The Fire of the Spirit
Saint Thomas’s, Salisbury, Whitsunday 2020
Preached via YouTube

It’s interesting that in all Christian traditions, the image of the Holy Spirit as fire turns up again and again in our worship. If I just think through the breadth of the tradition, hymn words spring immediately to mind. “O thou who camest from above, the fire celestial to impart, Kindle a flame of deepest love on the mean altar of my heart.” Charles Wesley of course, but well beloved of the Anglo-Catholic tradition too. I remember kneeling before the altar at my installation as parish priest in Gloucestershire, and singing “still let me guard the holy fire, and still stir up the gift in me.”

But think of the evangelical tradition: Graham Kendrick’s perennially popular ‘Shine, Jesus, Shine’, with its repeated petition, “blaze, spirit, blaze, set our hearts on fire.”

Or William Booth’s wonderful Salvation Army classic, ‘Thou Christ of burning cleansing fire’, which is a direct prayer to Christ for the gift of the Holy Spirit, and contains the extraordinary and wonderful prayer: “to make our weak hearts strong and brave, send the fire. To live a dying world to save, send the fire.”

The symbol of the Holy Spirit as a flame, or as fire, comes of course most directly from the story in Acts of the “divided tongues, as of fire” which settle on the heads of the apostles on the day of Pentecost, bringing confidence, inspiration and the gift of tongues. But all through Scripture like a golden thread there is the language of light and flame being a marker of the presence of God. The pillar of fire leads the Israelites through the desert. Fire blazes down on the mountain to consume Elijah’s offering. When Peter is freed from prison, again in Charles Wesley’s words, “thine eye diffused a quickening ray: I woke, the dungeon flamed with light.”

Over my shoulder you can see the remains of Emma and my Paschal candle, bodged together this year from what we could order online from IKEA! And as I have lit it every day through this lockdown Eastertide, I’m reminded of the candle lit at my baptism when I was told to “shine as a light in the world”, I’m reminded of the candles that burn on the altar at St Thomas’s when we celebrate the Eucharist. I’m reminded that the God who draws close to us is like fire: able to warm, able to illuminate: alive, dancing, flickering, animating. Welcoming, comforting, and yes maybe even a little bit dangerous. All of these things are the marks of the Holy Spirit that burns in each of our hearts, knitting us, separated though we be, into the people of God, called to proclaim, wherever we are: alleluia! Christ is risen.