

## Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> July 2022 – 1 Thessalonians 4:13-5:11 'Living for eternity'

A few weeks ago, I re-watched the classic Tom Hanks film 'Castaway'. Most of you will know the true story – a Fedex courier is presumed dead after his plane crashes in the Pacific Ocean. In fact, he survives, and is stranded on a remote island for four years, until he risks everything to build a makeshift boat, which was eventually discovered by a passing tanker. It's a great film, and a remarkable story of survival against all the odds – much like our young church in Thessalonica, who have been the subject of our series over the last few weeks.

One of the best and most captivating parts of the film centres on Hanks' quest to make fire. After a few weeks on the island, he realised that **fire was going to be necessary for his survival**. But it proved incredibly hard to get the right tools and the right method to actually do it. As the days tick on, his efforts get more and more desperate. Eventually, with both hands raw and bloody with painful blisters, he realises that he needs not just friction but oxygen. A few more excruciating rubs of the twigs, and.... hey presto: fire! Later that evening we see a jubilant Hanks throwing large branches onto a huge blaze and dancing round it in utter joy.

There are many images for the Holy Spirit in the bible – water, wind, dove, trainer – but perhaps the most evocative the most dramatic is the one we find here: FIRE. 'Do not quench the Spirit,' Paul tells his readers – in other words, do not put out the fire.

Some of us may find ourselves uncomfortable with this image for the Spirit – it suggests **wildness, something fierce and powerful which is outside our control**. We may prefer the safer images of dove or trainer, or the refreshing image of water. And these are valuable, too, of course – God is always bigger than one image! But it's important not to lose the wilder images: the wind which blows where it pleases, or, here, the fire. To a tiny community under pressure, what they need is not just the comfort of God – they need the power of God too. They need the fire. As it happens, so do we.

And just as Hanks needed the fire to survive on his island, so this young church needs the fire of the Spirit to blaze on their behalf too. It is the unique qualities of fire that can keep this young church going, and we see these itemised in this frantic end to the letter, with so many final encouragement delivered at high speed.

**First we need the light of a fire.** 'Do not treat prophecies with contempt, but test them all; hold on to what is good.' How any church needs the wisdom of God: but the extra value of prophecy is that it is not just general wisdom, it is *specific*. At any point in time, there are particular things which it is good for us to know. Prophecy understands what God is up to, and reveals this to God's people. Sometimes these things represent unique revelation; more often, they are existing bits of wisdom which become important for a particular time and place. My journey towards ordination was triggered by two or three such prophetic words – it's not that it wouldn't have happened without those words: but prophecy made it clear that *now* was the right time.

**That's why we need prophets** – people who are particularly attentive to God, who listen carefully, who stand on the edge of the land seeing what God is about to do next.

And Paul says: listen to these people – test what they say, weigh it and see if the rest of the church’s leadership agrees, but don’t ignore it. If you do, you risk ignoring the light of the Spirit. You pour water on the Spirit’s fire.

**Second, we need the purifying effect of the Spirit’s fire.** If we let the fire burn, inevitably it burns off the impurities. And Paul interprets this in two ways: first, with relation to prophetic words he says ‘reject every kind of evil.’ What I think he is saying here is that we should pay particular attention to words which encourage us to avoid some sort of sinful behaviour. If you look at the Old Testament prophets, much of their prophecy pointed out what was wrong, and urged people to turn back to God. And Paul is saying that this remains valid now: some prophecy positively points us towards what God is doing, other prophecy warns us to avoid harmful behaviour. And we need *both* – both act as a purifying fire in our lives.

But this thought acts as a trigger for Paul to give them a more general encouragement to allow the Spirit of God to cleanse us: ‘May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through.’ The root of the word ‘sanctify’ means to make holy or pure, and there is a strong element of cleansing in this. After all, it is the Holy Spirit – so where the Spirit dwells, that too will become ‘holy’ or set apart.

**This work of cleansing and purifying is not just for a part of us – it’s for all of us: our spirit, soul and body,** as Paul says. What’s the difference between the spirit and the soul, I hear you ask? Well, the great Christian writer Watchman Nee defines the ‘soul’ as a combination of the mind, the emotions and the will – as humans we have unique capacities in this respect, which is why we often refer to our souls as being the essence of what it means to be human. But it’s notable that Paul distinguishes this from the even deeper essence, which is our ‘spirit’ – the breath of life, you might say, the spark of the image of God within us.

Either way, the fire of the Spirit energises and purifies all of us – our spirits, yes, but also our souls and bodies. Like any fire, it doesn’t stay where it is, but moves throughout the dwelling. This, Paul says, is part of the faithful love of God at work in our lives.

**Finally, the fire brings warmth** – and Paul concludes with some lovely encouragements to continue to practise community: pray for us, greet each other with a holy kiss, read this letter together. In other words, stay close to each other. Just as people naturally want to gather round a fire, so let the fire of the Spirit gather you together in the warmth of God’s life.

Just like Hanks, if this small church was to have any chance of surviving – and they did! – they needed the fire: the fire of God’s Spirit to enlighten them, to purify them and to warm them. This is what life in the Spirit means – and it is no less true for us today. Over seven weeks, we’ve soaked up the beautiful teaching of this early letter, and this feels like the fitting place to stop. In the end our Christian life begins with God and ends with God. Paul starts with the Father and the Son, and ends with the Spirit. In fact, he ends with Jesus, too: ‘The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.’ As I close today, I could hardly pray a better blessing for each of us. We never move far from grace – God’s undeserved love towards us. May the Spirit’s fire lead us ever closer to the glorious grace of our Lord – and may that grace be with us all today, this week, and forever more. Amen.