

## Salted with fire

I have a feeling that we might look back at this time, the half century from around 1970 to 2020, as having been the zenith of secular materialism. A time when the vacuity of the human condition collapsed into an urgent and emergent thirst to recover mystery from out of barren egocentric reasoning. To recover spiritual imagination.

The problem with ungrounded intellect, is that reality is incomplete when it is not rested in the heart. The Hindus have a central mantra. *Om mani padme hum*. It means that the *om*, the cosmic totality of being, is realised when the *mani*, the diamond of the mind, rests in the *padme*, the lotus of the heart, *hum*, undivided.

Jesus says the same in Luke 17. The community of heaven will not be found in the logical ordering of the rational world. It's not something that you find in the realm of 'Here it is!' or 'There it is!' The community of heaven is within. Then we will be enlightened, Luke goes on to say, and so poetically in the King James Version, 'as the lightning, that lighteneth out of the one part under heaven, shineth unto the other part under heaven'. Then we will see the inner truth of all.

A lightning show is best watched in the darkness. Our eyes must similarly grow accustomed to the spiritual milieu. We will not see with eyes that have been dazzled and damaged by too much outer world reality. The saints would turn off artificial lights; they'd fast as Easter drew nigh. Theology itself, when seen through damaged eyes, turns toxic. It turns us from within back to the busy, noisy realm of 'here' or 'there'. We miss the rhythms of the mystery, their many layers of meaning, we maybe even cast them out – anathema! – and lose them to our shared traditions.

Consider hell. Those who take a literal fundamentalist view of Christian scripture often point to the binary divide between Heaven and Hell posited in the story of Lazarus and Dives. But dim the lights a little, watch for the underflash of lightning from the clouds, and the word used in Luke 16 is simply Hades, the Greek world of the afterlife. Moreover, in addressing Dives – the corporate banker, the arms merchant, the human trafficker, the

ordinary me and you – Abraham refers to him tenderly, as ‘son’ or ‘child’. It’s not exactly unredemptive language.

Or consider Matthew 3, where Christ comes with his winnowing fork to separate the wheat from the chaff, and to burn the latter in unquenchable fire. This is another passage that’s used to justify a binary divide between heaven and hell, the Elect and the Damned. But not so fast. Have too many theologians up their ivory towers been set loose on this passage? Is it not the case that every single grain of wheat has had its corresponding chaff? That, as vital to its growing journey? Might we not be wiser, and more humble towards others, if we take our cue from 1 Corinthians 3, and understand it as the fire that tests the quality of each one of us, the fire that refines gold?

Then there’s Mark’s Gospel, chapter 9, where Jesus seems to open all the stops on hell, for here, repeated three times, ‘their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched’. Note, however, that the rhetorical force of this text has been amplified through time. Modern translations tend to omit verses 44 and 46, leaving only verse 48, as the repetitions are lacking in the most reliable early manuscripts.

Still, ‘the fire that never shall be quenched’ sounds bad enough. But if we read on, if we don’t quote out of context, the remaining verses in the chapter say: ‘For every one shall be salted with fire ... Salt is good ... Have salt in yourselves, and have peace one with another.’ Salt was a precious commodity and it brings out the flavour, so here too is a metaphor of our winnowing.

The first letter of John, chapter 4, tells that perfect love casts out fear because fear is punishment, or torment. Because ‘God is love.’

Easter exposes naked violence on a green hill far away, but devoid of reciprocal violence in a never-ending spiral. Instead, the buck stops here. The cross absorbs the violence of the world. Christ told Pilate that if he was a worldly king, his followers would take up the sword and rally to save him (John 18). His ‘kingdom’ is not of this world, the very concept of being a ‘king’, he shows Pilate, is suspect. His way is not of this world. As our medi-

eval forebears might have translated it, 'Thy community of the realm come ... in earth as is in heaven.'

Over the Easter weekend, says the Apostles' Creed, 'He descended into Hell.' But as Livvy or John Livingstone, a street theologian and eco-warrior of the GalGael Trust in George MacLeod's Govan once said, 'Hell could not hold such love as this.'

As the Russian Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov develops the point: '*The only message which could reach atheism today is that of Christ descending into hell. As deep as the hell in which we find ourselves, it is even more profound to find Christ already there waiting for us.*'<sup>1</sup>

'*The fire of hell,*' says another Orthodox theologian, Olivier Clément, is but '*the fire of love that gives remorse a terrible clarity.*'<sup>2</sup> It burns off only the chaff, only that which is no longer authentic to us. Such love as this can not be trapped in space and time. It can not be limited to our logical perceptions and cognitions of 'here' or 'there'. Such love is of the mystery, grounded in eternity. Resurrection is intrinsic to the nature of that which never dies, '*You can't kill the Spirit ...*' How we tell that story, how we relax the *mani* into the *padme*, how we ground what is in heaven here on earth, well, that is the Easter story.

'Our God is a consuming fire' (Hebrews 12:29).

And there's the lightning flash.

*Alastair McIntosh*

Notes:

1. Paul Evdokimov, *In the World, of the Church: A Paul Evdokimov Reader*, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, NY, 2001, p.191.

2. Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Texts from the Patristic Era with Commentary*, Olivier Clément, New City Press, NY, 1993, p.303.