

Ex. 2:2 “The angel of the Lord appeared to Moses in flames of fire from within a bush. “Do not come any closer’ said God, ..”for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”

My wife and I had a quarrel this week. We don't quarrel often but this was a bad one. It was my fault, caused by some childish and unreasonable behaviour. At first she was in a blazing fury, which quite frightened me. Then she became icily cold, which was in a way more frightening, and I was shut out of her life for some hours. Yet it was necessary for me. I became aware of how silly and hurtful my behaviour had been, not just in the incident but in a host of other incidents which had led up to the confrontation. Wives are very forgiving and I'm glad to say she's been speaking to me again for a little while now. But, I say again, the fire and the ice were important for me

Speaking of blazing furies it's a time of year for thinking about fires. Its been so cold that we've had one most evenings glowing in our hearth. Hearth fires are warm and comforting, I guess, but it's the time of year, too, for grass fires as cautious landowners burn firebreaks to protect their lands. And grass fires are not comforting. They are scary, they are very scary if they get out of control as you will remember after the terrible midlands fires some years ago, but they are also important for the health of veld and pasture. Grassland scientists tell us that veld fires are a necessary part of nature.

In the gospel for today Jesus also talks about fires, about a sort of bonfire on which all the weeds or tares which have been pulled up will get burned up. Garden bonfires are quite nice too, for those of you who are allowed to burn leaves in your garden and don't live in a smoke free zone. But Jesus isn't talking about fun bonfires. He's talking about hell. He talks about hell in a number of places in the gospels; today's reference is a somewhat glancing one but what about earlier in Matthew: “He will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into his barn; but the chaff, the rubbish, he will burn in a fire that will never go out.” (Mt 3:12) What about the Book of Revelation: “Those who have worshipped the beast, those who have sinned, who have worshipped false gods, shall be tortured in the presence of the holy angels and the smoke of their torture will go up for ever and ever.”

What do you believe about hell? Do you believe in it at all? Perhaps for some of you the pictures of Hieronimus Bosch come to mind, of tormented souls being thrown by the demons into the blazing fires. Is the whole idea just a piece of lurid medieval imagination? But it's in the Bible. It's in the words of Jesus. It's in the bits marked in red in your New Testament, in the very words of Jesus. The fire. The torture. For all eternity.

There's been an ongoing dispute about hell amongst evangelical Christians for some time now. More liberal Christians of course have stopped believing in hell for a long time. It's not consistent with a God of Love, they say. Modern people can't believe such rubbish. But it's in the Bible, say the evangelicals, it's in the gospels and you can't just remake your idea of God to fit your own comfort levels.

Yet it is difficult, isn't it. The idea of eternal torment, eternal torture, eternal pain; does even the worst human sinner deserve that? And while they want to be faithful to the Bible some evangelicals are deeply troubled in their conscience. John Stott, famous evangelical leader and preacher and retired

Rector of All Souls Langham Place said “emotionally I find the concept intolerable and do not understand how people can live with it without either cauterizing their feelings or cracking under the strain”. More recently a younger evangelical scholar Gregory MacDonald, or more properly Robin Parry writing under a pseudonym, said he was having what he called a doxological crisis. What he meant was that suddenly, believing in hell made him feel that God was not worthy of worship, he could no longer love God because the idea of eternal punishment seemed to diminish God, make God smaller.

Do you know what he means? Yet John Stott came under sturdy criticism from James Packer, another Anglican evangelical scholar just as famous, and many other evangelicals and has never mentioned his doubts in public again, and Robin Parry was so nervous of voicing his moral objections that he wrote his book under an assumed name. You’re not being true to the Bible, said Packer. You can’t pick and choose just the bits that you like. You can’t remake God into what you think God should be like.

Let me put my cards on the table. I don’t believe in hell. I can’t believe in hell. I can’t take literally those biblical images of a burning lake of sulphur in which the faithless or the wicked will be tormented through the endless ages of eternity. Does that mean I believe everyone will go to heaven, that everyone will be saved? Am I what is called a universalist? On that I am agnostic. I do not know. I believe that God wants to save every human soul. I believe too that every human soul has free will and may choose, perhaps, to shut himself or herself away from God, perhaps for eternity. Perhaps in the end no-one makes that choice. Perhaps in the end, as Robin Parry to whom I referred a moment ago says, God’s grace is such that no-one is lost. Or perhaps in the end, as John Stott suggests, the person who ultimately refuses God is just annihilated as they cut themselves off from God who is life. I think I am with John Stott on this one.

But what about those Biblical images of fire? What about the bonfire to which Jesus refers in the gospel? Well, the story of Moses and the burning bush perhaps gives us another perspective. This story is not about the fires of hell. Here is an image of God as fire. Is God the eternal fire? We remind ourselves: fire warms but fire also burns and destroys and Moses is told to come no closer for being in the presence of God is a serious and dangerous thing. Perhaps God is that eternal fire that the Biblical imagery so often refers to.

We need to take God’s anger seriously. As we come into his presence we come into the presence of his anger, his blazing fury against untruth and unlove and injustice and to the extent that these things are within us - and of course they are within us -they will be exposed and burnt out. It is a painful fire. It is a healing fire.

And the weeds, the tares, the darnel or whatever translation your Bible uses in today’s parable, the weeds which are [pulled up and burnt, they are perhaps not people being destroyed but the weeds within us, the deceits, lies we tell ourselves, the selfish impulses.

I want to go back to my opening story, the fire of my wife’s anger, the icyness of her withdrawal. There’s not much about ice in the Bible, perhaps because there’s not much ice in the Holy Land where

sun and hear and fire are more familiar images. But if you remember CS Lewis' tale of Narnia under the control of the snow queen you may get the idea. If we draw close to God there will be heat; heat is comforting, heat is necessary, heat gives life. Heat, as in any grass fire, burns away what is old and dead and lifeless so that new growth can take place. But that will be painful and we may resist and turn away. The pain of truth and honesty may be more than we are willing to bear. And then, perhaps, we are lost. If we turn away we enter the realm of ice; there is no longer life in us. We become rigid, frozen, stiff and ultimately dead.

I don't believe in hell. I do believe in God's anger. And anger, whether God's anger or the righteous anger of the social reformer or the furious anger of a wife who has been messed around with or any other justified anger is a holy thing. It is to be feared, but it is also to be welcomed. It is holy ground. We approach it with awe but it cleanses. It burns away the dross. However painful, it makes us holy too. It is a stepping stone to heaven.