

Views from the Pews – Fire

By the time you read this, hopefully Los Angeles is safe again, and that we at home are not troubled by fire either, given the season. Fire awakens primeval fear in humans, because it signifies destruction, loss of control, and unimaginable heat. So many of our towns rely on volunteer firefighters – where would we be without them?

So it is interesting to see just how many Biblical references there are to fire. And it is not just the stuff that keeps us warm at night, not just the stuff we boil camping meals over. Nor is it confined to the Old Testament. Most references can be found there, but make no bones about it; fire gets a mention in Luke Chapter 3, alongside its opposite; water. This is right at the beginning of the New Testament. The reference arrives through the mouth of John the Baptist no less; an actor we associate with water, particularly the River Jordan. John identifies two parts to the Messiah Baptism; the Holy Spirit (soon to appear as a dove) and secondly, fire.

John then speaks directly to his audience, who must have been country folk who had seen many harvests. The wheat and the chaff were to be separated, and the chaff was to meet with ‘unquenchable fire’ presumably the same fire Moses saw which inhabited a bush but did not consume it.

This makes for uncomfortable reading, because there are no grey areas here; no fudge. The Child in the Manger has within a few weeks of the Church Year become decidedly Old Testament. You are either for Him or against Him.

This passage is worthy of long and detailed study, given particularly the juxtaposition between fire and water – allegedly in short supply in Los Angeles – and because the Messiah introduced by John uses a winnowing-fork. Then there is the juxtaposition between fire and Holy Spirit. Can a bird survive fire? Where is the line between concrete description, and metaphor? Any illusions about the New Testament being a softer, kinder message are swept away. John’s true ministry is revealed; the expectant questioners needed to be convinced – quickly – that this was indeed Isaiah’s Messiah, the Son of God, equipped if necessary with that elemental Old Testament force; fire.

Please pray for our volunteer firefighters this summer.

Richard Swarbrick