

SERMON

Luke 3:7-18

He will Baptise with the Holy Spirit and with Fire
Nunawading and Waverley, 12-12-21

Dear friends in Christ,

Sidney Tapia is a top skate boarder and successful artist, winning the Western Australian Premier's award for best painting, called the Lester Award. Here is the winning painting of a homeless man. And another of his works. All his achievements, without him knowing, were really a seeking after Christ. He wanted to be successful in everything, his sport, his appearance and looks, and his street murals but admitted that all human striving is really a seeking for love. The trouble is, for the vast majority of people, it is seeking love of self and, therefore, trying to find transcendent, sublime love in the wrong ways. You can read about his journey to Christ in the latest Eternity magazine, online or at the door of the church today. The reason for God's coming to us, born as Jesus in such humble circumstances, was to show us the way to his love.

You and I have received his love in our lives and are now waiting for his return, which is the conclusion to all his work. On earth, his ministry was like working on a sculpture behind the covers. We see the outline and rough dimensions in the gospels and epistles of holy Scripture but soon he will remove the cloth and his redeemed people will be revealed.

John said that the work of the Christ would be judgement and grace, **baptising with the Holy Spirit and fire**. We hear the fiery words of judgement: **who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Already the axe is laid at the root of the tree. Therefore, every tree not producing good fruit will be chopped down and cast into the fire... The winnowing fork will be in his hand to clean up his threshing floor and gather the wheat into his barn and to consume the chaff with an inextinguishable fire.** It sounds pretty frightening. Where is the

grace, here? Sidney Tapia, though outwardly successful, knew he was in a mess internally. He said that hearing the demands of Christ put him off for quite a while. Judgement is real and cannot be avoided because God is love, he is good, forgiving, just, true, wise, creative, and life-giving. He wants all people, made in his image, to act like him. Human beings often act in opposite ways, harming others and themselves, rebelling against God's good ways, consumed by greed and envy, trying to gain the world for themselves and forgetting all those who have so little. Of course, there has to be a judgement.

Yet, at the conclusion of John's preaching, Luke writes: **with many other exhortations he preached the good news to the people.** It seems amazing that this could be Luke's assessment. We hear a lot about fire, where is the cooling message? **Fire** can also stand for God's presence: there was a fire on Mt Sinai when God set up his relationship with the Hebrews. He met Moses in the burning bush. We remember the famous event of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came on believers **like tongues of fire.** So, it is a gospel term, too.

We have experienced the fire of grace in our baptisms: **He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire** came true for each one of us here. Through those waters, the Holy Spirit has brought us into the kingdom, ensuring our adoption as sons and daughters. The Holy Spirit has declared us holy, saintly children of God. We have been accepted and now we have also been changed. John spoke about this change: **He who has two shirts, hand over one to the person who has none. Tax collectors: Do not collect more for yourselves than you are legally entitled to. Soldiers, do not extort money by violence or by falsely accusing people and be content with your wages.** There are good principles behind this advice: give generously, care for the less fortunate, act justly and honestly, be content and thankful for what you have, and never use angry words, threats, or violence in our relationships to get what we want. We can go further than John by adding prayer, reaching out to others with the good news, being kind, and doing good to others when we can. Teaching the

young and dwelling in the word ourselves. Practicing humility by serving in the church. And let's not forget rejoicing in the Lord and loving him.

For us, we are aware of unfruitful trees being thrown into the fire but this terrible judgement has been replaced by the fire and warmth of grace and undeserved love. A life of goodness, justice, love, lifting up the oppressed and sharing the good news confirms that the Holy Spirit has brought us into the arms of God.