

Repent and Be Baptised

Eighty years ago, an ancient custom was reborn: after 1400 years, the Olympic flame was relit for the games which in that year were held in Amsterdam. Eight years later, the idea of lighting the torch at the ancient Olympian site in Greece and then running it through different countries was reborn. This more modern form was invented by the organisers of the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. It was planned with immense care by the Nazi leadership to project the image of the Third Reich as a modern, economically dynamic state with growing international influence.

The organiser of the 1936 games wanted an event linking the modern Olympics with the ancient, an idea which chimed perfectly with the Nazi belief that classical Greece was an Aryan forerunner of the modern German Reich. The ancient legend is reported in various pieces of classical Greek literature. It is the myth of Prometheus, who stole fire from almighty Zeus and gave it to mortal humanity.

The carrying of the Olympic Torch has always been, in its very nature, a demonstration of human's wrenching a divine blessing out of the hands of a reluctant God. A celebration that we don't need a God to interfere with human affairs. In its Greek Origins, or in its Nazi rebirth – the Olympic Torch is an acted political parable. It is political through and through. And that political flame will be carried right past this church as we sing our closing hymn this morning.

And so it sounds nothing short of ridiculous to hear Radio 4 presenters asking whether the Pure Ideals of the Olympic Torch will be tragically infected by Politics. The flame of that torch has always been a political flame. And as you may have heard, there will be political protests as the torch is carried through London, because our celebration of that flame as it makes its journey to China for this year's Olympics, is heard by many as an endorsement of the human rights abuses associated with China's occupation of Tibet.

The only question it raises for me, is whether countries might similarly boycott the flame as it travels to London in 2012. Because when you scratch the surface of Britain's economic and foreign policy, a very strong case could be made for human rights abuses that are not so easily labelled, but which are every bit as much a horrific reality as are those we currently see in China. But regardless of the controversy that surrounds it, the Olympic Torch carries a political flame.

This morning's New Testament reading takes up the controversy surrounding another political flame: those burning at Pentecost. The tongues of fire which gripped a multi-national gathering of Jews.

Pentecost and Politics

For a second week running, the lectionary takes us through Peter's sermon in the light of what has just happened at Pentecost. Although Peter had not really preached a great Pentecost sermon by our standards! He had mentioned the prophecy that the Spirit would be poured out on all flesh, but from then on in, the whole sermon is about Jesus and the resurrection: he has begun by showing from the Hebrews Scriptures, that God had always intended that Israel's Messiah, a true descendant of David, should not suffer physical corruption after death, but should be raised to new bodily life. The resurrection of Jesus is the demonstration that he

really is the true Messiah, David's ultimate heir, Israel's rightful King, the world's true Lord. That is the essence of Peter's address, and it is classic early Christian evangelism.

Those who heard this sermon were cut to the heart, and encouraged to repent and be baptised. And what does repentance mean here? It is not saying sorry for this or that particular sin. Nor is it an individual change of heart. The call, when coupled with Baptism, is communal, to become a new kind of community, with a new kind of politics. It is precisely the counter-narrative to the politics of the Olympian flame.

The Olympian flame, even in its contemporary format, is the all-too-human attempt to achieve peace and harmony and unity, without reference to God. It is self made humanity, living by the warmth of its own political flame. Pentecost is about a flame from elsewhere.

What we usually fail to realise, though it would have been blindingly obvious to Luke and his earliest readers, is that this brings the reality and message of God's power into the sphere which we more normally associate with 'power' without the word 'spiritual' attached to it, namely the world of earthly power, political power.

Saying that someone is the nation's true king, the world's true Lord, is fighting talk, and every early Christian knew it. The message of Pentecost invites us not simply to a new, cleansing and reviving spirituality, though of course it does that; not simply to a fresh and firm belief in Jesus' resurrection, though it does that too; it invites us to hail the risen and ascended Jesus as king and lord on earth as he is in heaven.

But ... There already are kings and lords on earth. Peter's Pentecost sermon begins a politically subversive drama that unfolds throughout the entire book of acts : he insists that we hail Jesus as the superior of any earthly king or lord or president or commission or government : Jesus is the king of kings and lord of lords; and Pentecost offers us not simply the power to have new and exciting spiritual experiences but the power to stake this claim for Jesus boldly, cheerfully and effectively.

Peter's address makes this clear once we listen to what he's actually saying. It's political dynamite. This man Jesus, he says, was handed over to you according to God's plan and purpose; but you then used the Gentiles, those outside the law, to crucify him and kill him. That was the political act of the Judaeen rulers, the mob who egged them on, and the soldiers of the occupying forces.

It is a message that is echoed throughout the book of Acts works as a whole. It begins of course with the Ascension, which a first-century reader would be almost bound to see as making a claim about Jesus like that which the Romans made about the Emperors; they supposedly ascended to heaven after their death, to be established as gods and world rulers.

Acts then proceeds in two large sections. The first half has Jesus being announced as the true Messiah, Israel's rightful king; and the various Herods, to say the least, are annoyed and try to stamp it out. They can't, and the message goes out to the wider world in the second half of the book, where Paul and the others are accused, rightly, of saying that there is 'another king, namely Jesus'. The Romans are disturbed, but they can't stop the power of the new movement - that's the point of Pentecost, you see - and Paul ends up in Rome itself, announcing in Caesar's own back yard that God is King and that Jesus the Messiah is Lord, openly and unhindered. That's Pentecost for you. This message, this subversive news, this counter-gospel to the Caesar-gospel, carries a strange power, dare we say a political power.

But it is of course a very strange kind of political power. It doesn't proceed by military conquest from above, or by violent revolution from below. It doesn't impose itself by force or threats. It doesn't, at this stage at least, run for office and try to influence the political process from within.

It proceeds by establishing a community that has turned away from giving allegiance to the other gods, other kings, and other lords - in other words, that has repented - and that has been marked with the sign of the new community, the restored Israel, the new incipient world community, the sign in question being baptism in the name of Jesus the Messiah. And this community orders its life - a very dangerous and subversive thing to do both in first-century Judaism and in the Roman empire - according to a rule which has nothing to do with the social norms of the day: the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread and prayers.

This is how the flame of Pentecost burns. Like the hearts of those disciples on the Road to Emmaus burned. But this is a very different political flame to the one soon to be carried past our church. The Olympic flame is one that, in seeking not to be political, simply endorses the political norms of our world today.

The Pentecost flame is not stolen from God, but given freely by him. It's flame is not one of the discord and fragmentation that the Olympic flame demonstrates: it is a flame that kindles true community and communication. As those from all over the world hear God praised in their own language, as they give themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship and to the breaking of bread.

And as we break bread shortly, it is not for some individual, spiritual forgiveness - although it entails this. It is to a way of being human that breaks through the power games of our world as spring flowers break through concrete. Because it is precisely here that we become truly human, and in so doing offer the world a genuinely alternative way of being human, a truly liberating political flame.