

**January 9<sup>th</sup> 2022 (Epiphany 1 – The Baptism of Jesus)**

**10am Parish Communion at St Nicolas**

**Readings: Isaiah 43:1-7 and Luke 3:15-17, 21-26**

Of the four elements, air, earth, fire and water, fire is perhaps both the most fascinating and in many ways, the most terrifying. We're unable to live without fire – we need it both for warmth and for cooking our food and for manufacture, and generally it is easy to control.

But fire does have the ability to flare up unexpectedly and cause havoc. And a fire which is burning out of control is terrifying. I can't help thinking of the fire that swept through my old Church in Fleet six years ago, or the bush fires in Australia late last year! And people die needlessly every year through tragic fires in their own homes caused by electrical faults or simply through carelessness. I can't help thinking of the 4 children who died in a house fire in Sutton over Christmas, or the 8 who died in Philadelphia in America!

Fire must always be handled with care. Otherwise, people get burnt.

In today's gospel passage written in Luke's unmistakably elaborate and story-telling style, John the Baptist says: "*I baptise you with water, but he who is more powerful than I is coming . . . . he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*" And John goes on to spell out just what this means: "*His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor,*

*and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."*

So, Jesus is Baptised by John, and the Spirit descended on him, not as fire, but in the form of the gentle Dove! And Jesus consistently tells his disciples that they will receive the Holy Spirit after his death. Which according to Luke's second book, the Acts of the Apostles, is exactly what happened on the Day of Pentecost.

And so it's only after that first Pentecost, after the disciples had received the Holy Spirit, while tongues of flame hovered over their heads, that baptism seems to take on its full meaning as predicted by John-the-Baptist.

And then, throughout the Acts of the Apostles, baptism is accompanied by some spectacular manifestations of the Holy Spirit. If we had chosen the alternative reading from Acts 8 today, we would have heard that Peter and John had to make a special trip to Samaria, because the people there had 'only been baptised in the name of the Lord Jesus' but had not yet received the Holy Spirit! And once there, they laid their hands on the people and amazing things happened!

There's a sense of urgency and excitement in the accounts of the receiving of the Holy Spirit, throughout Acts. And in those very early days of the church, in the immediate aftermath of Jesus' death, there seems to have been a great outpouring of the Holy Spirit - an outpouring in which the Spirit is seen as uncontrollable, uncontainable and potentially very dangerous - just like fire. The ancient Celts called it 'The

Wild Goose', flying free – an image which has become the symbol of The Iona Community!

We're given a glimpse in Acts of the wild, untameable potential of God himself, for which the symbol of fire does seem so entirely appropriate - and it's a glimpse of the God of the Old Testament, who was so dangerous that people had to be shielded from his presence!

And that same outpouring of God's power is seen in that wonderful passage from Isaiah which was read to us today: this is what the LORD says - he who created you, . . . . he who formed you . . . . *"Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze. For I am the LORD, your God, . . . . you are precious and honoured in my sight, and . . . . I love you. Do not be afraid, for I am with you . . . . Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth - everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."*

And it's this transforming energy - this urgency, which I pray for each time I baptise a young child or prepare an adult for confirmation!

Baptism, is a turning point, just as it was in Jesus' own ministry as he was anointed with the Holy Spirit, and empowered to begin that ministry!

But, as I said, at Jesus' own Baptism, the image of the Holy Spirit wasn't fire, but a gentle dove – and perhaps that says something about Jesus himself? As throughout his life, the Holy Spirit was mainly experienced through a gentle and loving concern for all people. So, in Jesus the fire was controlled and put to use. The 'light of the world' is more of a gentle candle flame, which has the potential to burst into fire and burn, but which is mostly restrained and warm and loving.

And perhaps that's what we should expect not only of God, but of ourselves, as we bring children to baptism? Perhaps we are responsible for allowing the spark of the God within to be fanned into flame, but then allowing God to take control and channel that flame where he will. For he has promised that when we walk through the fire, we will not be burned; the flames will not set us ablaze. For He is the LORD, our God, ... we are precious and honoured in his sight, and he does love us!

Perhaps what we need more than anything in our church and community, is to allow that Holy Spirit, the wild goose, the freedom to take hold of us and set our hearts on fire with God's all-encompassing love, and to fly freely, doing it's will, though our church and community!