

Welcome



NAOMI STARKEY

Describing somebody as a 'fiery' person is not usually a compliment. By choosing the word 'fiery' we tend to mean 'fierce, intolerant, hot-tempered'. At the same time, to say that we are 'fired up' by something means that we are enthusiastic, ready to throw ourselves into a situation or activity with boundless energy and vigour.

While we may talk about faith being 'kindled', what does it actually mean to be 'on fire' for God? Traditional 'hellfire and brimstone' preachers don't tend to get a good press these days, and then there is always the danger of 'burnout' when things just get too hot for us...

In this issue of *Quiet Spaces*, we focus on different aspects of fire, both positive and negative. This powerful symbol appears many times in the Bible, particularly as an image for God himself, from the guiding pillar of fire at the time of the exodus to the tongues of flame on the day of Pentecost. In other contexts, we reflect on how 'guarding the flame' can have positive overtones of nurture and maintaining a witness. Taking yet another angle, while a fierce fire may leave a heap of ashes, God promises to bring beauty and healing even out of such remains.

Before the age of electricity, any kind of light involved actual fire and heat, whether a gas mantle, candles or (remembering the old chorus 'Sing hosanna') the biblical oil lamp that needed topping up with fuel in order to stay 'burning till the break of day'. To adapt a well-known saying, it is worth remembering that even a very small candle flame can bring both warmth and light to cold, dark places.

Quiet Spaces



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Praying and *Personality*

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God loves variety.

In all he creates, he never repeats himself

In the few glimpses we have into the life of heaven, we find a community of strikingly different creatures joyfully united around the throne of God in timeless worship: 'Holy, holy, holy, the Lord God the Almighty, who was and is and is to come' (Revelation 4:6–8, NRSV). Any worship leader who has struggled to cater for the contradictory tastes of earthly congregations would love to know the secret!

God loves variety. In all he creates, he never repeats himself. The nearer we get to him, the *more* different we

become from each other, not less.

'Everything in heaven comes apart,' writes the poet Stewart Henderson. By that he means that in heaven each created thing will be fully revealed in its uniqueness and distinctiveness, celebrating its place in the whole that is the glorious life of God. When we pray '... on earth as it is in heaven', we are asking, among other things, for the same bewildering mixture to be a feature of our lives, too.

This also means that the number of ways of praying will be as varied and different as there are people. There is no right way to pray. God never comes to us with an 'off-the-peg' method of praying that we have to use regardless of our personality, gifts or needs.

I always need reminding of this



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God lovingly works 'with the grain' of the person he has made us to be

There is no right way to pray

because, at a formative stage in my Christian life, the message that I heard was quite the opposite. Certain ways of believing and praying were the 'correct' ones. Other ways were looked on with suspicion. Furthermore, I was told, my own personality, thoughts and desires were obstacles to real prayer: they had to be firmly denied and pushed out of the way. Following Jesus meant having a very negative view of myself. There was also a deep suspicion of life beyond the boundaries of what was carefully (not to say rigidly) defined as Christian.

I now think that such attitudes are unbiblical and deeply damaging to our ability to sense God's presence in our lives. For all their realism about human sin, the Psalms, for example, never lose confidence that all created life is touched and renewed moment by

moment by the presence of God. Over time, I have grown to treasure the way God lovingly works 'with the grain' of the person he has made us to be—no matter how much restoring, healing and time it takes. I come as I am and he receives me with love and joy.

One of my most exciting discoveries in recent years has been the significance of our personalities in the way we relate to God. One of the best books on this is *Finding Your Prayer Personality* by Ruth Fowke (Abingdon Press, 2002). The author understands from hard experience what it is like to try to pray in someone else's style. It's like being required to wear an outfit that someone has lent us, for want of anything else on offer. It doesn't fit us; it doesn't suit us; it actually belongs to someone else. But we were told that this is how to pray so we feel condemned when we find it an uncomfortable struggle.

