Reflections on 'Fire' –28th July 2021 – prepared by Hazel

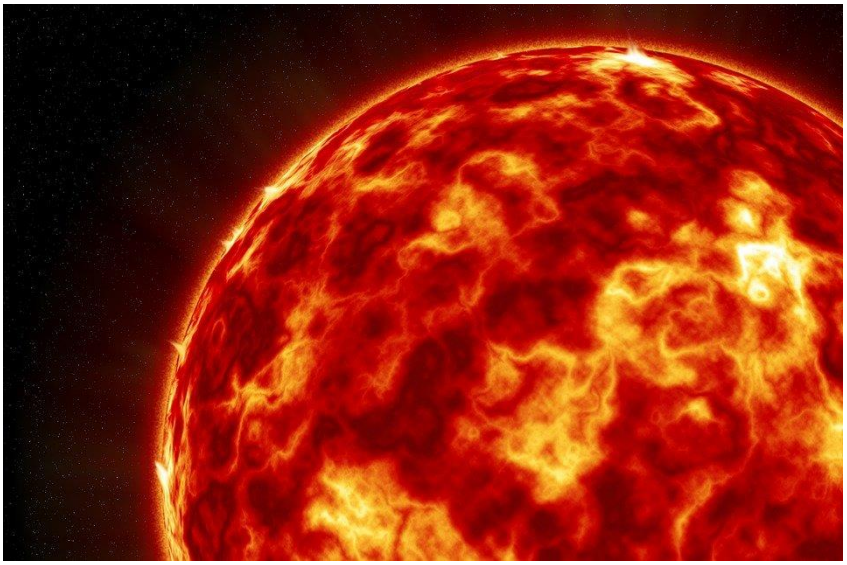
Opening words: This week, we are meditating in person again and have a transcript for those unable to join us. We have included some pictures/ resources to help you in your meditation. If you are meditating alone but would like to feel 'with us' we meditate at 7.30pm on Wednesday in Wisdom Centre/ our homes. The tradition we meditate in is Centring Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centring Prayer Tradition: A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob, Hazel and Paul, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

Opening Prayer: Eternal God, through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, peace and justice making. **Amen**

Introduction: This reflection on 'fire' is the last of four such explorations of the elements. I refer again to books by Benedictine oblate Christine Valters Paintner(1) and by John O'Donohue(2) – both of whom studied the four elements from a mystical perspective. Paintner explains how fire is often associated with the season of summer; water is associated with autumn, earth with winter and air with spring. It is perhaps, timely to be noticing the elements this week since the 31st July is the feast of St Ignatius of Loyola whose key insight was that we can find 'God in all things'. It would thus follow that God is fundamentally 'in' all the elements. Fire has a range of spiritual associations and this reflection touches on just a few. In so doing, it invites experiential awareness, and each person will have their own unique experiences and perspectives.

The beginning: I have left this element until last as I found it the most difficult one to fully connect with clearly, due to the ambiguity that fire holds. However, in his Book of Blessings, John O'Donohue includes his reflections on fire in the section on 'Beginnings'. This is because fire is considered so primal and basic and goes back to the energy of the 'big bang' of creation, and the subsequent formation of trillions of stars, including the sun, now our source of light and heat. The sun was formed over 4 billion years ago.



In Genesis we read:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

Genesis 1:1-4

Fire was once assumed a 'substance' (an element), but more recent definitions of fire include: 'the heat and light of burning', or 'a mass of burning matter'. Fire is more loosely associated with extreme heat or energy released from materials, including the constant, rapidly repeated, small explosions within the internal combustion engine!

As we reside and move on the surface of our planet - in the zone that offers humans a habitat for survival, beneath us are vast volumes of magma, the extremely hot liquid and semi-liquid rock located under Earth's surface. This sometimes forces through the earth's crust in the form of lava flows from erupting volcanos. Over the summer months, wildfires have long been part of a natural process that stimulates regeneration from overgrown vegetation and provides new habitats.

Human relationship with fire. O'Donohue[2] describes how: 'Fire has played a key role in the origin, evolution and definition of human consciousness and culture. …The ability to handle fire seems to be a universal human achievement. Even to a greater extent than language and the use of tools, fire seems to be an exclusive human ability.'

He also describes the traditional importance of the 'hearth' in his Irish homeland where families would routinely gather round a fire and converse. 'In country houses, the coals of the day's fire were smoored each night in its ashes. This sealed them from the searing of the air that would urge them to glow and vanish. 'Smoor' is a lovely word. Its sound captures exactly the powdered smother of ashes that quenches and slows the desire of the coals to go up in flames, yet holds them alive and kindled. The day's work over, the coals are banked inside the night ashes and live until they are called to warm a new dawn.'

Have humans lost this connection with the fire, or are current lifestyles just an extension of this? In recent years, we use more stored energy for a whole range of activities. The earth's temperature has been rising and more frequent and larger wildfires have been occurring globally, including in peat under ice in the Arctic. As in all of nature, we cannot fully control fire, but we have to be in flow with it – with 'God in all things.'

Meditative practices: Paintner[1] offers many suggestion for reflective or meditative practices to get in touch with the element of fire and I pick out just a few: Gather round a fire with friends and tell stories whilst experiencing the warmth of the flames. Light a candle at home or in a place that feels sacred. Find ways to support those in your community who cannot afford their winter heating bulls. Feel the heat of the sun on your skin. Spread out a blanket under the night sky and watch the stars.

Fire as a metaphor for Love and Fear: Fire in all its varied forms elicits a wide range of feelings and responses. As a child I once had the traumatic experience of a house fire in which a family member was injured. I still enjoy making or watching open fires inside or outside or watching the gentle flicker of a candle flame, but I notice a deep respect and carefulness around fire.

