

Fire or Fire

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I

In his discussion of the work of preaching in *Church Dogmatics I,2*, Karl Barth distinguishes three movements in the preparation of the preacher. First, interpretation begins with explication, which comes close to what we normally think of as exegesis or explaining the text in its context. And last, interpretation moves toward application, which is most evident in the finished sermon where text speaks to congregation.

There is, however, a crucial central moment between explication and application—one that is too easily neglected by those who would interpret Scripture. This is the moment of meditation: “What is meant is not, of course, an act which follows the first in time, nor a second act which takes place independently of the first, but the one act of scriptural exegesis considered now in the moment of the transition of what is said into the thinking of the reader or hearer.”¹

Barth further suggests that this process of meditation involves more than the interpreter and the biblical text: “In reading the Bible, we use some sort of key or scheme of thought as a ‘vehicle’ in which to ‘accompany’ it.”²

The “vehicle” which Barth has in mind is some philosophical scheme, a set of presuppositions which the reader brings to the text to help in understanding. Barth suggests that when we use such a vehicle we need to be self-conscious about what we are doing. We need to use the philosophical scheme, not as an end in itself but as a way to raise questions about the text. And we need to remember that what counts is our *interpretation* of the text; the philosophical ideas are aids to that purpose and may in fact be discarded or changed before our interpretation is done.

I suspect that the missing link in much of our preaching is that moment of meditation to which Barth points. We know how to read our commentaries, and we have some idea of the needs and hopes of our congregation, but we rush prematurely from text to situation without the time for meditation. It is precisely that meditation which helps rescue us from using our sermons as an opportunity to apply the arcane to the obvious.

Barth limits the meditative moment, however, by suggesting that the “vehicle” for our reflection should regularly be some philosophical scheme. Novels, poems, plays, visual and plastic arts, motion pictures, hymns—all can fructify our imaginations in the time between exegesis and application.

The purpose of the meditation is a better understanding of the text and its meaning for our people. It may well be that the “vehicle” is discarded by the time we get to the sermon. It would certainly not have been necessary for Barth to quote Hegel in a sermon, however much Hegel helped him in his thought about the text. *Paradise Lost* may help us interpret Genesis more

richly and *J.B.* may open up new meanings in the Book of Job, but our sermons need not be sprinkled with references either to Milton or to MacLeish.

II

T.S. Eliot's poem "Little Gidding," the last of his *Four Quartets*, provides a vehicle to enrich our meditation on the scriptural story of Pentecost.

The poem, like each of the other three quartets, is in five movements. The fourth movement, as in the other quartets, is a lyric:

The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

Who then devised the torment? Love.
Love is the unfamiliar Name
Behind the hands that wove
The intolerable shirt of flame
Which human power cannot remove.
We only live, only suspire
Consumed by either fire or fire.³

We shall attempt briefly a reading of this lyric by Eliot and then use that reading to help us read the Pentecost story afresh. The two texts illumine each other, however, and we begin by noticing that Eliot's lines bring together two Lucan texts: the Pentecost story where the Spirit is given in the wind and the tongues of fire (Acts 2:1-4), and the story of Jesus' baptism where the Spirit descends as a dove (Luke 3:22). Eliot will help us read the Pentecost story in the light of the story of Jesus' baptism and especially in the light of John the Baptist's prophecy about Jesus himself: "I baptize you with water; but he who is mightier than I is coming, the thong of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie; he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire" (Luke 3:16).

When T.S. Eliot wrote "Little Gidding", he had been serving as an air-raid warden, and he was in London in December of 1940 when the blitz began. Although he found life there too strenuous for him and moved shortly thereafter to the country, he returned to London regularly and saw the burned and burning ruins which the German incendiary bombs had left behind.⁴ In a portion of "Little Gidding" which precedes our Pentecost lyric, Eliot recalls the terror of the German bomber flying over the city:

In the uncertain hour before the morning
Near the ending of interminable night
At the recurrent end of the unending
After the dark dove with the flickering tongue
Had passed below the horizon of his homing . . .

