

St Brandon's, Sermon for 14th August 2022.

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Fire, or scorching heat?

Alison Hobbs

I wonder if you have seen or heard the honking flights of geese going overhead all this last week? Are they practising? I had to do a quick mental check: yes, we are not yet at the middle of August and I think of those V formations around Michlemas daisy time. I'm no country girl but that and the golden brown stubble fields feel early.

The last couple of day's heat might have been worthy of comment – remarkable even - had we not had the extraordinary roaring hot winds taking Durham to 37 degrees this time last month. I'm resisting using the word 'unprecedented', I rate it as the new cliché yet it is often being used accurately.

I might not be a country girl but I enjoy listening to Farming Today when I catch it, and yesterday morning they were reflecting on the current, less record-breaking heat wave. There were several reports of crop fires caused by combine harvesters hitting flints, no lives lost but expensive crop loss and burnt out machinery, and insurance claims set to exceed the 550 claims made by farmers last year for fire losses.

I noticed how quickly I've got used to such stories after the first shock last month, of hearing that rows of houses had been caught by wild fires in the London area: quite unthinkable in the London I grew up in.

I am drawing a parallel here with the words of Jesus at the end of the gospel passage where he says to the crowds, "*when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat'; and it happens.. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"*

Jesus was referring to the whole acceptance of the Roman occupation and oppression; the false values of many of the Pharisees and High Priests that were driving corrupt religious practises, Israel turning away from God to look for an army leader: an unstable situation. Into this melting-pot has come Jesus with talk of the kingdom, of not focussing on material goods: how the inheritance is divided between brothers, not fretting about 'their lives' but looking at what is far more important both as the threat and the promise, if they will only listen to him. They did, but not enough: much bloodshed and the unthinkable happened within decades, and the temple, the centre of their religion was destroyed again.

Here we are, 2,000 years on and all of God's beautiful creation, this very world, is under threat of destruction.

We have known the heatwave was coming for days and weeks, we have known our summers are getting hotter, the weather more extreme, for years. But have we been ready to interpret the meaning of this truthfully?

Perhaps like me, you remember reading prophetic warnings like Rachel Carson's 'Silent Spring'? Have followed science articles over the years and tried to understand the arguments. Have watched the increasing take-up of the themes across the media, across the continents, across the Aid Agencies. Have watched and wondered why so little has been seriously acted upon by those in power, and feel helpless in the face of it all?

Jesus came to overturn our helplessness, to challenge our acceptance of an unacceptable status quo, to open our minds to the threat and the promise, if we hear and act accordingly.

"I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled!"

The fire of faith, setting hearts ablaze.

But it cannot be kindled in the disciples by the Holy Spirit until Pentacost, until he himself has gone through the agony of his death and resurrection, has fulfilled the mission he has been given, been baptized into the new life he was baptised for, *"and what stress I am under until it is completed!"*

Today's passages are hard, there is little that is reassuring in Jesus' words, he is looking straight at the truth of what is coming, and speaking with the urgent, gloves-off voice of one who looks truth in the eye. He contradicts what we think we have understood him to say elsewhere, he makes us feel on unsafe ground.

Well, I guess we do stand on unsafe ground but the cause of that is not Jesus' words but the truth of the situation. Every follower of Christ is called to see the truth of their day as best they can and follow as best they can even though the way of their baptism promises will take them into conflicts and consequent pain because of that following.

Jesus is not advocating conflict in relationships, it is not a desirable outcome for a household to have division, it can't be, because his teaching is always emphasising compassion and forgiveness in relationships. But what when the world views and intentions for good, or lack of them divide the household into

different camps? Then the relative importance of loving him and his way has to be considered and not pushed aside. We're not asked to love them less but to acknowledge that we love him above all else and that's the challenge, to act in acknowledgement of that.

Jesus is addressing first the disciples, and later, the crowds. We are responsible for listening and acting as individuals, and we are responsible for listening and acting corporately.

As a church, we will have a green fortnight covering three Sundays at the end of September. This will be a chance to listen and pray on these matters, to get more informed and be creative, putting our faith in the Holy Spirit to inspire further action for change.

At the same time, the government will be announcing the measures for financial aid in response to the increase in energy caps and the rapid escalation in the costs of energy, and the knock-ons that will have. I doubt there will be many households in the country that will be ignoring this, and many that will be looking to cut consumption, and as Geoff pointed out last week, excess consumption is a big part of the malady.

How can we grasp truth when it is so full of hardship and pain? There will be real suffering, for many, and its going to fall hardest on the least resourced: how can we work for justice?

I don't know the answer to that, the inspiration has not yet come! But I do know that we are better resourced – are a more resourceful community than many. Between us, we have the brains, we have the skills of managing and the inventiveness to find solutions and alternatives. Do we have the courage and resilience to move into lower personal consumption with grace and good humour, for the sake of a fairer world – fairer in both senses? If we can walk that walk openly, we can learn from each other and find not only incidental but also intentional ways of spreading that learning wider and enabling others. The starting point can also be that intentional action of enabling and resourcing others but not without the humility and integrity of doing our part to walk alongside.

A third item coming in late September will be the start, we hope, of us becoming a PMC, a partnership for mission church, inviting all and any of you to be part of a prayerful seeking for what God's promised and preferred future for St Brandon's looks like: what do we do and why.

Perhaps this is the cue to turn and look briefly at the letter to the Hebrews (!) because although it may have sounded like a wearily long list of hard tasks, persecutions, and martyrdoms, there are important contra messages. The author is urging us to see that all these seemingly impossible things were made possible not by the person's own strength but in the strength of their faith. By faith we do and endure things that are beyond our expectations and abilities; we are equipped for the task through faith. Furthermore, we who come in the light of Christ are additionally equipped through the work of the Holy Spirit, and encouraged and urged on by the lives of all who have gone before: that cloud of witnesses that have preceded us to death and wait with eager longing to be resurrected with us.

This is the truth that should give us the courage to not just to follow in Christ's footsteps but to run! Running with perseverance the race that is set before us with eyes fixed on Jesus and the weight of our uncertainties cast onto him.

Jesus has been telling us that turning this world around and entering into the kingdom demands considerable effort: but the outward strife and hardship is nothing compared to the joy set before us, the fullness of his peace.

Amen