

*Trinity 15 2012*

Fire – a recurrent image in the bible.

To be near a fire on a cold evening is to feel safe. The wild animals will be kept at bay. The heat will warm your body; you can boil water and make a hot drink or cook meat. With a really hot fire you can work metal, make tools. Fire can be seen from far away, it can be used to signal to communities, the rising smoke by day and the red glow by night. So it was that Moses steered his people across the wilderness led by the pillar of fire.

Fire is a part of our existence and has been since the earliest times. But it is dangerous. Once it gets out of hand it can be terrifying. We were walking once on the headland on the Isle of Wight with one child in a pushchair, the other in a sling when we saw a spiral of smoke in the distance. We took no notice. Then we saw flames, and decided perhaps we had better turn around. Within seconds, a wall of flame, maybe twenty foot high was leaping towards us through the gorse and heather. Then we ran.

Danger is a part of life. We use the sea for travel, for fishing, for recreation, but every year it claims lives, because we underestimate the risk. We benefit from nuclear power, radioactive medicines, knowledge of genetics, we can create hybrid species, and we are creating machines capable of rational decision making – artificial intelligence. All of this can be used for good, but if we ever fail to respect and understand the dangers, they too can cause sweeping destruction on a terrifying scale.

But the tongue? St James calls the tongue a fire. He says:

The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by hell.

We take our speech for granted. It is only when we lose it, after a stroke for example, that we fully understand the power of words and our dependency upon speech as a means of communication. Anyone with locked in syndrome or severe motor neurone disease may have

to spell each word letter by letter using small eye movements. When each word is an effort, it is not to be wasted, it needs to be chosen with care.

How often have we all spoken swiftly and immediately regretted what we have said. It isn't just the hurtful or spiteful things, it is the careless comments. When someone is grieving, it is so easy to say 'I know how you feel', or 'time is a great healer' or any one of a number of other platitudes. Or when someone tells you a tale of woe, it is too easy to cap it with a story of our own. We can find ourselves talking in clichés, thinking in clichés, and our words, instead of bringing us closer, put up a barrier. Indeed they are a barrier, because the clichés protect us from the raw pain of emotion by putting experience into a neat box labelled grief, or illness, rather than allowing us to enter fully into the other person's pain.

The trouble is that words once out can never be unsaid. Now that words are broadcast so widely on Facebook and Twitter, we can see even more clearly the effect of careless talk. Words can destroy relationships, ruin reputations, destroy trust.

The tongue is a fire. So do we put out the fire, quench it, render it safe?

No! Fire can be good. Our collect says:

‘God, who in generous mercy sent the Holy Spirit  
upon your Church in the burning fire of your love’

The burning fire of your love! Love too is a fire. It hurts. But it never destroys. Like the burning bush that startles Moses, it brings challenge, but also freedom and new life.

Our words need to be like the fire of love – building up rather than destroying, bringing comfort rather than dis-ease.

Look at Peter. Impetuous Peter is the disciple who seems to speak first, think later. On the mountain when Jesus was transfigured he babbled about making tents without understanding what he was saying. When Jesus talks of having to suffer, Peter says 'no, you mustn't do that, take the safe route' and Jesus says those terrible words to him ; 'Get behind me Satan', words intended to shock, to challenge. But Peter takes a long time to learn his lesson. He it is who

rashly promises never to betray Jesus, yet within 24 hours denies knowing him. It is not that Peter doesn't care, it is not that he takes discipleship lightly, after all he has given up much to follow Jesus, but he is careless in his speech, and in that carelessness fails to realise how much influence he has over others, how easily his words can harm the message that Jesus is bringing.

Yet learn he does. When we read the words of Peter in his epistle, we can see how carefully he weighs each word, how seriously he takes the task of discipleship.

And we must too. In our dealings with family, friends, work colleagues, we can use our words to bless, to demonstrate care, trust, love, or we can use them carelessly. When we talk about our faith we can be dismissive, or over assertive, we can treat questions with distrust or contempt, we can avoid the difficult questions by making a joke and being flippant. Or we can be careful, trying to speak the truth, trying to be honest about what we know and what we don't understand, and ensuring that we never inadvertently become a stumbling block in someone else's search for meaning.

May the fire of God's love direct our thoughts, guard our tongue, determine our actions, and be visible in our lives. Amen.