

PST OLAVE HART STREET, LONDON

**Pepys and The Great Fire 350**

The Fire Sermon

By Graham Fawcett



**Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> September 2016**

**11.00am**

My text this morning is from the Danish-American Victor Borge, who said:

“One afternoon, when I was four years old, my father came home, and he found me in the living room in front of a roaring fire, which made him very angry. Because we didn't have a fireplace.”

A 4-year-old D.I.Y. fire-maker's unknowing fearlessness set against the father's knowledge of the power of uncontained flames.

I have to declare an interest here. It was Sunday morning at our house. *My* father was in the dining room marking his school-books. The coal-fire had been lit in the living-room next door. Set into the wall between the two rooms was a wooden partition behind which was an empty space extending to the back of the fire-place and through which some warmth helped comfort the Sunday marker.

My by nature anxious father, a lovable man who would always try to avoid anything resembling an event, was about to be treated to the irony of having that enclosed space behind the fire-place within three feet of where he sat suddenly turned into an echo-chamber.

Folk in days gone by would have jumped to the conclusion that the god of fire was angry and that was why he was roaring, and the sense of a superhuman rage was certainly there in the echo-chamber's upping of the volume of that roar. The fire had slipped the bonds of hearth and set light to the chimney. Someone hadn't had it swept. But who?

“What's that noise?” my father erupted. In the sitting-room, we found the hot coals all banked up and purring, flameless, blameless, as innocently immobile as the tongs, the poker, the coal-scuttle., the sensible trappings of fire-comfort, of hearth-heart. “I told you not to keep on heaping up the fire”, he levelled at my mother, who was calmer, and not, as I recall, responsible for scheduling the chimney-sweep. “Now we'll have to call the Fire Brigade”.

So they did, while I, aged 13, ran out of the house onto the patch of grass by the telephone box for a grandstand view. There was real scope for loss of neighbour-face here, with everyone else's chimney quiet or dreamily wisping grey, while our smoke was ocean-liner black, billowing, vertical, over-the-top, in more ways than one, with even a Golden-Rainish smattering of sparks, all thoroughly inappropriate on a Sunday in that era. I stood there jaw locked onto that altitude, oblivious of impending disaster, home razed to the ground, death, or the loss of treasures. The Fire Brigade were on their way and,

besides, the *spectacle* of the event was so gloriously transgressive of our quiet lives. As my mother often reasonably observed, ‘nothing ever happens here’. Now something *was*. Maybe that was why she was noticeably steady that morning, aware that the wound of a chronically uneventful life was being cauterised. The fright of fire, the *dividend* of fire, simultaneous. Something to recover from, stronger.

Each new fire-event reacts, as though chemically, with our memory of the domestic and public ‘previous’ we have with the phenomenon of it. If we live in a peace zone, we first know fire as a source of indispensable life-saving tamed warmth which coalesces in our minds and bodies with that of love and especially love’s presence or absence at the heart of the home. We learn that the control of fire made possible the progress of civilisation. So we come to *love fire*, and when we see it as conflagration, feel we are watching a beloved friend go mad, feeling afraid for them and of them, but still loving them.

On his way home from work at Woolwich Arsenal in the war, one night my father saw both sides of the Thames alight as far as the horizon. Perhaps that would give him enough fire for a life-time. And then I was stopped in my tracks all these years later to read Samuel Pepys on September 5<sup>th</sup> 1666:

but, Lord! what sad sight it was by moone- light to see, the whole City almost on fire, that you might see it plain at Woolwich, as if you were by it.

So how has your Sunday morning been so far? 350 years ago today, on what was Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> September 1666, the third morning of the Great Fire, Pepys, who usually got up ‘betimes’, or early, was already

Up by break of day to get away the remainder of my things; which I did by a lighter at the Iron gate and my hands so few, that it was the afternoon before we could get them all away. Sir W. Pen and I to Tower- streete, and there met the fire burning three or four doors beyond Mr. Howell’s, whose goods, poor man, his trays, and dishes, shovells, &c., were flung all along Tower-street in the kennels, and people working therewith from one end to the other; the fire coming on in that narrow streete, on both sides, with infinite fury. Sir W. Batten not knowing how to remove his wine, did dig a pit in the garden, and laid it in there; and I took the opportunity of laying all the papers of my office that I could not otherwise dispose of. And

in the evening Sir W. Pen and I did dig another, and put our wine in it; and I my Parmazan cheese, as well as my wine and some other things.