Ruth writes, 'God created us different from each other. He does not want our communication with him to be constricted or thwarted by stilted, imposed patterns of prayer.' She explores the ways in which different personalities meet the world and seek God. As I read, I was reminded of different people I know who experienced a breakthrough in their prayer lives as they made new discoveries about their personalities.

Sheila went on a Quiet Day for the first time and discovered that this was the way of silent prayer for which she had longed restlessly over many years. But it was not the way she had been

taught, and her lively church fellowship found it hard to understand her gift.

Brian was a rather serious man with a marked preference for formal worship. He reluctantly attended a charismatic service and (after resisting the urge to walk out) was overcome by a new vision of the joy and love of God. He came to see how this part of his own personality had never been allowed to develop in a family ruled by his severe, emotionally repressed father.

John's approach to prayer took a new direction when he found himself sitting in a church service next to a group of hearing-impaired Christians, who were signing the songs and prayers. On impulse, he joined in and was suddenly aware of how much more alive he felt as he worshipped with his body rather than words. He not only felt nearer to God, he felt nearer to the world around him and to himself.

Karen was very ill in hospital. Praying felt impossible, and she was very anxious. Her daughter placed an icon of Christ by her bedside. She was deeply comforted and, with a naturalness that made her wish she had found this long before, she fixed her attention on his face and prayed silently using her eyes alone. Karen had always delighted in life through the 'here and now' senses—touch, smell, taste, sound and sight. Now she discovered that this was her most natural way to commune with God.

There is a wise saying: 'Pray as you can, not as you cannot!' (Dom John Chapman). We could go further: 'Pray as the person you are, not as the

person you are not.' One of the most common causes of guilt for Christians is when we compare ourselves with someone else. Remember: God only asks us to be ourselves, no one else. But who am 'I'? What do we mean by 'my personality'? And isn't this approach rather self-absorbed?

By 'my personality', we mean that unique mixture of thinking, desiring, feeling and relating that makes me 'me' and not somebody else. It gives me my distinctive shape and presence in the world. My personality is something that has been deeply influenced by factors such as biological and psychological

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inheritance, experiences of home and family, health, education, work, relationships, and social and natural environment.

So who I am is firstly part of a much

*Earth's crammed with heaven,
and every common bush afire with God:
but only he who sees, takes off his shoes;
the rest sit round it, and pluck blackberries...*

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING, 'AURORA LEIGH' (1857)



***Creatures of a day, what is a man? What is he not? Mankind
is a dream of a shadow. But when a god-given brightness
comes, a radiant light rests on men, and a gentle life.***

PINDAR, *PYTHIAN ODES* (FIFTH CENTURY BC)



Fire. The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob.
Not of the philosophers and intellectuals... The God of Jesus Christ.
BLAISE PASCAL (1623–62), WRITING OF THE EXPERIENCE LEADING TO HIS CONVERSION



*The trouble is that no devastating or redeeming fires
have ever burnt in my life... My life began by flickering out.*

IVAN GONCHAROV, *OBOLOMOV* (1859)



***Faith is not simply a patience that passively suffers until the
storm is past. Rather, it is a spirit that bears things—with
resignations, yes, but above all, with blazing, serene hope.***

CORAZON AQUINO (b. 1933)



Wood already touched by fire is not hard to set alight.

AFRICAN PROVERB

Fire

These prayers are written by Amy Boucher Pye, an American who has lived in the UK for the past nine years. She works in Christian publishing and has written for such periodicals as 'Church Times', 'The Church of England Newspaper', 'Woman Alive' and 'Christian Marketplace'. She makes her home in north London with her husband and young family.



Fire in the Bible has different connotations: it can bring not only heat and comfort but also destruction and fear. The Lord God appeared as a

guide to Abram and Moses in a smoking pot and burning bush, but he is also called a consuming fire. Our prayers focus on the varied image of fire as inspired by biblical text, and I hope that they will bring warmth, purification and comfort.

