

Ash Wednesday 2019

Amidst the pancakes, the apple bobbing, the doughnuts on a string, the squeal of children enjoying themselves and the adults savouring a glass of Shiraz something else occurred last night. Without fanfare or liturgy or even a prayer, we burnt the crosses from last year's Palm Sunday commemoration. This simple act entranced the younger members of the congregation and served as a reminder of the primal fascination we have with fire.

In the lives of the Desert Fathers we read how Abbot Lot came to Abbot Joseph and said: Father, I keep my little rule to the utmost, my fasts, meditation and contemplative silence; as much as I can I have striven to cleanse my heart. And now what? And Father Joseph for answer stood up and stretched his hands to heaven, and his fingers were ten torches of fire. And he said, 'Why not be changed totally into fire.'

Our Lenten disciplines: giving up chocolate or the booze, seem more like a Scout trying to coax fire from a damp match. But this is what we called to, to be alive with the fire of the Spirit. As Paul wrote to his young friend Timothy: For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.

Power, love, self-discipline; does that sound like your experience of Lent! We are so caught up in the old religion that even the average person on the street knows something about or has an opinion on, that we fail to find in it the renewal, the freshness and the urgency which is what it is truly about. The poet Auden opens his poem *The Journey* with the words:

To throw away the key and walk away...

and Philip Larkin wrote:

*He chucked up everything
And just cleared off.
And always the voice will sound
Certain you approve
This audacious, purifying
Elemental move.*

The prophet Joel wrenches us out of normality and beckons us to some strange renewal. Blow the trumpet in Zion! proclaim a fast, call an assembly; Gather the people, notify the congregation; Assemble the

elders, gather the children and the infants at the breast; get the newlyweds out of bed! And Paul with the same urgency: *Now is the acceptable time, now is the day of salvation.* These extraordinary, daunting passages are an invitation to break with the past and to launch out into this new world of the spirit.

Last night we let our hair down a little, I certainly enjoyed some of the simple but good things of life, fine food, fine wine and good company! What was it all about? Late last night was not the time the time for deep contemplation. But as I read the passage from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians I began to see that his call for reconciliation is a call to hold together deeply paradoxical ideas. 'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God,' 'We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.'

Clearly some of the meaning of Strove Tuesday has been lost over time, the using up of eggs and flour etc and clearly the Lenten discipline of giving up something has become somewhat trivialised. What we should acknowledge there is nothing wrong in these things in themselves, they are indeed gifts and we receive them with gratitude. But their goodness paradoxically can tame us, trap us, make us settle down when our calling is to be travellers, this Lenten experience is not called a journey for nothing; reconciliation is our destination! One writer said that the tragedy of being human is that we cannot love things and leave them. There is an ancient prayer which seeks God's mercy and guidance that we 'may so pass through the good things of this world that we finally lose not the things that are eternal.' Cranmer used the prayer as the basis of one of his most well-loved collects:

O God, the protector of all that trust in thee, without whom nothing is strong, nothing is holy: Increase and multiply upon us thy mercy; that, thou being our ruler and guide, we may so pass through (good) things temporal, that we finally lose not the things eternal

Cranmer dropped off the good; perhaps it is just too difficult for us to accept that even the truly good things that we enjoy have the potential to keep us from eternal things. Clearly we called not to settle down but to be free, this is difficult, at times perhaps impossible. It is a gift of the Spirit, of Abbot Joseph's fire! This is what Lent is all about, it's not about being miserable, Jesus warned us about that, it is about being free, it's about being audacious, purifying, elemental. It is the journey of a lifetime, but we have to start somewhere perhaps this Lent will be the one! Amen.