Ah, that Parmesan cheese. I was thinking of Pepys the other day when I went into my Italian café and saw half a parmesan on the table. So I told Fausto, the owner, about Pepys burying his Parmesan, and Fausto, who had never heard of Pepys, agreed that it would probably have been all right. Scorched earth rather than melted cheese. By the evening on that third day there had been no let-up. If anything, the outlook was closer to apocalypse:

Only now and then walking into the garden, and saw how horridly the sky looks, all on a fire in the night, was enough to put us out of our wits; and, indeed, it was extremely dreadful, for it looks just as if it was at us; and the whole heaven on fire.

Thank God he tells us he was afraid. No sanitised heroics from him. Such honesty is itself warming. The American artist and illustrator John R Chapin drew the Great Chicago Fire of 1871:

“I confess that I felt myself a second Nero as I sat down to make the sketch . . . No language which I can command will serve to convey any idea of the grandeur, the awful sublimity of the scene”.

Yet image-making is a language. So Chapin had actually *shamed* Nero; as did Pepys, writing *our* Great Fire’s sublimity into the history-books and the treasury of English prose at night. Nor did he merely scribble while London burned. He went onto the streets like someone from the crowd at a circus who has volunteered to be ringmaster, not only helping the Fire effort, but even supervising it, with as much relish for detail as sadness for the hurt. That he enjoyed “an extraordinary good dinner’ in the evening is no anomaly: it was vital at night to touch base again with the hearth, where he could be re-united with his *old friend* the fire and that other old friend, the Diary.

So Pepys stood up to be counted in the Great Fire of London, although at no point in the diary does he give the slightest impression of *self-consciousness* that that is what he was doing. He simply got on with it. He did not run for cover and stay there. He hid his Parmesan underground but not himself.

to White Hall, and there up to the Kings closett in the Chappell, where people come about me, and did give them an account

dismayed them all, and word was carried in to the King. So I was called for, and did tell the King and Duke of Yorke what I saw, and that unless his Majesty did command houses to be pulled down nothing could stop the fire. They seemed much troubled, and the King commanded me to go to my Lord Mayor from him, and command him to spare no houses, but to pull down before the fire every way.

*Pepys's* Great Fire – we have come to think of it *as* his - calls us to a more hand-to-hand sighting of history. It is, too, an irresistible enabler of our personal memory to cast a colder eye on past disaster and upgrade our capacity to tame anxiety about any such thing in the future. Nor does he simply chart the course of the fire, what it *was*. He recorded what it could do, in a language and register usually reserved for the miraculous:

“And took up (which I keep by me) a piece of glasse of Mercers' Chappell in the streete, where much more was, so melted and buckled with the heat of the fire like parchment. I also did see a poor cat taken out of a hole in the chimney, joyning to the wall of the Exchange; with, the hair all burned off the body, and yet alive. . . . River full of lighters and boats taking in goods, and good goods swimming in the water, and only I observed that hardly one lighter or boat in three that had the goods of a house in, but there was a pair of Virginalls . . . “So near the fire as we could for smoke; and all over the Thames, with one's face in the wind you were almost burned with a shower of Firedrops’.

Pepys's account is like a parable of fire: he is putting a frame round it, holding that Fire in his hands. We are moved and, at the same time, *moved on* in our proportioning of fire's power to change us; and even though the vocabulary treats of a merciless destructiveness, it is life-giving. Here surely is Aristotle's theory of tragedy in the drama. For ‘tragedy’, read diary of a fire:

“A tragedy is the imitation of an action that is serious and also, as having magnitude, complete in itself; in appropriate and pleasurable language;... in a dramatic rather than narrative form; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish a **catharsis** of these emotions.”

