

Welcome to ‘Mixed Metaphor of the Day’: fire is a two-edged sword. It has been vital to humans for millennia, and it’s clear from archaeology that tremendous efforts were used to make and preserve fire. It provided warmth and light and the means of cooking, enabling many things which would otherwise have been inedible or even downright dangerous to become useful sources of food. Later it was the way in which metals could be smelted and shaped, a producer of power and the key to vital industrial processes and large-scale transportation. If you went through the standard boy scout/girl guide stage you’ll remember what fun it was to sit around the campfire in the dark, singing and telling stories, and how cold and lonely it felt if you turned your back on it and wandered away. Fire was always at the heart of the family and the community.

But this is ‘tame fire’. Great precautions are taken to keep it under control. Just ask Angus about the risk assessment for the Christingle service – all those children with candles. An out-of-control fire is a different matter. You may have seen pictures this week of the fires in Madeira: huge areas of devastation, tiny helicopters dropping water on burning forests and looking utterly ineffective. Most wildfires ultimately burn out naturally. I remember driving through part of Alaska shortly after a forest fire. The atmosphere was still smoky and the smell caught the back of the throat; there were vast blackened areas where apparently nothing had survived. Yet even then some new green shoots were appearing, from seeds which could only germinate after being exposed to intense heat. Everything had not been destroyed, and new life was already coming out of what initially looked like a total disaster.

It’s that sort of fire that Jesus and Jeremiah are talking about. Jesus has ‘come to bring fire to the earth’. Yet in the next sentence he talks about ‘having a baptism with which to be baptised’. But it isn’t baptism in the way that we understand it. Remember that baptism wasn’t any part of conventional Jewish ritual, and that there was no such thing as Christian baptism until after Pentecost. But baptism did exist as a form of purification, and this was the sense in which John the Baptist used it. It was a symbol of cleansing and initiation which led to a new state of being. The baptism Jesus is referring to is the ordeal he already knows he will undergo to bring about the salvation that God promises for everyone. His crucifixion and resurrection will be the means by which his message – God’s message – will spread like wildfire, laying waste the old religions and old beliefs. It will bring new shoots: new faith, new understanding, new life, to everyone who is willing to be alive to what is happening and to play their part in it. The new kingdom of God will be a complete transformation of the old landscape. Its effects will be so radical that of course it will engender bitter arguments between those – not always the old – who believe they should stick to what they know and are used to, and those – not always the young – who have grasped the importance of being part of the transformation, and who can interpret the signs they see.

We can’t hide from this fire, any more than the people of Funchal could ignore what was happening around them. ‘Am I a God near by’, says the Lord, ‘and not a God far off?’ This is a rhetorical question. It’s most frightening aspect is the one Jeremiah is referring to. We

cannot hide from God. There are no secret places to which we can escape. But the comforting aspect is the same. 'Do I not fill heaven and earth?' says the Lord. I'm reminded of all those missionaries who went off to strange and often dangerous places. 'I went to bring God to the people of West Africa', one of them wrote, 'but when I arrived I realised that God was there already.'

We don't have to go to special places to find God. 'The Lord is here!' we say on Sundays in church, and he is. And in the house when we get home, and on the bus, in the office, the school, the cinema, the prison, the night-club, the scary dark arch under the railway bridge. We can ask him for reassurance and help whenever we need it. We can thank him for the gifts of his creation whenever we encounter them – whether it's a toasted marshmallow, a life-saving operation or the unexpected appearance of a Jersey Tiger moth in the garden. We can bring the needs of an individual or the world to his attention at any time; not that he needs to be told, but those prayers are a powerful means of alerting us to ways in which we might help to make a difference.

Probably most of us, most of the time, don't think much about God. We just get on with whatever we're doing. Maybe there's a particular time of day when we read the Bible and say our prayers, consciously trying to become aware of the presence of God. Which is good, and we must keep on doing it. But one of the most important ways of growing and maturing in our Christian life is to become more aware of God's presence with us all the time. It was because the Old Testament leaders and prophets were conscious of that constant presence that they could do the deeds for which they are honoured. All those others, right up to the present day, who make up the cloud of witnesses that surrounds us, allowed God's words to sweep through them like a fire, and as a result they could draw on his strength to endure the difficulties, overcome the obstacles and cultivate the green shoots of a fresh, new, kingdom-centred world. Let us pray that the same fire may be kindled in us.