Between three districts whence the smoke arose . . . (II,25-32).

We are given a clue to the choice between “fire and fire” that Eliot presents in the lines of the lyric. He has known the fire of human warfare, the incendiary bombs. He has witnessed the terror of the dark dove whose tongue flickers forth the flames of destruction. He recalls—prays for—that bright dove who descends with other tongues of flame, the fire that purifies and redeems.

Remembrance, looking back to the redemptive events of the past, can bring hope even in this enormously precarious present. Eliot writes of “Little Gidding,” an Anglican retreat that had been the center of a spiritual renewal centuries before. He recalls those who have prayed there before his arrival:

And what the dead had no speech for, when living,
They can tell you, being dead: the communication
Of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living
(I,51-53).

Eliot, faced with the threat of death for himself and for western civilization, looks back to the dead for a word of hope. Remembrance brings what the present seems to lack: a word “tongued with fire.”

Again, seeing the specter of death for western civilization and for himself, he writes of the dubious gifts that come with advancing age:

And last, the rending pain of re-enactment
Of all that you have done, and been; the shame
Of motives late revealed, and the awareness
Of things ill done and done to others' harm
Which once you took for exercise of virtue.
Then fools' approval stings, and honour stains.
From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit
Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire
Where you must move in measure, like a dancer (II,86-94).

The fire of war destroys, but other fire refines and purifies. Is this the fire that Eliot calls on us to choose, the fire that restores us from our corporate, national, and personal sin? It is sin, after all, that he has described here—“things ill done and done to others' harm, which once you took as exercise of virtue.”

For Eliot, we remember, the tongues of Pentecost, the tongues with flames of incandescent terror, “declare/The one discharge from sin and error.”

The fire of destruction and sin on the one hand, the fire of purification and forgiveness on the other. Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. We are called to choose between fire and fire.

The choice between fire and fire, one of Eliot's critics says, is the choice between self-love and the love of God.⁵ Eliot tells us that it is *Love* “who devised the torment,” who put us between fire and fire. Love that makes us choose, allows us to choose, either belligerence, sin, and destructiveness on the one side, or purification and reconciliation on the other. The blitzkrieg or Pentecost.

Eliot draws throughout “Little Gidding” on the writings of the English

mystic Dame Julian of Norwich who closed her meditations with these words:

And I saw full surely that ere God made us He loved us; which love was never slacked, nor ever shall be. And in this love He hath done all His works; and in this love is our life everlasting. In our making we had beginning, but the love wherein He made us was in Him without beginning; in which love we have made our beginning. And all this shall we see in God without end.⁶

If this is a lyric about Pentecost, it interprets Pentecost as a moment both of redemption and of choice. The fire which descends promises forgiveness but reminds us of the fires of judgment and terror. Pentecost affirms the promise of God's love, but it is a love full of "incandescent terror."

III

Using the lyric from "Little Gidding" as a "vehicle," we look afresh at the Pentecost text to see what insights might help us move toward the sermon.

We note that Eliot's poetic move, combining the descent of the dove from the Gospel with the descent of the tongues in Acts, helps us see the connections between Luke 3 and Acts 2. As the Spirit descends from God to Jesus in the form of a dove, so the Spirit descends from the Risen Christ to the church in the form of fiery tongues. John the Baptist has predicted that Jesus will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Peter's speech on the Pentecost event makes clear the connection between the two baptisms: "Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, [Christ] has poured out this which you see and hear" (Acts 2:33).

The Risen Jesus himself makes the connection between the two baptisms in the charge he gives his followers during the forty days between the resurrection and the ascension: "And while staying with them, he charged them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, 'you heard from me, for John baptized with water, but before many days you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 1:4-5).⁷

One gets the sense that Luke has an almost geographical sense of transcendence. In the baptism scene of Luke 3, God the Father pours the Holy Spirit down upon the Son. It is only after his ascension that the Son is able to pour the Holy Spirit down upon believers.

