
Whitsuntide Reflections

Arising from T. S. Eliot's Poem "Little Gidding"

by H. F. Woodhouse

As Whitsuntide falls in the quarter covered by our April-June issue, it is appropriate to include in it these reflections by the Regius Professor of Divinity in the University of Dublin.

MANY reflections ran through my mind while reading T. S. Eliot's poem "Little Gidding" in the context of Whitsunday and the place and work of God the Holy Spirit or God the Life Giver. Of course much material not explicitly stated enriched my thinking, Eliot's own spiritual pilgrimage, his great knowledge of earlier writers and his "search for the sentence that is right where every word is at home". This quotation from the poem is but one example of those illustrating the three traits mentioned.

The main background source will be obvious as we consider "Little Gidding" itself. Its theme is the Life Giver at work; in it the metaphor of fire is expanded, illustrated and allusion made to it, so obviously my reflections are going to be influenced by my knowledge of scripture. The background will influence the foreground much the same way as a modern symphony may remind one over and over again of an ancient folk tune.

So my central theme is the work of the Holy Spirit as illustrated by "Little Gidding" with special reference to the idea of fire.

The word "fire" appears at line 4, but is not at this stage evocative. However, it does become evocative in line 10 in the phrase "pentecostal fire". This pentecostal fire comes "in the dark time of the year". It is an unusual but welcome phenomenon. The operation of the Holy Spirit is sometimes almost unobserved, more often unexpected, entirely undeserved and sometimes found in the most unlikely places and situations. How watchful I must be for His voice. How sensitive to it. Am I?

There are also considerations which will recur over and over again concerning this metaphor of fire. Fire can purify or fire can cleanse. Once more a boyhood memory comes back of an old chorus:

Oh thou Spirit divine,
All my nature refine,
Till the beauty of Jesus is seen in me.

Here again is place for self examination. Indeed the metaphor of refining through fire is found in the Old Testament itself where we are told that in the Messianic age there will be one who will act like a refiner's fire. Purifying and refining is an integral part

of the work of the Holy Spirit. I could develop these ideas further by looking at my hymn book and at some of the hymns for Whitsunday.

Less obvious is the fact that the Holy Spirit also sets afire and I think of the tremendous power which is thus engendered. My mind goes back to fire-breaks in the Canadian forest, to seeing scarred stumps of trees where the forest has been swept away in a few hours by a consuming fire. I even think of Canadian "muskeg" where fire runs underground underneath the covering of snow and can appear when a thaw comes miles away from its source. And as I ponder these I see something of the mysterious work (for at times it is mysterious) of God the Holy Spirit.

Eliot, a few lines later, correctly describes the pentecostal fire as
 the springtime
 but not in time's covenant.

Now my knowledge of the biblical word "covenant" operates. How central it is! I find several biblical aspects of this idea illustrated and enriched by the work of God the Holy Spirit in the third chapter of the second letter to the Corinthians. (This passage I might well take for my reflections on one of the other days of the week.) Its main point is the superiority of the new covenant. It has come out of time, it is due to the divine initiative. It is much more splendid than the old covenant, more permanent and more stable. In the old, even though Moses' face shone for a while, that glory disappeared but in the new it will not disappear. The effects and the operation are continual; indeed, they are not only continual, they can deepen and increase. All this in human lives, even mine, the Life Giver can achieve. Here the thought of life, the thought of power, both of them affecting my own individual conduct, comes directly to the fore.

The pentecostal allusions can be found again where a few lines lower Eliot speaks of the hedges "white again". I cannot but recall how white is composed of many colours and so the Holy Spirit works in different ways, in different times and in different lives. But also I remember that white is the colour of perfection and so this variety does not lead to a clash but to a richer harmony and perfection.

The theme of perfection is one that we often neglect. Many of us forget how many times the idea is found in one form or another that we are to press on, that we are to increase, that we are to become full-grown, or are to become perfect. The whole Christian life is a life which is lived in community and Little Gidding was an epitome of this way of perfection, sought by a group living together in community. The poem goes on in line 30 to use the word "fulfilled"

which sums up many ideas linked with those of perfection and reminds me that the way of perfection is to be fully filled by the Spirit.

I read on fairly quickly until I come to line 42 the word "put off". Because I have been thinking of fire and the Holy Spirit, two ideas come into my mind about this word "put off", partly because Eliot was well-known for the way he combined several ideas or suggestions in one word. "Put off" may well have a double significance here: first the literal one as it stands, then further relevant suggestions coming from biblical sources. Eliot has been thinking of Little Gidding, it is a holy place; he is also thinking of Moses coming to the burning bush and bidden to put off his shoes as he was on holy ground; and the burning bush of course suggests fire.

The next mention of fire comes in line 50, where we get the phrase "tongued with fire". Immediately my mind is brought back to the scriptural passage of Acts 2, the narrative of pentecost, where we are told that the Holy Spirit descended with "tongues like fire". Here, although it may have been in the background of my mind earlier, the present "pentecostal movement" comes to the foreground.

