

Sermon for Pentecost, 15 May 2016 The Spark of Life
Silvia Purdie

Bible Readings:

Psalm 104:24-35

Acts 2:1-21

I am working through a series for you, since Easter, on theology: WHO IS GOD? What is God? Over the next month we are going to weave our way into that most thorniest of questions, about how God can be three in one and one in three, and where we got that crazy convoluted idea from in the first place. Today we have, not surprisingly, God as FIRE.

Fire is a wonderful metaphor for God. Fire, heat, energy. One of my favourite bits of the Anglican Prayer Book is a blessing for Night Prayer:

The blessing of God, the eternal goodwill of God, the shalom of God, the wildness and the warmth of God, be among us and between us, now and always.

Fire is wildness and warmth. We want the warmth, but not too much or we get burned. Watch out or the wildness of God could quickly get out of hand!

Those observing the coming of the Holy Spirit at the feast of Pentecost in Jerusalem 2000 years ago clearly thought that things had seriously got out of hand! It was hard to describe, what they experienced that day. Afterwards people talked about something like a sound of rushing wind, and something that looked a bit like fire appearing among them, almost as though each person had a tongue of fire on them ... like, almost, as though ... the experience of the Holy Spirit always pushes us to the edge of language, and words seem barely adequate to describe it.

What words would you use to describe fire, to someone who had never seen a naked flame? ...

Fire. The way flames prance and move and leap. The amazing colours inside the flames

We used to have bonfires down the river in Linton. The boys and their friends would gather up piles of old wood, we'd sit around, get long sticks for the marshmallows, make a game out of who can keep your marshmallow over the heat just long enough for it to caramelise before that terrible moment when it melts completely and slips off your stick into the fire, or bursts into flames!

Ben just said last week how he misses our fires by the river. Maybe in winter we'll find somewhere round Christchurch where you're allowed to light a bonfire. Any suggestions?

God as FIRE expresses something of the dynamic power of God that is never under our control. God's perfect freedom to BE GOD, always bursting out of whatever boxes we try to put him in. God as FIRE expresses ENERGY, Spirit, spark, flash of inspiration, our physical energy that burns calories and heats our blood, sparks ideas, the warmth of affection, the fire of passion, desire, connection, union.

God as FIRE is ALIVE!

Christian theology says two quite contradictory opposite things about the Spirit of God, both deeply involved with this metaphor of God as fire. The first claim is that God has made everything, is in everything, and sustains everything ... all matter, all life. We don't do things by halves - this is the biggest claim that can ever be made, that our God is universal, bigger than the universe, containing the universe, but more than that - the claim that the universe itself can only exist at every level of its existence because of the spirit of God.

The second claim is quite different. This claim is that God's Spirit works in very particular ways in particular people in particular places. So how can God be both in everything and only in some things, at the same time? The answer is in the fire ...

We used to think that the earth was mostly solid, mostly predictable. We used to think that we stood on solid ground. Christchurch people know now that that is not true. Scientists know now that nothing is solid at all, not really. Many of the most mind-bending, earth-shattering scientific discoveries ever was made during the 20th century through particle physics, as they were able to split the atom. But even when I was at High School, which although a long time ago wasn't THAT long ago! ... I was taught that each atom had a nucleus, and the electrons attached it to other atoms to form molecules ... and we pictured this like blocks of lego, one little solid thing clicking in to another little solid thing to make something bigger. That makes sense. Problem is, it really is not like that. The reality of life inside an atom is that actually there is almost nothing there at all. The mass of an atom varies depending on what kind of atom it is, but the actual solid 'stuff' is almost not there. Hydrogen atom: 0.00000000000004% of the total area. That's 12 zeros after the decimal point of nothing at all.

Solid matter is made almost entirely from energy. The solidness of the wood under your feet is made almost entirely out of practically non-existent

electrons whizzing around at practically impossible speeds in a frenetic dance of attraction and repulsion.
The universe runs on electricity. Spark. Fire. Energy. This is what the universe is made of.

And here's another thing. What do you know about how your brain works? You probably know that inside the pink jelly inside your skull there are millions of brain cells, and that each brain cell makes connections with other brain cells. Thoughts happen along pathways between them. What you probably don't know is that each brain cell is not actually connected to the others around it at all. The tendril from one brain cell reaches out for the tendril from another brain cell ... and there's a gap between them. Across that gap leaps a spark of electricity. It's the fantastically fast sparking along chains of brains cells ... bing bing bing that creates this astonishing thing called thinking that you and I take for granted (at least, while we can!).

So all human thought requires millions of sparks of energy, fire if you like. And all matter, every atom, requires sparks of energy, fire. So when I read the ancient creeds of the Christian church, when they say that God is the 'Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. I actually take this very literally.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life

Psalm 140 verse 30: When you send forth your spirit all things are created. You give life to the earth.

Colossians 1:15-17:

¹⁵ Jesus is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation;¹⁶ for in^[a] him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible,—all things have been created through him and for him. ¹⁷ He himself is before all things, and in^[b] him all things hold together.

The church's conviction is that God, with the Son, through the Spirit, makes and sustains all things. The fact that all things are made primarily of sparks of energy actually makes a huge amount of sense out of the ancient creeds. God is the source of this energy, God is the ongoing fire that keeps every atom whirling around inside itself.

But what about the other half of my contradictory paradox, that God through the Spirit is a very particular kind of Spirit that works in specific ways in specific people for specific reasons ...

On the day of Pentecost, the Spirit was poured out on all people, and all those who walked past, from every nation, heard their own language spoken in a wonderful universal outpouring of Spirit. Then Peter gets up to speak,

and he brings it down to the specifics, and this specific claim shocked them to the core. Here's the thing:

Acts 2:36: Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.

This Spirit is the ongoing presence of Jesus. This fire is the power of Jesus. And because it's Jesus, this energy has a particular personality to it. Because it's the Spirit of Jesus, it carries with it the hallmarks of Jesus' ministry. This Spirit creates particular outcomes in the lives of those it touches. Paul described this as 'fruit' and lists 9 characteristics of this Spirit. Can you remember them?

Love, joy peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self control.

We might add other ways in which we recognise the particular spirit of Jesus at work ... I would describe this as the affection between people that forms the basis of community despite outward differences.

I have seen this spirit at work caring for the poor, those who are struggling, this spirit has a selfless outpouring characteristic to it.

I have known this spirit as a deepening of silence, the 'still small voice' that Elijah heard in the cave.

Mostly we keep circling around back to this key word - LOVE

for it is by his love that we most recognise Jesus, just as he said that it is by our love for each other that we would most clearly be recognised as his followers.

So this Spirit of Pentecost is the fire of love, the fire that sparks and sustains the energy that holds the universe together. This Spirit of Pentecost is utterly universal, and nothing that **is** can exist without it. It is also deeply personal and highly particular, for it is the spirit of Jesus who chooses ordinary people like you and me to bring to new life with the fire of his love.