God has often revealed himself through this wonderful, terrible element we call fire, whether in the burning bush—when He revealed His holy Name to Moses (Exodus 3), in the pillar of fire that led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt (Exodus 13:21), in the fire that came down on Mount Carmel to assert God’s reality and presence (1 Kings 18:38), in the chariots of fire that carried Elijah up into heaven (2 Kings 2:11-12), in the flames of the furnace where Darius tried to burn the godly young men, where one like the Son of God was with them protecting them (Daniel 3). In the gospels, John the Baptist said: ““I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire” (Matthew 3:11). And indeed, the disciples of Jesus were all baptized in water and baptized others in water (John 3:22-26), but on the day of Pentecost, we witness the descent of fire: “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2:1-4). The words of the gospel and the language of the gospel come with flames. In antiquity, the fire was to be kept burning in the tabernacle at all times (Exodus 27:20-21). God’s house was a real house—it had a hearth and lamps. Growing up, stoves and hearths were of the utmost importance. First, in traditional homes, the old style hearth was the spiritual center of the house. In the northern homes of the frontier, the stove was still central—but because of the imperative of having heat in the winter. A home was where there was light and warmth. On the day of Pentecost, God is moving! God comes to dwell in us; God’s earthly house has changed—the fire of the hearth and the lamps come to rest on the apostles and believers—because those who love God become His temple and His house, His place of radiant glory.

Fire is powerful, illuminating and good. It is a sign of activity and life. In the first pages of his book *Fire Within: St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and the Gospel on Prayer,* Thomas Dubay, S.M. says: “The Son, radiant Image of the Father’s glory, proclaimed that He had come to cast fire upon the earth and that He longed for it to burst into blaze. It was in the form of fiery tongues that the Holy Spirit of Pentecost descended upon a timorous group of men and women. Their minds and hearts having been enkindled with a burning love and ardent zeal, those who received the Spirit sparked the astonishing transformation of an unbelieving and corrupt civilization into a community of faith and love. In our day the divine fire has not been extinguished. The consuming conflagration has not been contained. The proven incapacity of committees and clubs, speeches and surveys, electronics and entertainment profoundly and permanently to change vast numbers of people for the better has to be conceded. As the experience of the centuries attests, true transformations in the world and in the Church continue to come about only through the interventions of men and women on fire—that is, through saints. The evidence is overwhelming. It is also widely ignored, for it contains an otherworldly wisdom that his world does not welcome. For some, taking evidence seriously presents a snag, since it implies striving for this same kind of transformation within oneself as a starting point for improving the world. Indeed, at this very moment, deep and lasting changes in the Church are being brought about by a faithful few who are burning interiorly as a consequence of the deep prayer given by the Holy Spirit, who renews the face of the earth in ways other than our own. These quiet, humble, unassuming individuals seldom write position papers, and they are not likely to appear on controversial television talk shows or to attract front-page headlines. They are not identified with any ‘ism’, and they care nothing for a life of luxury or notoriety. They do not achieve popular acclaim by opposing ecclesial leadership and rejecting received doctrine. Rather, they are like the saints that have always been. The burning ones are the unflickering light of the world, the savory salt of the earth, the lively leaven in the mass…Contemplative husbands and wives are examples of holiness to their children…Prayerful clergy serve to inspire parishioners through soul-stirring homilies, sound guidance…and comforting concern in times of need. Teachers who are aflame ignite their students by their contagious enthusiasm as well as by the attractiveness of the truth they proclaim. Nurses close to God have a healing influence on both soul and body. In the home, in the marketplace, in the cloister, the love steadily radiating from these simples ones permeates and invigorates the world around us. It is unmistakable evidence of God living in and among us, a clear manifestation to our world that the Incarnation has taken place” (Thomas Dubay, *Fire Within: St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and the Gospel on Prayer.* San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989. 1-2).

