

The Day of Pentecost (A) **31 May, 2020**

Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them. Acts 2:3

We don't know precisely when the primeval night first was illumined, and at the same time warmed, by a light that was wholly human-made. That first fire, however it was produced, must have seemed nothing short of a miracle, perhaps even a gift from the gods. Our ancient ancestors now, literally, could see in the dark. They could see the eyes of approaching predators; but they also could see the eyes of familiar kinsmen and friends, the glowing eyes of loved ones now gathered around the same fire. And now they could shed at least one of their wooly robes, as the flames leapt and lingered, as the warmth reached them.

So, the properties of enkindled fire aspects of protection and warmth, comfort and community, and so much more have been noted and celebrated ever since that first night. They have so found their way into our imagination, into our language, that we speak of them often with thinking of it; they mark not just our emotions, but our determined hopes, our loves, our dreams. 'Keep the home-fires burning,' longingly sang two wartime generations on two continents. 'Try to remember the kind of September,' says another song, 'when love was an ember about to billow.' And we still hear (or should hear) the call to duty and sacrifice that President Kennedy summoned us to, in what now may seem many ages ago: 'The energy, the faith, the devotion [he said] that we bring to this endeavor will light our country and all who serve it; and the glow from that fire can truly light the world.'

Yet we know, at the same time, that fire is a destructive and consuming force. I'm speaking here of fires not of nature but of human making. The flames of fires, set to beleaguered cities, have burned throughout our history, even as they do up to this very moment. These fires, however, are distinct from the fires of righteous rage that might have spawned them, from the white-hot anguish and anger over injustice and oppression, over dreams deferred and hopes abandoned, over a knee always at the back of a neck, over casual brutality to body and spirit. They are distinct as well from the fires of hot tears shed for 100,000 separate souls from 100,000 grieving families, for lives cut short and lights snuffed out by the spread of the current virus. These are the sacred fires we honor; for they are the fires that make us moral beings, fires that prompt us to mourn and to lament, and fires that bring enlightenment. They are flames of wisdom and compassion, indignation and courage that alone can enkindle peace, that alone can restore dignity and recover joy.

I say 'alone' because these human fires have their origin from a single divine source from that flaming Spirit set loose on the Church and the world on that first Pentecost morning. A fire that made orators out of fishermen, champions out of cowards, that turned fear into commitment, doubt into devotion. St. Luke, after all, is following in a long poetic tradition, begun around those primeval campfires eons ago. He can't help himself; it is only in fiery language, in image and symbol, that he can begin to describe a gift once thought to be of the gods, but one we now know to be the inheritance of the one true, loving God through the merits of his Son a spirit and a presence set ablaze in and for the lives of his followers. A fire that burns, and must burn, in each of us.

But like all fires, it must begin with a spark a light, a match, a basket of kindling. It must begin with the desire to burn white-hot in the Spirit for as long as we take breath. It may, in fact, begin with a promise, and perhaps even a daily prayer. In the Celtic Christian tradition, there's an ancient custom called the Blessing of the Kindling a practice in which one consecrates the day

ahead at the hour of first lighting of the morning hearth. I can almost imagine how this ritual must have looked centuries ago, and how it still must appear wherever it's observed . . . in the half-light of dawn, as a chilly mist clings to the cliffs off of Ireland and Wales and Cornwall (from Iona to Land's End!). A spurt of flame, a crackle under the first log or square of peat, and then the lifted words, burning with praise and love for God and for all whom God loves, both a yearning and a pledge in a world grown cruel and cold:

'I will kindle my fire this morning
In the presence of the holy angels of heaven . . .
Without malice, without jealousy, without envy,
Without fear, without terror of anyone under the sun,
But the Holy Son of God to shield me.'

And as the room warms, ever so slightly, and as a single ray of sunlight slants across the still darkened floor, and because the fire in the hearth is more than a fire, and because, well, the singer is a Celt, the benediction concludes in poetry:

'God, kindle Thou in my heart within
A flame of love to my neighbor,
To my foe, to my friend, to my kindred all,
To the brave, to the knave, to the thrall,
O Son of the loveliest Mary,
From the lowliest thing that liveth,
To the Name that is highest of all.'

And so, dear friends, along these our own shores, in the cities and towns of our own land, amongst our fellow citizens, our own kindred, where fires of sorrow and suffering and injustice hourly burn, let us pray the fire of the Spirit to enter our hearts as well. And let us likewise bear its fiery force without malice, without fear, without terror of anyone, or anything, under the sun. On this Day of Pentecost, as at the first, let us speak with boldness and act with courage. Let us batter back wrong wherever we find it, and send love to whomever needs it, and so gather the world in as the Spirit commands it. And may the kindled fire of each morning precede and follow each of you, during these painful times and in all our days. Amen.

Blessings,
Fr. Gordon +