

A Heart Aflame

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Only passions, great passions, can elevate the soul to great things. Denis Diderot

No-one will achieve anything unless his heart is passionate in the pursuit of it. I have often been saddened at the dispassionate way in which some people pursue their worship. Worship is meant to be hot, alive, burning, the irrepressible love of a heart aflame.

I remember as a child, while staying with my grandmother, going out among the grass and trees and lighting my little campfire. Within minutes I was running back to the house terrified, shouting, 'Gran, Gran, there's a fire!'

What minutes before had been a small flame had leapt upwards, setting fire to the leaves of the trees. Now the tall grass and small trees were ablaze. It took the efforts of the neighbours from all around, as well as the fire brigade, to finally put it out.

How like the spirit of man which, set alight by the love of God, leaps instantly upwards, its flame longing to join the fire that surrounds his throne.

But seeing his eyes like 'flames of fire', we quickly feel our humanity to be so unfitted for the presence of his divinity. Yet it is he who brought us to this place of his presence. He doesn't drive us away. Instead, our experience becomes that of Isaiah, who, feeling so small, unsuited and unclean in the presence of God's burning majesty, was touched by the coals of fire from the altar.

That fire burns up what is unworthy, unacceptable and undesirable in our lives. It continues to burn among the coals on the altars of our hearts as we find a zeal for God, a passion to do his will for his pleasure.

No-one is fitted to be a true servant of God unless the fire of God's love burns in his heart. The Bible teaches us that he makes his servants flames of fire (Hebrews 1:7). It is this burning zeal and passion that causes us to drop all else in our pursuit of the purpose of God for our time. And nowhere does this inner fire of the soul find better fuel than in the time of worship and adoration before his throne.

It was as he emerged from waiting on God in the secret place that the Scripture records of Christ, 'his countenance was changed'. If it was true for him is it not equally true for us? We cannot be in his presence alone for long without experiencing a change in our being. It is impossible to be with him and not be warmed by his presence.

The two lone disciples sharing the pain of his recent crucifixion while trudging along the Emmaus road were startled by the stranger coming alongside. His questions and his words of wisdom burned into their innermost being. Then, as he broke bread with them that evening, they knew it was the Lord. Their description of that experience illustrates the

effect of his presence and words in our own lives: 'Were not our hearts *burning within us* while he talked with us on the road?' (Luke 24:32).

Much has been spoken and written about the Christ of the broken heart. Much also should be made of the Christ of the *burning* heart. The zeal with which he pursued the will of God. The anger he displayed at the hypocrisy of the religionists of his day. The convictions he held so immovably. The commitment he displayed towards the disciples. None of it would have been possible had not the flame of God burned strongly within him. As he was, so must we be.

'Ah, but'-those twins of unbelief-now say, 'If you only knew my pressures. I can't stay fervently in love with God all the time.'

But the fire *can* be kept burning. From childhood, one of my delights has been to keep an open fire burning in the home. I have learnt how to bank up the fire on cold winter evenings to make sure that in the morning it remains alight. I find it very fulfilling to come down in the morning and, gently blowing upon the coals, see them come alive again-to realise that, although the length of the night had seemed to snatch away the flame, the gentle blowing revives it.

So it is in life when the pressures of circumstances close in around us. The choices and decisions to be made may momentarily damp down the flame of fervour in our hearts, but they cannot steal it away. The gentle blowing of the wind of the Spirit will soon fan the flame of worship into life again.

It will be partly through corporate worship that this takes place-if it is truly Spirit-led. Somehow the oh-so-predictable song service, synthesised music and zealously animated worship leaders we so often encounter today leave me yearning for a different time, place and way. They are no more satisfying to me than the equally predictable liturgies of yesteryear.

How glad I am that I was privileged from my earliest Christian days to worship in a Christian community that knew how to respond fervently to the moving of the Holy Spirit from hearts burning with love for God.

How I loved those meetings! There was a divine unpredictability about them. Often the awesome sense of his presence found us reluctant to breathe or say anything; at other times strong men, most of them coal-miners, were prostrate on the floor in adoration of God. People would burst into songs of the Spirit and tears were allowed to flow without restraint.

We were all deeply conscious of the presence of God among us. We were caught up with the wonder, the breathtaking beauty, the immeasurable grace, the infinite greatness and the majestic splendour of God himself in our midst, our hearts aflame with him.

We were released by his presence into the reality of worship. It was as though our interaction in worship deepened, heightened and broadened our capacity to express

worship together. It was from these times together that we went back to our homes and work filled by new visions of God.

When religion is stripped of its ritual and liturgy we return to the simplicity of our encounters and experience of God. Here in his burning presence our spirit is unimpaired in its approach to the throne. Here we see the glory of God before us. 'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God' (Matthew 5:8).

It is such visions of God that made the ancient prophets what they were-mighty men of faith and the voice of God in their time. Here in the secret place of worship and praise where we behold him, we are being fitted for just such a calling to our own generation. Here is the vision that makes his ministers flames of fire.

'When Solomon finished praying, fire came down from heaven and consumed the burnt offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. The priests could not enter the temple of the Lord because the glory of the Lord filled it. When all the Israelites saw the fire coming down and the glory of the Lord above the temple, they knelt on the pavement with their faces to the ground, and they worshipped and gave thanks to the Lord, saying, "He is good; his love endures forever"' (2 Chronicles 7:1-3).

Thirty-two years ago God called me to be a preacher. My life has lived the joys of preaching ever since. I can't imagine anything that could excite the human heart to the same degree. There is a thrill in opening the Word of God and realising the awesome privilege of standing between God and men. There is also a fear of God causing the heart to tremble, the love of God causing the heart to reach out, and the anointing of God causing the mind to be alert to revelation and effective in communicating its truth. I think all preachers would agree with me that we would be the first to fall back, not only in awe but in glad deference, should God sovereignly move in with a display of his presence, power and fiery burnings that made preaching at that moment unnecessary. He has done it before; he still does it at times.

While we were in the flow of worship one recent Sunday morning, God moved in upon us sovereignly in this fashion. There was such a work of the Spirit across the gathering that I knew it would be impossible to preach the Word that day. God had come.

Some were kneeling, some were standing, some were sitting. Some were prostrate before his presence. No-one dared try to call time on what was happening because God had taken the floor. And even without a preacher, that day twelve people came to Christ, acknowledging him as their Lord and Saviour. As we left, our hearts burned with the flame of his presence.