

St Paul's Cathedral – 350th anniversary of the Great Fire. Out of the Ashes.

The Great Fire of London, which we have heard so graphically described by Evelyn and Pepys, began in Pudding Lane and ended at Pie Corner. In view of its course, one radical preacher of the time interpreted the fire as a divine judgement on the gluttony of the City. Others among a traumatised population were ready to believe that the disaster was the result of a terrorist conspiracy.

London was the capital of a kingdom in which the memories of the Civil War were still vivid. There had been very recent insurrections by supporters of the Cromwellian regime and rumours of plots hatched by an assortment of religious fanatics led by shadowy figures like the “Precious Man” and “Mene Tekel”.

Anxiety had been stoked by the plague which had claimed many lives in the preceding 12 months; about one in five of the population unable to flee had died. If that were not enough, the country was at war with the Dutch. In August 1666 Admiral Sir Robert Holmes had captured and burned West-Terschelling a town in the West Frisian Islands.

There were dire prophecies stimulated by the number of the beast in the book of Revelation, 666. George Wharton the mathematician in his almanac for the year declared ominously if not very poetically, “Now sixtene hundred sixtie six is come when [as some say] shall be the day of Doome”.

On Saturday September 1st the English Fleet caught up with the Dutch in Channel but a decisive engagement was frustrated by a violent storm which reached London in the early hours of Sunday September 2nd. The gale toppled chimneys and lifted thatch and a fire broke out on the ground floor of Thomas Farriner’s bakery in Pudding Lane. The easterly wind soon carried the flames to the combustible naval stores in the warehouses and Thames-side wharves. Not only was there abundant fuel but it had been an unusually hot summer and everything was tinder dry.

There were no emergency services or police to call. London parishes were equipped with hooks, ladders, buckets and squirts and there were even primitive fire engines first introduced into the City in 1625 but they were heavy and difficult to manoeuvre. Such was the chaos they could not get into Pudding Lane. By Monday with the

disappearance of the official Gazette and the destruction of the General Letter Office in Threadneedle Street, rumour had the field to itself and in the combustible state of public opinion blame was fixed on Dutch and French terrorists and there was an outbreak of xenophobic violence. Adrian Tinniswood in his excellent book, "By Permission of Heaven" gives a lucid and lively account of events.

By Tuesday, September 4th, about 8pm, flames appeared on the roof of St Paul's and the lead melted and ran in a stream down Ludgate Hill. By 9pm the books and papers stored in the crypt, a great part of the stock of the publishing houses clustered around the Churchyard, caught fire. Richard Braybrooke, Bishop of London, who died in 1404, fell from the floor of the Cathedral into the crypt and out of his coffin during that night. He was perfectly intact and was exhibited near the ruins. He was still there, a tourist spectacle, in 1675 when the foundation stone of this Cathedral was laid.

With the loss of the Guildhall, St Paul's Cathedral and the Exchange, the civic, religious and commercial centres of the City had been destroyed. The disappearance of the Custom House and Excise Office severely impaired the capacity of the

government to bring in fresh revenue. The burning of the General Letter Office disrupted communications between London and the rest of the country. The loss of most of the Livery Company Halls and 86 churches threatened the social and economic infrastructure. With no insurance, charitable institutions like the hospitals were badly affected.

But not for the last time, the City's resilience was remarkable. There was an officially inspired building programme, but ordinary citizens moved even faster than officialdom and in some ways even thwarted the grand plans of Sir Christopher Wren and others.

The grandest cities of Europe like St Petersburg or the Paris of the Emperor Napoleon III were the creation of absolute governments. In England a host of little platoons between the individual and the state set to work to rebuild a city that remains fascinating in its diversity although infuriating to navigate in any kind of vehicle.

The destruction of more than 13,000 houses quickened interest in the provision of insurance, a mutual sharing of risk. In his new plan for London of 1667, Sir Christopher Wren included a site for "the Insurance Office" although it was not until the opening of Lloyd's Coffee House in the 1680's that

the insurance market really took off. This was one of the many ways in which destruction of so much of the old city cleared the way for fresh thinking and enterprise.

St Paul's is the supreme symbol of resilience, a phoenix from the ashes, a sermon in stone asserting an imperturbable confidence in face of disaster and a vision of God of harmony, beauty and reason which defies destructive fanaticism masquerading under the pretence of religion.

The Great Fire was by no means the only time that London has faced destruction by fire. World War II fire storms caused by bombing laid waste to much of the capital in and beyond the area affected in 1666. A massive effort of reconstruction followed in which once again this Cathedral and City Churches were brought back to life. Resilience and the capacity to overcome disaster depends, yes upon financial and material resources but also vitally on resources of the spirit, the courage and professionalism of our emergency services the fire fighters and the police; the indomitable spirit of ordinary Londoners.

This is an occasion for thanking God for those who serve the common good, the emergency services and those who offer themselves for election to public office or who play a public role. Any society

that gives way to cynicism; that does not honour those in public office and demand high standards of them is vulnerable to disaster.

Faith and confidence which means literally “having faith together” are as significant in building and rebuilding a city as bricks and mortar. Here in the City there have been times when faith has been relegated to the leisure sector. Not so long ago there was a crisis of confidence which called in question the importance of maintaining and developing the life of the churches rebuilt by Wren and his collaborators and restored after World War II. Plans were drawn up to close all but four of the City Churches but with renewed confidence in the centrality of faith to the life of the City we have witnessed an astonishing revival. Confidence in Jesus Christ has been turned into compassion and creativity as we seek with every one of good will to serve all Londoners irrespective of their place of origin or world view.

In 1666 there was a search for scapegoats and one Robert Hubert confessed to having started the fire. Not even the Lord Chief Justice believed his confession but he was hanged nevertheless.

Bishop Gilbert Burnet in his “History of My Own Times” remarked that “there are seasons of believing as well as of disbelieving and believing

was then so much in season that improbabilities or inconsistencies were little considered”.

Resilience also consists in being able to deal with challenge and even disaster without resorting to scapegoating. Sir Christopher Wren’s Cathedral is his response, creative, beautiful and harmonious. It has survived the years as an inspiration, as London has again and again renewed itself after disasters. The message of hope is encapsulated in one word carved into this place Resurgam – I shall rise again.