***Baptised with Fire and Water –* Acts 8: 14-17 & Luke 3: 15-17, 21-22**

**Sermon for 9th January 2022 (Baptism of Christ) – Rev Phil Wootton**

When we baptise a child (or indeed an adult) today, we use water and fire. They are symbols, and we are restrained in how we use them. We splash a little water on the forehead of an infant, who then either bursts into tears or sploshes around in the bowl. Washing happens symbolically; it marks the start, or restart, of a life. The fire we use is gentle and contained. It comes as candle flame, flickering calmly giving mellow, yellow light – the Pascal candle, the light we turn to in order to make promises, the baptismal candle we carry out of the church, with an undertaking to shine with the light of Christ.

John the Baptist had water and fire on his mind when he baptised – rivers of water, rampaging fire. John was not one for half-measures. He baptised in the River Jordan as it flowed from the Sea of Galilee to the Dead Sea. His candidates for baptism were dipped right under the water, submerged, given a whole-body wash. They emerged cleansed and renewed, ready to start a whole new life. John promised fire – a great rampaging fire storm coming on the arrogant and wicked, in fact on all who did not repent and go under the waters. It was not, however, he who would bring the fire (he said) but one coming after him, the thongs of whose sandals he was not worthy to stoop down and untie; this is the One who would baptise with fire. However, when Jesus did come, the fire he lit was of a very different kind.

A few years later, after Jesus had died, risen, and returned to heaven, his early apostles believed in the importance of both water and fire. A mission amongst the Samaritans (elsewhere considered hate figures to people of New Testament times) had been a roaring success as they had suddenly started believing in Jesus. They are quickly baptised. But the apostles remaining in Jerusalem, delighted as they were at the Samaritans turning to the Lord, realised something was still missing. They’d had the water but not the fire: they had not received the Holy Spirit. So, Peter and John head over, lay hands on them, and the Spirit floods into their lives.

How is it that John the Baptist’s threat of a fire that burnt all before it had been so replaced? The answer has to be the disciples’ experience on the Day of Pentecost. On that day, what looked like tongues of fire had come upon them and separated to touch the head of each one of them. Like the burning bush that Moses encountered of old, this was fire that burned but didn’t burn anything up. No one was scorched, but the disciples’ tongues were set alight with words that tumbled from them and made sense in any and every language. They discovered new confidence and power within themselves, new abilities and gifts, new resources and new understanding, together with faith and strength to endure. This was the Spirit of God, coming upon them and working in them and driving them outwards to share the word with those on the streets. Without the fire of the Spirit, the believer is underpowered and unprepared for the task God has for them: no wonder the apostles insisted Samaritan Christians must have the chance to receive the Holy Spirit.

Today, as through the history of the church, we baptise in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. We never miss out the Spirit. There is fire as well as water in the service. But it is fair to say that it is at the Confirmation service that the focus truly falls on the Holy Spirit. As the candidates confirm for themselves the beliefs and promises made for them at their baptism, so we pray God will confirm them with the Holy Spirit – an inner conviction of God’s presence with, in and for them.

It’s important that this is formalised within a ceremony. It’s a statement that this really matters. But sometimes it can feel like we’re treating the Spirit like a box that can be ticked and dealt with, or else that we’re trying to exert control over when and how the Spirit should work. Like the wind, the Spirit blows where the Spirit wills. The fire burns, and will not be contained. ‘The Spirit lives to set us free,’ says the song. So, we need to allow for the freedom of the Spirit to give us new visions, to open up our imaginations, to give us the courage to walk into new possibilities, to pick up the still small voice that whispers in our ears. There is no one way the Spirit comes, no one thing the Spirit says. All we can do is try to be ready. All we can do is ask the Spirit to come, and take the risk of having our lives turned upside down.

When Jesus was baptised, his mind was on water and Spirit. In Luke’s account, it is all very calm. Luke simply says people were being baptised and Jesus was too. Jesus went under the water, and came up again. Then he was praying. And the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove. For him, the Spirit comes as the bird of peace, not the raging fire. For Jesus, as for all, the Spirit comes in response to prayer. Then the voice of affirmation comes from heaven: ‘You are my Son, whom I love; with you I am well pleased.’ God’s affirmation is what each of his children need, when they’re baptised in water, when they’re confirmed by the Holy Spirit, and every day of their lives. A true spiritual discipline, every day, is to repent our sins, as it were, washing in waters of penitence, and pray for the Holy Spirit to come with the fire-power to reignite our lives.

*A prayer from the Confirmation service:*

Almighty and ever-living God,

you have given these your servants new birth

in baptism by water and the Spirit,

and have forgiven them all their sins.

Let your Holy Spirit rest upon them:

the Spirit of wisdom and understanding;

the Spirit of counsel and inward strength;

the Spirit of knowledge and true godliness;

and let their delight be in the fear of the Lord. **Amen.**