What surprises us, however, is that the Pentecost baptism with fire is apparently different from what the prophecy by John the Baptist would lead us to expect: ". . . he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor, and to gather the wheat into his granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Luke 3:16-17). This "unquenchable fire" seems quite different from the beneficent tongues of fire which brought the miraculous communication of Pentecost. The "unquenchable fire" is, of course, close to what Eliot suggests in his lyric:

The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror . . .

Yet Peter himself interprets the Pentecost "baptism" not only as a sign of blessing but as a sign of judgment. Fire is not only creative; it is also destructive. Peter quotes from Joel, a passage which combines the descent of the Spirit with the fires of judgment:

I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.
And I will show wonders in the heaven above,
and signs on the earth beneath,
blood, and fire, and vapor of smoke . . .
before the day of the Lord comes,
the great and manifest day.
And it shall be that whoever calls on the name of the Lord, shall be saved
(Acts 2:18b-21).⁸

When the audience hears Peter's sermon, concluding with the accusation of guilt in the crucifixion of Jesus but including this warning of the fires of judgment, Luke says: ". . . they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, 'Brethren, what shall we do?' And Peter said to them, 'Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit'" (Acts 2:37-38).

The pentecostal fire is the fire of judgment and of blessing, which is always there as judgment's complement. On the one hand, it is a portent of destruction. On the other hand, it is the promise of forgiveness.

The moment of judgment is also the moment of decision: "What shall we do?" . . . "Repent."

The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

So also, says Eliot, "the communication/of the dead is tongued with fire beyond the language of the living." Luke's great job of remembrance is that he let the apostles' story be the story for his own church a generation later. Thus, he let the dead speak to the living—or let the living Christ and the Spirit speak to the new generation through the old.

Is "Love, the unfamiliar name" behind this Pentecost judgment, this Pentecost mercy—for Luke as for Eliot? The name, the vision of the love of God, seems as unfamiliar to Luke as to Eliot's reader. God's "love" seems not to inform Luke's writing as it does the writings of the Johannine school or of Paul. We do remember (we are meditating now, not explicating or preaching) the father in Luke 15 running down from the porch to greet his son. The son has known his own version of the refining fire and has come home penitent to

be redeemed.

What Luke *does* affirm is that God in Christ is the one who baptizes with the Spirit and with fire, who provides us with the judgment and the mercy—and the choice: “We only live, only suspire/Consumed by either fire or fire.”

IV

It is time to put Eliot aside. “Little Gidding” has helped us reflect on the texts from Acts and Luke. Perhaps we have a few scribbled notes, an image or two. Now we use other “vehicles” to help us meditate. We think of our congregation and its needs. We check the commentaries. Perhaps as the sermon takes final shape we shall find a way to use Eliot again. More likely we let him inform our thinking more than our speaking. Quotations from “The Four Quartets” are not easily heard.

But before we leave “Little Gidding,” we move from the lyric we’ve been studying to the final section and Eliot’s words about poetry, which may also suggest a kind of judgment, and promise, for our preaching:

. . . And every phrase
And sentence that is right (where every word is at home,
Taking its place to support the others,
The word neither diffident nor ostentatious,
An easy commerce of the old and the new,
The common word exact without vulgarity,
The formal word precise but not pedantic,
The complete consort dancing together) (V,3-10).

NOTES

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, I,2. trans. G.T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), p. 727.

² *Ibid.*, p. 729.

³ In T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), pp. 138-145.

⁴ See Peter Ackroyd, *T.S. Eliot: A Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), pp. 258-260.

⁵ See Helen Gardner, *The Art of T.S. Eliot* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1959), p. 182.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁷ On the relation between these texts, see Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke* (Anchor Bible) (New York: Doubleday, 1981), p. 474. For a further elaboration of the relationship between John’s prophecy and the baptism by the Holy Spirit throughout Acts, see Robert Tannehill, *The Narrative Unity of Luke-Acts* (I) (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), p. 51.

⁸ In Acts the “wonders” of Peter’s speech apparently refer both to Jesus’ ministry and to the events of Pentecost.

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