

Hymns: **443** “Come, let us sing of a wonderful love”
 501 “Help us, O Lord, to learn”
 412 “See how great a flame aspires”
 564 “O thou who camest from above”

Readings: **Isaiah 5:1-7**
 Luke 12:49-56

“HOW TO INTERPRET THE PRESENT TIME”

For a few weeks now, I’ve been sorting through the accumulation of papers with which my study seems to be crammed. I’m throwing away most of them but, from time to time, an odd item comes to my attention and I’m totally engrossed by it. Such a thing happened to me in the course of this last week.

I came across a scrap of paper which, upon examination, proved to carry a translation (by me) of an original poem in French. The poet was a man called Luzincourt Rose – a Haitian. And the discovery of this forgotten piece has started a stream of consciousness which I’m about to pour over onto you poor people now.

The subject of the poem is a young man called Philip Baker. He was in his twenties and living a very comfortable life on Sark, one of the Chanel Islands. His father was the magistrate there and the family was part of a ruling clique on that tiny island. Everything seemed to perpare him for a comfortable and well connected life. But soon things were happening to this young man which deeply disturbed his family.

First of all he was converted to an active Christian faith – his zeal made him an uncomfortable member of his household. What was worse, the faith he’d embraced was of a Methodist variety – again a challenge to the nominal Anglicanism of the family. When he became a preacher, the die seemed to be cast; he must now form a future on his own. The preacher eventually became a minister and the trend continued. It was when the minister directed to become a missionary that the family simply couldn’t understand their boy any longer. Off he sailed, in October 1882, to distant Haiti where his French language skills could best be put to use.

Three weeks after his arrival, after a few visits to a particular place of interest, he was dead. Yellow Fever ate him up and spat him out. He’d had time to charm the city of Port au Prince and representatives of every sector of the capital city’s life attended his funeral. Tears flowed copiously.

One of those attending the funeral was the poet Luzincourt Rose. And this is what he wrote afterwards:

*Was it necessary for you to die so far from home?
Under a foreign sky where your tortured soul
Called out in vain for someone you loved,
A mother or a sister who will now forever weep?*

*Bringing the Good News of the Gospel to the dark sons of Ham,
You left your homeland and came to our island,
But your spirit flew away like the lark
Towards the misty climate of your beloved Albion.*

*And yet you loved this land, the Queen of the Antilles;
In its meadows, valleys, gentle hills,
Your soul sought out a restful calm,
And then, in the evenings, you fed the Lord's sheep.*

I find descriptions of the sorrow felt by the loss of this young man to be highly evocative even after all this time.

So who was right – the family in Sark who desperately wanted to keep their boy at home? Or the man himself, listening for his inner voices and following what he thought to be his Lord's command?

Philip Baker had been set on fire for the Gospel. His heart burned within him. And this brings to mind the verse from this morning's Gospel lesson: "I have come to bring fire on the earth..." It's not the fire that destroys or ravages. It's the fire that enlivens, gives someone a sense of identity, energises a person's life. We just prayed about it in the baptism service a few moments ago when we said, all of us: "Generous God, touch us again with the fire of your spirit..." And we'll close the service this morning with another nod in the direction of the life-bringing fire:

*O thou who camest from above
The pure, celestial fire to impart;
Kindle a flame of sacred love
On the mean altar of my heart.*

In our Western world, those fires seem to be going out. The flames of an earlier faith are dying away, damped down by our own self-indulgence. Materialism, the search for comfort, our selfishness, and greed, our decadence – all of these are a damp blanket put over the fire of faith. And the flame of faith cannot easily compete with such stultifying, suffocating, air-denying, energy-sapping, self-indulgence.

The only outcome from our indifference, our laziness, our resignation, is the one shown in the graphic picture painted by Isaiah.

God has given us a vineyard and he expects us to work in it to make the best of it. But we haven't done our part. It's yielded poor grapes and produced sour wine. The hedge that surrounded the territory is no longer. The land has gone to waste. The walls of the buildings on the land are crumbling and the whole place has become derelict. No-one prunes or hoes it any longer. It's got overgrown with briars and thorns.

The indictment then follows as Isaiah, on fire himself, alleges: "God looked for justice but found bloodshed. He looked for righteousness but heard cries of distress." Was there ever an indictment that has better stood the test of time? Could not that same indictment be held against our contemporary world and those who run it? Bloodshed and distress – the hallmark of our present day world.

That fire, that original flame, that consuming passion - do we still remember it? Does it still burn in our breasts?

It has a tendency to set people apart. The young Philip Baker on the island of Sark was widely criticised for his zeal, ostracised for his fervour, blamed for family disruption, misunderstood by his closest friends, and reviled. So was he wrong? Should he have complied with their strictures? Could he have avoided the situation where, in the words of this morning's Gospel, a "father was set against son and a son against parents?" That's all wrong. But is it?

What else could the boy have done?

And us? How assiduously will we cultivate the flame of our faith. Where exactly has our first love gone? How has the light of our lives dimmed? Are we ready to fan alive again what one religious leader called "the glow below the ashes" till they burst once again into flame? Or will greyness, fifty shades of grey, suffice?

Will we nostalgically keep memories of a faith which, no longer actively practiced, is effectively in terminal decline? Will we settle for a dullness of spirit, a miserable bourgeois existence, a culture of contentedness? Or can we re-radicalise our inner selves?

Radical Christianity commits itself to the path of love. Unlike what is frequently described as "Islamic radicalism" which traces a road of violence, Christian radical action is committed to righteousness and peace. It commits itself to the Common Good. It stands up to be counted. It sets people on fire for justice and peace. No Prevent programme can stop the forward movement of people on fire for Christ. Like a mighty army is Love on the march.

We can see what's happening. Our Chapels are emptying. Our voices are ignored. We have ceased to be a force in the land.

So let's read the signs of the times. There's a vineyard that needs rebuilding. We must commit ourselves to being counter-cultural. We must take the risk of being misunderstood. We must put up with people laughing at us, ignoring us, being angry with us, or simply dismissing us. The times are challenging and we can either let them overwhelm and drown us or else stand up and make a determined effort to show people a different set of values. And to release energies that have long since been submerged in dull oblivion.

Back to Philip Baker. He did all that I've been describing. He embraced Christ, he committed his life to Christ, he took his faith to the poor people of Haiti. And he died within three weeks of his arrival there. A waste? I wonder.

In his short time in Haiti he made a few visits to a place called Duplan. It was a three hour ride from the centre of Port au Prince up the hill through Petionville to a hillside community above the capital city. His conversation with the Chief of that community led to a Damascus Road conversion of that man who brought his whole community with him. No longer the voodoo gods of African tribal religion. Simply a full-throated vote of confidence in Jesus and the wining way of love.

I could take you to Duplan today. They have the best choir on the island. We're going to close by listening to one track of the CD that they made. The whole place is faithfully committed to bearing witness for Christianity. And it all came about because of the apparent stupidity of a young man who left home to take the story that had changed his life into distant places.

A waste?

Certainly not. Let the long-dead Philip Baker, so easily and readily dismissed by the canons of conventional thinking, speak his message loud and clear across the generations. Jesus came to set fire on the earth – a fire that can rage in your hearts too. He had a baptism with which he must be baptised, the road of love is not always an easy one. The sharp distinctiveness of his message would separate people from each other as some accepted it and others rejected it. Now as then. But the times we're living in require something radical – and it surely must begin with us Christians.

God help us. Amen.