

SERMON 31 May 2015

John 3: 1 – 21

“The wind blows wherever it pleases”

As I reflected on Pentecost this week, Saturday television as a child came to mind, the Billy Cotton Show in particular. The older generation will remember his call at the beginning of the show “Wakey wakey!”

I think that call might apply to Christians at Pentecost. Wakey wakey! It is time to do an audit of your spiritual life, there’s a more modern term! Time to stoke the flames of the fire.

We’ve had a wood burning stove for the past year. You can have a raging fire with a warm glow and heat radiating into the room. But if you forget to add fuel, it can quickly die down, the bright orange glow becomes a flicker, the heat is gone, you would think it is too late to add another log. How do you catch that flicker and re-ignite it? You open the vents and let the air flow and the flames come back to life.

And so it is with our spiritual lives. We sometimes need to open the vents wider and let the wind of the spirit refresh and renew and strengthen us. Lots of things can dampen our enthusiasm and passion and energy - difficult circumstances, disappointments, health worries, broken relationships, fatigue. The term “burn out” is quite apt.

The disciples knew all of these things – fatigue from three years of intensive ministry, the loss of their Lord and master in horrendous circumstances, the disappointment of hopes for the future destroyed. But the resurrection of Jesus restored their joy and the coming of the Holy Spirit ignited their fire!

Wakey wakey! This phrase is, in fact, very biblical. The bible says **“Wake up, O sleeper, rise from the dead and Christ will shine on you.”** (Ephesians 5: 14).

The source of this new testament verse is probably from several hundred years previously in Isaiah 60: 1 where it says **“Arise, shine, for your light has come and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.”** God has been trying to waken us up for a long time.

The daily word from the Glasgow Prophetic Centre on Wednesday was on this theme. The person wrote **“I heard the Holy Spirit repeat the same phrase three times – Wake up and be set on fire! As these words were decreed, I saw the phrase shooting out over all lands, all nations and, ultimately over all his people.**

To those who chose to listen to the wake-up call from Heaven, there is an encounter with the fire of God that will equip you to fulfil his coming purposes. In your response to the call to rise up from your slumber there is a whole new wave of power coming into your midst, to equip you to bring Kingdom transformation.

Kingdom transformation! How we long to see transformed lives in our church, in our families, in our community, across our nation.

Jesus needs us to be the sparks that ignite the fire. A friend gave me a picture this week to think about in relation to ministry and I think it applies to all our Christian activity. She saw a

blacksmith hitting his hammer against the anvil and sparks were flying. Not flames but tiny sparks.

We can think of individual encounters with people, outreach into the community, our work with children or young people or the elderly or the sick or the dying. We might not see huge results ourselves but we are sending out sparks of faith into the lives of others and only God knows when these sparks might bring about transformation.

I remember some years ago, welding work was being done in a barn near Ratho and care was taken to ensure that the sparks did not come near the bales of straw. But a stray spark did find its way unnoticed into the bales and smouldered there for hours, unseen, before suddenly bursting into flame and setting the barn ablaze.

A tiny spark. Scotland used to be a Christian country. For some of us even in our lifetimes the churches were full on Sundays and people went to church twice on a Sunday and Sunday School had to meet in the afternoon because there was no room for all the children in the morning. There are still some churches like that today but they are in the minority. Shops and businesses were closed on Sunday and I didn't get to play in the local park. It was a family day for walking or visiting family and friends after church. Scotland sent missionaries around the world and now countries in South America and Africa are sending missionaries to Scotland.

I see the present spiritual landscape of Scotland as barren and waterless with dried up yellow grass. And yet what happens when a spark lands in dry yellow grass? It can ignite a massive, blazing uncontrollable fire.

Or maybe in Scotland we should be thinking about setting the heather on fire! The phrase means to be exceptionally or sensationally successful, to cause a great sensation. We tend to use that phrase negatively, maybe it's a Scottish thing. We might say that event was okay or that person was interesting....but he won't set the heather on fire.

We need to be the sparks that will set the heather on fire. Many people are spiritually thirsty and seeking. Many people believe in "something" that might resemble God and many believe in "somewhere" after death. They are like dry heather waiting for someone or something to ignite the fire of faith within them.

