21st May 2016

A Sermon preached by the Dean of Melbourne, the Very Revd Dr Andreas Loewe, at Westminster Abbey, on Trinity Sunday 2016:

I bring you warm greetings from the Archbishop of Melbourne and Primate of Australia, Dr Philip Freier, and the congregations and Chapter of St Paul’s Cathedral Melbourne. It is a great pleasure to be with you again, and I thank Dean John Hall and Canon Vernon White for their kind invitation.

The last time I looked on a burning bush, it wasn’t just the sight of the yellow and red flames fanned by gusts of hot desert wind, but the smell of acrid, black smoke in dark plumes spreading across the grassland, carrying burning embers in its wake, that held me spellbound. For an Australian, even a relatively recent one like myself, the image of a burning bush holds in balance the terror of destruction of acres and acres of bushland, and the natural threat to homes and properties, with the knowledge that for many of our ancient gum trees only the heat of fire will release the seeds of from the hardy gum nuts. The bush that is ravaged by fire is not consumed by it, but rather depends on fire for its renewal, as the seed-pods of the eucalypts are broken and opened, and a cycle of new life commences. In this awe-inspiring sight, death and new life are combined in fire and wind that swept through the grey-green forest to begin the shattering work of re-birth.

Like the bush fires that ravage my adopted homeland each summer, the burning bush that Moses saw on the mountain he would later call the ‘mountain of God’ also burnt and was not consumed. The bush that Moses saw was not even reduced to ash: ablaze with the glory of God it lit up the mountainside. And out of the flame Moses heard a voice commanding him to remain at a distance, to observe, listen and worship. ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’, the voice revealed. I am the God of your forebears, the creator of the land on which you feed your flock, and I have come to manifest myself to you. And Moses averted his gaze, hid his face, and listened. And God reveals himself as a compassionate God who hears the prayers of his people, tells Moses that he has heard the cries of those who called on him for help, to be their liberator. And there, in the flame of the burning bush, God commissions Moses to be the agent of this work of liberation: ‘I will send you to bring my people out of Egypt’, he commands Moses, ‘and you shall worship me on this mountain’. And promises them a new land, a land without slavery, without hardship, a good land with watercourses that run like milk and honey, a land of crops and fruit trees, olives and cedars to house God’s great nation.

And Moses asks the God who speaks to him out of the fire and flame to make himself known to his people, asks God to reveal his name to those who cried to him for help. And the vision of fire spoke his name ‘I am who I am’: I am who called all being into being, and am all being, I am your maker, and your liberator, and you will be the one who sets my people free to worship me for all generations, the voice of flame spoke, and sent Moses away to call God’s people from their taskmasters. And Moses went, and pleaded with his people, and with Pharaoh, and called on God to send down signs of power to effect the release of his people. And God sent plagues, and even death himself, and the people fled and walked through water and wave, and desert sand, following the pillar of fire that Moses first saw in the burning bush. They journeyed for a generation, and reached the land that was promised them, and there they settled, and many continued to worship the God whose name is ‘I am’ and who had set them free from slavery and given them their own homeland. They sang his praise in psalms and found in him their shelter, continually proclaiming what he has done for them.

Twenty-eight generations on, and many of the people had forgotten the awe-inspiring wonder of the God who spoke to them from the fire. Many had come to enjoy the land they were given, and forgot the giver. They had heard the word he had given them through Moses, their liberator, and many turned that word to suit their own needs first of all. They had settled in a land of freedom, only for that
land to be subjugated to successive armies of occupation. Some had arranged themselves with their new overlords, some were longing for a new liberator. Many found themselves without hope, without the pillar of fire that had lit up their paths before them, ‘as a light to lighten the nations’. And among those who longed for light to direct them, one man, a leader of the people of Israel, made his way to a teacher from God. By night, perhaps led by the faint reflection of the pillar of fire that once had led his people, he made his way to Jesus, to ask him about how his people may be re-born.

And Jesus tells him how God’s people will be reborn when they gaze on the One who was sent by God, and who will be lifted up before them as a sign of new life. Even though many will think his death to be the end, and his broken body and pierced side a sign of destruction, it will be at that moment that new life is bestowed, eternal life given. For flowing with his last breath will be the Spirit of peace, and flowing from the broken body will be the water and the blood that give new birth. And once he is lifted on high, to die on a cross, the people will see God’s work of liberation. And Jesus tells Nicodemus that his people will not readily perceive this truth: just as Moses was only reluctantly accepted by his own, and had to reveal his authority through the power of God, so the people Nicodemus serves as teacher, will find it hard to believe and let go of what holds them back from recognising their salvation. At the cross, God will again give of his own, this time of his own flesh and blood, to set his people free; to kindle a flame of fire in the darkness of the eclipse of Good Friday that will never be extinguished by any work of darkness, but will take into himself all the darknesses of our human story, until the darkness is as light. ‘Indeed, God did not send his Son to condemn the world’, Jesus tells Nicodemus, ‘but in order that the world may be saved through him’.

Saved through the gift of God himself: the Father who reveals himself through fire and flame, and is the one who called all things living into being; the Son who lets himself be lifted high as an ensign of salvation and be broken as a means that we may not perish; and the Spirit of new birth, who fans the flames of light and life into being, and sheds abroad the wind of peace. Saved through the God who has revealed himself to us in three persons, and one God, who continues to calls us into being, and into friendship with him, and by whose Spirit we are en-flamed to bear the light of his new life into the darkness that surrounds us. Saved and set alight to be aflame and not consumed; to be the signs, the vision, of the saving Trinity in our world.

In my homeland, it is in the smouldering ash of the burnt ground, when the acrid smoke of the force of fire and flame is past, and the wind stirs through the scarred eucalypt trunks, that new life comes forth; new growth enabled. Set free from its hardened core, the seeds of eucalypts take root in the fertile ash; watered by the autumn rains they are given new life, new growth. And so we, too, are to be freed: set free from all that hardens our hearts, broken open to receive the life-giving Spirit, the God who is the eternal ‘I am’ calls us by name, calls us to be his children, daughters and sons of the Son, whom he gave, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

Now to the Father, who called us by name and sets us aflame with his light; to the Son, who washed us with water from his side to share his new life; to the Holy Spirit, who gives us new birth and fills our hearts with love; to the Holy and Undivided Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be all honour and glory, majesty and might, through all generations, now and forever. Amen.

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