Fire can be very frightening but also, cleansing. Paintner reflects on fire as a means of purification. She quotes St Catherine of Sienna who wrote: 'You, God, are a fire that always burns without consuming. You are a fire consuming in its heat every compartment of the soul's self-absorbed love. You are a fire lifting all chill and giving all light. In Your light You show me Your truth. You're the light that outshines every light. You, God give the mind's eye Your divine light so completely and excellently. You bring lucidity even to the light of faith. In that faith, I see my soul has life, and in that light, I receive You who are Light itself.'

Jim Manney[3] writes of Ignatius of Loyola, 'Ignatius often ended his letters to Jesuits going to the missions with the expression *ite, inflammate omnia* - "go, set the world on fire." What did he mean by that? Maybe it was just a rah-rah expression, … But I don't think so. I don't think Ignatius had a cheerleader's personality. He was a serious man who used words carefully. "Set the world on fire" is a curious expression. Fire destroys; the world is already on fire with hatred, resentment, greed, lust, and other passions that consume individuals and whole societies. But fire purifies too; in the Bible, flames burn up the weeds and the refiner's fire purifies gold. Then there are the tongues of fire that that descend on the Apostles at Pentecost, bringing the power of the Holy Spirit. I think this image might have been in Ignatius's mind when he told his Jesuits to set the world on fire. He wanted everyone to be set afire with passion and zeal for the Kingdom of God. No wonder "set the world on fire" has become something of a motto of Jesuit ministries. The book of Jesuit/Ignatian

prayer that Loyola Press publishes is called '*Hearts on Fire'.* The Jesuit General Congregation's decree on the Jesuit charism is called "A Fire That Kindles Other Fires." '

If we 'lean into' feelings of the energy of fire, whilst attuned to our sense of the Divine, it seems that this can take us to a place of deep love, which transcends (though doesn't necessarily remove) fear.

> *There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.* 1 John 4:18







Embers of anger: O'Donohue observes that fire is often used to portray anger. 'Anger burns and blazes. It inflames the human heart. But it can also be a subtle presence. It can turn totally inward and become depression. It can also hide under several guises. However, unlike resentment, which points to death, anger points to life.'

Anger by Terry Waite

Anger rages
Like a consuming fire,
Destroying all
That would impede
Its relentless pathway.

Do not extinguish
The flames totally.
Calm them.
And warm yourself
By the gentle glow
Of the embers.

Terry Waite[4], who was taken hostage in Beirut in 1987 and was held for nearly five years in solitary confinement, writes of anger in this poem.



The Divine Spark: O'Donohue reflects: 'Meister Eckhart identified a place within the soul that neither time, flesh nor space can touch. This sacred temple is in every heart. He believed this to be the *Vunklein*, the simple, divine spark within us. In that spark your own essence and the essence of God are the one brightness. It is a lovely idea that the passion at the heart of the human is indeed divine. Light plays on the surface of things. When night comes, it clears all the light before it. But fire can reach and penetrate inwards to the essence of a thing – to the heart where no hand or eye can reach. This is why the Christian teaching on the Holy Spirit is so profound. The warmth and fire in the human heart is that of the Holy Spirit.'

Reflection before meditation: *'In Praise of Fire* by John O'Donohue[5] (excerpts)

Let us praise the grace and risk of fire.

In the beginning
The Word was red,
And the sound was thunder,
And the wound in the unseen
Spilled forth the red weather of being.

In the name of Fire,
The Flame
And the Light:
Praise the pure presence of fire
That burns from within
Without thought of time.

(continued below)

As air intensifies the hunger of fire, May the thought of death Breathe new urgency Into our love of life. As fire cleanses dross, May the flame of passion Burn away what is false.	As short as the time From spark to flame, So brief may the distance be Between heart and being. May we discover Beneath our fear Embers of anger To kindle justice.	May courage Cause our lives to flame, In the name of the Fire, And the Flame And the Light.

Preparation for Meditation: You might like to follow your normal practice for meditation, or, if you wish, place a candle next to you or bring your awareness to the picture below. When you are ready, find a comfortable position, shifting your body so you feel relaxed and open. Take as much time as you need to turn inward and settle into stillness. As always, it is important that you allow yourself to notice any difficult feelings that arise, and, although we suggest 25 minutes, do meditate for as long as feels right for you. You might try using the candle as a point of anchor today during meditation, or hold in mind an image of a candle. As your mind wanders, as it surely will, gently bring your attention back to your chosen anchor or centre.

Meditation for 25-minutes.



Prayer – *'Celtic Prayer'* [6]

Deep Peace of the shining stars to you,
which stay invisible till darkness falls
and disclose their pure and shining presence
beaming down in compassion on our turning world.
Deep peace of the shining stars to you.

Closing prayer: Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Moments of your personal prayer follow…**Amen.**

Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon. Stay safe and well.

Resources: Pictures from Pixabay.com and author

(1) Christine Valters Paintner (2010). 'Water, wind, earth and fire: The Christian Practice of Praying with the Elements'. Notre Dame: Sorin Books.
(2) O'Donohue, J. (2010). 'The Four Elements: Reflections on Nature'. A Book of Blessings'. Transworld Ireland
(3) Jim Manney https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/go-set-the-world-on-fire/
(4) Terry Waite (2016). 'Out of the Silence'. London: SPCK
(5) O'Donohue, J. (2007). 'Benedictus: A Book of Blessings'. London: Bantom Press.
(6) In Christine Valters Paintner's book as above.



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