An old man once told me that long ago there were itinerant fire-bearers in the mountains of Taiwan who would bring live coals from village to village. At times in my life, I felt like one of those itinerant fire-bearers—except that my charcoals seemed to be dead and I was not lighting fires. The reason was that I was mistaken. I believed that I could manage my life, manage others, and persuade or convince others of the goodness of God and the reality of salvation. I worried about the state of the world constantly, yet did little or nothing to change my own state. In my stubbornness and pride, I forgot who I was called to be and I forgot who God is. And thus, I neglected the one task given to me, the one needful thing—to be filled with God. I had no fire inside of me. Why do we worry about what God is doing on earth if we have no concern for what God is doing in our own hearts and lives? Our work is not to manufacture peace, justice, conversion, or discipleship. Our work is to be filled with God, for it is God who gives peace and justice; it is God who converts hearts and makes us disciples of Jesus (cf. Mark 4:26-29). Our work is to bear the fire and bring it to others. Jesus said: “Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you. And when he comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgement: about sin, because they do not believe in me; about righteousness, because I am going to the Father and you will see me no longer; about judgement, because the ruler of this world has been condemned. ‘I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:7-15). The message we bear is not us. It is not our thoughts or aspirations, our opinions or desires, our fears or our remonstrances. The message we bear is what God has spoken. The message is the Holy Spirit and the love of God.

What is this great fire, this good fire? It is God living in us, making us the light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16). Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing, but if we are filled with the Spirit of Jesus, with the Spirit of God, we can do all things (Philippians 4:13), for the One who is in you is greater than the world (1 John 4:4). As Psalm 104 says: “Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, you are very great. You are clothed with honour and majesty, wrapped in light as with a garment…you make the clouds your chariot, you ride on the wings of the wind, you make the winds your messengers, fire and flame your ministers” (Psalm 104:1-4). Jesus is Emmanuel—*God with us*. One might think of the Holy Spirit as *God in us.* This, and only this, is what transforms us and transforms our earth. To become fire and flame as His ministers and messengers. In the old days, men and women carried around tinderboxes—little boxes containing flint, firesteel, and tinder, to build fires when they needed to. Őtzi the Iceman, a 5,000 year-old mummy from the Alps, carried embers in birch-bark containers. Some days, we may have little more than embers—but our spiritual life should be a walk of bearing fire, of bringing fire wherever we go, like the itinerant charcoal-sellers of long ago. And God has promised us more than tinderboxes, matches, embers, lighters or even blowtorches. God has promised us living fire within. The fire of the divine life. It is the fire of calling out to God, of calling upon the Lord (Psalm 39:3). Fire is purification and cleansing (Micah 3:2). Fire is the word of the Lord (Jeremiah 5:14). Fire is the fulfillment of God’s word (Psalm 148:7-8). Fire is the coming of the Lord (Isaiah 64:1-2). Fire is the protective wall of God around His children (Zechariah 2:5). Fire is the prayers of the saints in heaven cast upon the earth by the angels (Revelation 8:1-5). Fire is the transformative experience of God in your life (Zechariah 13:9). Fire is love (Song of Solomon 8:6). Fire is the glory of the Lord (Isaiah 4:5).

God sent Jesus to take on our humanity and bring that humanity into heaven. God sent the Holy Spirit to share his divinity and bring heaven to earth. Pentecost is a second triumphal entry! Of all the gifts to be desired, there is none holier, wiser, greater and more loving than the gift of God himself. And unless we seek this kingdom within us, it will never be among us (Matthew 6:33, Luke 13:1-15, Luke 17:21). In the same book, Thomas Dubay says: “Paul, himself a mystic, writes that as we grow in the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge we are to be ‘filled with the utter fullness of God.’ Scripture commentator Max Zerwick finds this to be ‘a thought of bewildering magnitude.’ No doubt. The thought cannot be exaggerated. That I, of myself a puny nothing, am to be filled *utterly* with boundless beauty, power, joy and love staggers the imagination” (*Fire Within,* 12). And the fire of Pentecost not only staggers the imagination, but it inspires us and enables to imagine better things, good things. In his Pentecost sermon, Peter quoted the prophet Joel, saying: “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy… Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Acts 2:17-21). One night last year, on a lakeside up north, hundreds of kilometers from civilization, I sat up late and tended a campfire. And I wondered at the simplicity and goodness of fire—this brilliant flowering of oxidation that prevents my body from freezing or starving with its gift of heat. I watched the flames transform logs and branches—things that were not fire—into fire and flame, into light itself. This is like the work of God, *theosis,* or sanctification—God making us like Him. All of us begin as non-fire; and the Holy Spirit makes us into fire. All of us are mortal; the Holy Spirit makes us immortal. God would be your lamp and your hearth. God would make His home in You and make you into a living flame, a flame that can ignite others. Where there was cold and darkness, there can be light and warmth. Where there was weakness, there will be power. Where there was despair, there will be love. May the Lord ignite us all with Himself, with the fire of bewildering magnitude!