I go on to line 80 and I begin to think about the dove and here Eliot seems to open up possibilities along several lines which may well be determined by the cast of our minds. For many of us the dove is almost the most familiar symbol of the Holy Spirit, and yet here Eliot compares it to the dive-bomber. If we think of the dove as linked with the pentecostal flames, here it is the flames the bombs create. I feel that I should bear this in mind and consider what it may mean in other contexts. I can, of course, if I choose, bring any knowledge I have of birds, especially of the dove, to my mind and try to develop these.

I now read on quickly until the last half dozen lines of this section and I come across the phrase "exasperated spirit". It bears upon my own condition. I need to deal with this and there is offered to me the refining fire, so that this sense of exasperation or frustration can be coped with and perhaps finally conquered.

However, fire can restore us so that we move in measure like a dancer. I begin to think about the dancer, the order and the symmetry of the movement. The word "order", meaning "right relationships", brings many ideas into my mind. I recall great passages in literature found right down from the Greek philosophers to the present day concerning order and the hymn which speaks of my "ordered life confessing the beauty of thy peace". Also two phrases from the collects in the Prayer Book that "God's never failing providence ordereth all things in Heaven and earth" or the other one that He alone can "order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men". Here is a thought upon which I can ponder with

great spiritual benefit. My life need no longer perhaps be like a "disfigured street" but a scene of greater beauty and harmony. Order is the fruit of the Spirit.

So I come to my meditation on the third section where Eliot mentions liberation and love. They are the results of the Spirit's work. These are the results of order in my life. How valuable they are, how much I want to develop them! A few lines later, Eliot sketches the possibility of their full fruition, so that I continually become renewed, transfigured. Instead of being "disfigured" I become "transfigured". Here again my mind is recalled to 2 Cor. 3. Not just renewal, but change from glory to glory, so that my life becomes transfigured. It suggests a very solemn thought. Supposing I met someone who knew me say when I was twenty and now I am sixty, would they see much evidence of transfiguration in my life?

Towards the end of the third section I am faced again with the purification of which fire is a symbol. "The purification of the motive in the ground of our beseeching". How far is my mind set to purify my motives? Are not the motives the important thing? What is the depth of consecration in my life? Here Eliot uses the famous spiritual classic "Mother Julian".

With section four comes a tremendous amount of material. The first ten lines provide ample material for a meditation. Here I note the ideas of the dove and the dive bomber, the tongues of fire and of gun fire both declaring the one discharge from sin and error. In these lines Eliot's strong churchmanship, his adherence to the episcopal system, the idea of absolution, power to absolve in the name of God conferred through ordination, the ideas of apostolic succession, are all latent. If I wish I can easily develop these further and think of them as the discharge from sin and error. Are not these our main hindrances? So Eliot stresses the only hope. If we do not think of this hope then comes despair. Despair or hope. We face what our Lord was always driving home upon us, the urgency and the necessity of making a choice. It is pyre or pyre, it is to be redeemed "from the fire by fire".

This apparent "torment" is the work of love. Biblically, I recall 1 Corinthians 12, which emphasises the work and gifts of the Holy Spirit in individual lives and in the community. Then the next chapter emphasises that the greatest of these gifts is love. So this "intolerable shirt of flame" was woven by hands of love and thus we face our choice to be consumed by fire of selfishness or fire of love.

In section five on first sight Eliot seems to turn away from this theme of love and of our calling, but he comes back again to it half way or so through (note that there is no full-stop); it is a long line:

With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this calling.

And so this journey can only be taken, as line 250 indicates, if I listen for God's voice in the stillness. And I remember here that Elijah, when he was strengthened by God (1 Kings 19) heard God's voice as a still small voice. But on our side we need simplicity and, as Eliot has hinted earlier, self-discipline and humility.

In the last few lines I learn that life can progress from being like a "wasteland" to become a garden. In this garden we shall find a rose—a sign of the affirmative life. Self-contradictory though it may well appear, the effect of fire on the rose or, to put it in plainer language, the work of the Holy Spirit, is to reveal something of the beauty, the colour and symmetry of the rose. The tongues of flame are enfolded in upon themselves and that they are brought together in the form of a rose. When I ponder the ideas in the last two lines I think upon the crowned knot of fire and that love is the knot whereby Father, Son and Spirit are joined together. Love is their bond, love is the bond whereby God unites Himself to myself, uniting myself to God. The start, developing and perfecting of this work, is achieved by the Holy Spirit. Here is true order, final harmony—the end of my exploring.

So I can use the Whitsuntide season with profit. Showers of spiritual strength can be mine, not mine in any selfish way, for Little Gidding was a community where the gifts of each were enhanced and used for the benefit of all. And Eliot's poem can be a means whereby the Life Giver enriches my life. It provides a fresh approach, a series of devotional readings which can illuminate a neglected and yet potentially most valuable and pertinent area of Christianity—the work of the Life Giver in my spiritual growth.

The more I grow the more conscious I am of my need of wisdom and power. I am convinced that the earliest Christians were endowed with resources conferred by the Life Giver. These are the identical resources I require,—not only I, but mankind. Therefore any thing which makes more real the scriptural messages about His Person and Work can be like fire in my life purifying, refining and enabling me to give out heat to others. So I hope once again to read Little Gidding during this pentecostal season.

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