

Fire from Heaven?

Luke 9:51-62

My son Lachlan had his 22nd birthday yesterday . . . he's turned out all right. Caring. Thoughtful. Considerate. Respectful. But you might not have thought so if you'd been with us in the GP's rooms for his 4 year old vaccinations!

Well, to start with, there was no way he was going to have those needles . . . absolutely no way! I don't remember what smoke and mirrors we used to get him to the GP but somehow we did . . . and then literally held him down when he realised what was about to happen . . . and this mild-mannered doctor almost apologetically administered the vaccinations . . . a jab in both legs.

The deed was done in a couple of seconds and we relaxed and let go of his arms and legs thinking it was all over! But, no . . . it had just begun! My son's previous distress was now channeled into righteous anger . . . he was absolutely livid . . . this scrawny little four year old . . . burning with rage at the injustice of it all.

Imagine the scene . . . the doctor, who was not a small man, being confronted by our usually quiet four year-old with a passionate, raging fury, suggesting all sorts of unkind things that should happen to the poor man. The scene was so preposterous . . . so unlikely . . . that it took all our will power not to burst out laughing . . . it really was hilarious, but we couldn't laugh because, for Lachlan, this was deadly serious . . . a grave injustice had been done!

There's something of that scene replaying in my mind as I read this story of James and John. It makes me want to laugh! These two indignant little boys . . . burning with righteous anger at being slighted . . . ready to confront a whole Samaritan village! I mean . . . who do they think they are?! And, then . . . "Do you want us to command fire from heaven?"! It's preposterous . . . as if they had the ability, let alone the authority, to do that! Where did they even get the idea that they could do that?! As if they are the centre of the universe! The sheer arrogance of it is just comical.

"Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?"

It makes me want to laugh . . . but not for very long . . . soon my laughter turns to sadness and to disappointment . . . sadness, not because of who they *think* they are, but because of who they *are* . . . and disappointment because they are serious.

These are disciples of Jesus . . . followers of Jesus . . . talking about wiping out a whole Samaritan village . . . calling down fire to burn them all . . . obliterating men, women and children . . . and probably even justifying themselves by using the story of Elijah and the prophets of Baal as a precedent! Sometimes saying "The Bible tells me so" can be very close to saying "the devil made me do it"!

Calling fire down from heaven . . . this is something we might expect from a megalomaniac dictator . . . or a deranged sociopath . . . or even the leader of the so-called free world . . . although, perhaps it doesn't even have to be so extreme and dramatic . . . isn't this a common social media reaction to

anything that upsets someone or offends someone? . . . canceling them . . . demonizing and dehumanizing anyone with a different opinion, or who disagree? Making easy judgments about who's in and who's out.

And, maybe we expect that . . . even *accept* that . . . from society . . . from the world . . . but these are followers of Jesus! And followers of Jesus don't look to harm others . . . not with their words, or their actions. Followers of Jesus don't make superficial judgments of others. Followers of Jesus don't use their power to get their own way. Followers of Jesus don't make hurtful remarks on social media. Followers of Jesus don't belittle those who disagree with them. Followers of Jesus don't stereotype and marginalize. Followers of Jesus don't talk about 'us and them'. Do they?

James and John . . . followers of Jesus . . . insistent . . . indignant . . . indulgent . . . it would be comical if it wasn't so serious . . . and sad. Sad that Jesus has to rebuke them.

Then he sets his face again to go to Jerusalem . . . calling to his followers . . . to his disciples: "Follow me!"

And, nobody does. Nobody does . . . not to the cross . . . because that's what going to Jerusalem means . . . Jesus knows that . . . and Jesus knows that when push comes to shove no one will go with him . . . because no one has the will to go with him. We'd rather rage with oh so serious self-righteous indignation . . . or find a million other more important things to do.

Still, Jesus goes . . . to die . . . to be consumed by sin . . . for the sake of people like James and John . . . and us. Jesus goes to the cross for the sake of people who will always have an excuse . . . who will always find a way of justifying ourselves . . . who will always think we are right.

As his disciples discuss amongst themselves who is the greatest, Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem.

As his followers come up with excuses, Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem.

As we argue about who's in and who's out, Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem.

Jesus sets his face towards Jerusalem to go to the cross . . . to die . . . taking on himself God's rebuke . . . God's judgment . . . God's condemnation . . . and, in the process, unleashing fire from heaven.

But, not the fire James and John so blithely called for . . . not the fire of God's wrath and judgment . . . not the fire of destruction and obliteration . . . no, in going to Jerusalem . . . in going to the cross . . . in confronting sin and death and the devil, and being raised from death to life, Jesus opens the way for the fire of the Holy Spirit . . . the Holy Spirit who immediately starts connecting, and healing and restoring . . . people of all different regions and languages and tongues. The fire of the Holy Spirit. A very different sort of fire.

Two weeks ago at the school service some of the Year 3s presented a humorous play about Pentecost. It was spot on. There is something comical about Pentecost . . . about those little tongues of fire that sat on the heads of those gathered that day . . . there's something faintly ridiculous about that scene . . . so ridiculous that other people thought they were drunk! How good is that?!

It's this fire that Jesus sends on the world . . . a comical, ridiculous kind of fire . . . a fire that is totally opposite to that which James and John envisaged . . . or wanted! . . . a fire that actually helps us to see the other . . . to listen to the other . . . to care for the other . . . often in spite of ourselves. This is God's power . . . it's faintly ridiculous when you look at it from a human perspective . . . comical even . . . but it's a power that allows us . . . that enables us . . . that authorizes us . . . that invites us to take ourselves less seriously so we might take the needs of others more seriously.

Amen.

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