Heather is burned deliberately for a purpose. We've all seen those areas of hillside covered in smoke. The old dead heather, the dead wood, is quickly burned off to allow new shoots to flourish and so burning actually strengthen the plants.

In drawing an analogy with our faith, the useless and the withered aspects of our life need to be refined and burnt off. We need to constantly get rid of the sin to allow faith and grace to flow and to flourish.

Wherever we go we carry the spirit of Jesus Christ. We need to constantly be aware of that. Maybe if we were more aware of sending out sparks of faith into the lives of others, we could be exceptionally or sensationally successful in fanning the fire of the holy spirit in those around us.

But the Holy Spirit is not confined or restrained in any way. He is certainly not dependant on us. Our reading about Nicodemus' conversation with Jesus reminds us the Holy Spirit goes

ahead of us into every situation. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.

The wind of the Holy Spirit was very much present in a train carriage yesterday. I was travelling to Aberdeen early in the morning and seven teenagers aged about 16 got on the train at Haymarket going to a sports event in Dundee. As the train pulled out of the station, one boy took a book from his bag and said someone had given it to him. It was a bible and he offered to read bits aloud to pass the time! He read bits aloud all the way from Edinburgh to Dundee and his friends listened. They really didn't have a clue about the bible and their comments were very funny at times. The boy kept reading the word "begat" and asked what on earth that meant. An older boy explained. He then asked where Jesus was in the bible and found the gospels. He asked "Did Jesus write this?" He read that Jesus was talking to Moses and wondered how this could be because Moses was a much much older guy! He read that Jesus was the son of David and exclaimed "But I thought he was the son of Joseph!" He read that the Saviour would come and his name would be Emmanuel. He said "But I thought his name was Jesus, who is this Emmanuel dude?"

I was so tempted to answer but that would have ended his journey through the bible. I simply prayed for him and his friends, that they would one day know the answers to all these questions. The holy spirit is at work everywhere and all the time.

The purpose of the wind of the spirit is to draw people to God, to transform lives, to enable people to be born again, to become new creations.

People are asking today "How can it be?" Nicodemus asked "How can it be?"

Where have we heard that question before in the New Testament? It was the question that Mary asked when the angel Gabriel appeared and told her she would give birth to the Son of God. Mary simply said "How will this be?" It is the question of an open, seeking heart. And Mary and Nicodemus were indeed shown how it could be and their lives were transformed.

In John 7, where Jesus attends the Feast of the Tabernacles and enrages the Pharisees by teaching that he is the water of life, Nicodemus comes to his defence, but still timidly. He does not proclaim his faith in Jesus but he quotes the Jewish law that a man cannot be condemned without a fair hearing.

It is after the death of Jesus that Nicodemus comes out of the shadows and publicly declares his love for Jesus. He along with Joseph of Arimathea, were allowed by Pilate to take the body of Jesus from Calvary Hill. Joseph provided the tomb and Nicodemus brought a huge amount of expensive myrrh and aloes to embalm the body.

It is recorded in the gospel of Nicodemus and other writings not included in the bible that Nicodemus was stripped of his office and banished from Jerusalem by hostile Jews and he would later be baptised by Peter and John.

Mary was highly favoured among women and Nicodemus was highly favoured among men. Mary brought Jesus into the world and Nicodemus prepared Jesus body to leave this world.

The wind of the Holy Spirit blows wherever it pleases. The tongues of Pentecost come down on those called by God, perhaps unexpectedly.

Returning to the word from the Glasgow Prophetic Centre, the writer went on to say -

Respond to this wake-up call from the Lord. Allow him to come into your midst, right now, to wake you up in areas that you have been sleeping and allow him to set you on fire for the sake of his name.

Tim Hughes wrote a song on this theme -

"Consuming Fire"

There must be more than this,
O breath of God come breathe within,
There must be more than this,
Spirit of God we wait for You.

Fill us anew we pray, Fill us anew we pray.

[Chorus]

Consuming fire fan into flame,
A passion for Your Name,
Spirit of God fall in this place,
Lord have Your way,
Lord have Your way with us,
Come like a rushing wind,
Clothe us with power from on high,
Now set the captives free,
Leave us abandoned to Your praise.

Lord let Your glory fall, Lord let Your glory fall.

Stir it up in our hearts Lord,
Stir it up in our hearts Lord,
Stir it up in our hearts Lord,
A passion for Your Name.

Amen