Sunday

There the angel of the Lord appeared to [Moses] in flames of fire from within a bush... 'Do not come any closer,' God said. 'Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground' (Exodus 3:2, 5, TNIV).

Lord God, you appeared to Moses as a burning bush—flames that burned but did not reduce to ashes. You provided him with warmth and light as you revealed yourself as the God of his ancestors, who had come to deliver his people from the misery of Egypt. Because you were there, Moses was standing on holy ground.

We are often like Moses, thinking that we are insufficient for the tasks to

which you call us. But you are gracious, and promise to give us the words to speak. Help us to trust you and to follow your calling for our lives, that we might be your flames of light and cheer in a cold and unfeeling world.

Monday

When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze (Isaiah 43:2b).

Lord, you have promised to be with us through the fiery trials that we face in this life. Help us to cling to these promises when we feel overwhelmed or downtrodden.

Help us to remember the three friends of Daniel who were thrown into the fiery furnace but were unscorched because you were their shield around them.

Lord God, please burn a holy ring of fire around our homes and our loved ones, that we would remain unscathed by the things that would harm us. Thank you for your everlasting love and protection.

Tuesday

Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body (James 3:5–6a).

Lord Jesus, we confess that our tongue can be like a small flame that sparks

out of control. Forgive us for our gossip or unclean words: the unkind things we say to and about others; the words we let loose when we are angry or hurt.

Help us to have no unwholesome talk coming out of our mouths, but only that which is helpful for building up others. Give us a word of encouragement for another person today.

Inhabit our words when we praise you, that we would bring glory and honour to your name.

Wednesday

Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven... They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:2–4a).

Holy Trinity, through the Holy Spirit you appeared as a flame to the new Church. The tongues of fire rested on the believers and they were filled with your Spirit.

Come anew into our lives, that we would burst forth with praise and thanksgiving to your holy name. Thank you that when we invite you in, you inhabit our very souls and bodies, and we are never separate from you.

Give us the tongues of poets and the angels, that our speech may be delightful not only to our fellow humans but also to you. We come ready to be filled with your renewing Spirit.

Thursday

Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you... But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ (1 Peter 4:12–13a).

Heavenly Father, we don't welcome the fiery trials we endure in this life. Strengthen us, that we might be given the wisdom and perseverance to endure to the end. Help us to look to you for release and freedom or, if our troubles continue, give us the fortitude to keep trusting in you.

We know, Lord, that while we are on this side of heaven our lives will not be free from sorrow. Impart to us your heavenly vision, that we may live in the light of eternity and anticipate that holy city where there will be no more tears, death, mourning or pain.

Reveal your glory in us, Lord Christ, as we participate in your sufferings. Refine us through your holy fire.

Friday

Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar... The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand (Revelation 8:3–4).

Father God, our prayers are offered as incense before you. Spark us out of our complacency when we are weary and do not want to pray. Give us the desire

to seek your wisdom and direction in all that we do.

Help us, too, to worship you with clean hearts and hands. We ask that you would forgive us our sins—those things we do wilfully and the things we leave undone.

We also ask that you would help us to pray for others throughout the day. Love the world through us, and enlarge our vision for your work in and through us. May our prayers rise as incense before you.

Saturday

Then the Lord will create over all of Mount Zion and over those who assemble there a cloud of smoke by day and a glow of flaming fire by night; over everything the glory will be a canopy. It will be a shelter and shade from the heat of the day, and a refuge and hiding-place from the storm and rain (Isaiah 4:5–6).

Creator and Redeemer, you have given us this vision of the new heaven and new earth.

We pray that now, as then, you would be our shelter in the heat of the day, whether this is persecution, gossip or hardship. We pray that you will be our hiding place when we face the storms of life.

Come and dwell with us and wipe the tears from our eyes. Make all things new, we pray, for you are the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and end. Come, Lord Jesus. ■