Since Prometheus's philanthropic raid of the Greek heaven of Olympus, fire has lent itself to portraiture in art, literature, music. *Representing* fire is like fighting it *and* singing it, matching it flame for flame. It's somewhere to put

oneself impossibly, closer to the heart of it than one could physically bear. So it's a creative act as aspirational as any upward-yearning flame - which burns in that direction, the ancients thought, because it was longing to return to where it had come from in a zone above the atmosphere. When, from the wings of the school stage, I heard that most ice-breaking of Shakespeare play openings, Henry V's 'O for a Muse of Fire that would ascend the brightest heaven of invention', it was all that I could do to keep myself from burning upwards. Because the very dynamic of fire, that rise-and-fall parabola of happening, finds common cause with what is already *in* our bloodstream. The Finnish composer Einojuhani Rautavaara called his second Piano Sonata 'The Fire-Sermon' and found it had

“derived its musical energy from the magic words 'The Fire Sermon', repeating themselves like a mantra. There is no conscious link, however, with T.S. Eliot's poem of the same name or Buddha's famous sermon . . . All three movements observe the principle of continuous growth and the initial idea grows in extent, density and strength until the texture cracks (often into clusters), becomes dissonant, dissolves into a fog of sound or, as in the concluding fugue, goes overboard from pathos to trivial irony for a fleeting instant.

In *his* refreshingly playful book *The Psychoanalysis of Fire*, the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard wrote that

“Among all phenomena, [Fire] is really the only one to which there can so definitely be attributed the opposing values of good and evil. It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentleness and torture. It is cookery and it is Apocalypse . . . It is a tutelary and a terrible divinity, both good and bad. . . . Fire suggests the desire to change, to speed up the passage of time, to bring all of life to its conclusion, to its hereafter . . . In these circumstances, the reverie becomes truly fascinating and dramatic; it magnifies human destiny, it links the small to the great, the hearth to the volcano, the life of a log to the life of the world.

Bachelard in his 50s experienced fire as part of his inheritance, confessing that

I still take special pride in the art of *kindling* [this word in italics] that I learned from my father . . . I think I would rather fail to teach a good philosophy lesson than fail to light my morning fire”

Fathers again, you see. But sometimes we feel fiery, we burn with our desire, learn, all too laboriously and so late in the day of our lives, to distinguish between passion contained and uncontained, the caustic and the transcendent. The purgative fire which Dante enters between the final Cornice of Lust and the Earthly Paradise at the top of the Mount of Purgatory does not burn but delivers him. As T S Eliot, recalling the refiner's fire of the Book of Malachi, compassionately reminds us in his last Quartet, 'Little Gidding', our neglect of the possibility of the higher fire can only be prevented by conscious thought:

The only hope, or else despair  
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre-  
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

Eliot, who studied Eastern language, literature and philosophy at Harvard, is tracing fire's paradigm of meanings here, I think tenderly and toughly, calling to those who live in thrall to passion's burning desires rather than in the refiner's fire which burns us not at all.

And then he gives a voice to Aeneas:

To Carthage then I came  
Burning burning burning burning  
O Lord Thou pluckest me out  
O Lord Thou pluckest  
Burning

where thanksgiving for deliverance from a personal inferno is set against the fieriness of Dido's passion for Aeneas leaving her no sense of an alternative to self-immolation, in the third section of Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which he called 'The Fire Sermon' - modelled on the Buddha's sermon of that name, which he gave at Gaya in the state of Bihar more than a millennium before 1666, a sermon which Eliot compares in importance with Christ's on the Mount.

"In the sermon",

says the American scholar Henry Clark Warren's note, which Eliot is quoting,

“the Buddha instructs his priests that all things ‘are on fire. . . The eye. . . is on fire; forms are on fire; eye-consciousness is on fire; impressions received by the eye are on fire; and whatever sensation, pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent, originates in dependence on impressions received by the eye, that also is on fire. And with what are these on fire? With the fire of passion, say I, with the fire of hatred, with the fire of infatuation.’

Since we are, so to speak, Fire Sermon colleagues just for this morning, may I add a modest footnote, a mere PS in the great scheme of things, to the words of the Lord Buddha, about something I have discovered and against which I feel the God I hear does not counsel? On the contrary. It is simply that if the intensity of *our* fire, to be who we truly are and no other, and to do what we deeply feel that we are on this planet *to* do and nothing else, is securely contained in the hearth and home of our nature and the chimney of our good sense kept thoroughly well swept, then that is truth, purity, is happiness, and only good can come of it, only warmth, only fulfilment, only love for others, and an absolute inability to burn either ourselves or anyone else.

4<sup>th</sup> September 2016