Remember, Remember…What We'd Rather Forget?

By Andy Brierley, In-touch Editor

As the nights draw in and the air turns crisp, many of us look forward to the comforting rituals of early winter: cosy pubs, crackling bonfires, and the unmistakable sound of fireworks alarming our pets. But behind the sparklers and catherine wheels lies a complex history, one with deeply Christian and somewhat uncomfortable roots. Bonfire Night is more than just an autumn tradition, it's a window into religious conflict, national identity, and the challenge of forgiveness.

As every British schoolchild remembers from the omnipresent refrain, the origins of Bonfire Night go back to the 5th November, when in 1605 a group of conspirators, including the now infamous Guy Fawkes, attempted to blow up the Houses of Parliament. What most children are probably less aware of is that their aim was to kill King James I and the entire Protestant government, hoping to end years of Catholic persecution and restore a Catholic monarch to the throne.

Of course, the plot failed. Guy Fawkes was caught guarding the explosives beneath the House of Lords, tortured, and executed along with his co-conspirators. The response from the Crown was swift and sweeping: stricter anti-Catholic laws, harsh punishments for anyone even tangentially involved, and a national day of thanksgiving to mark the King's survival.

Thus, Bonfire Night began in an era when religion and politics were fatally entwined, when faith was a matter of allegiance, and difference was met with suspicion or violence. It is a stark reminder of what happens when fear triumphs over understanding, and when faith becomes a weapon rather than a witness.

For centuries after the foiled plot November 5th was marked not just with fireworks, but with anti-Catholic sermons, public prayers, and often with the burning of Papal effigies – hardly a model of reconciliation. It wasn't until the 19th and 20th centuries that the event softened into the more family-friendly festival we know today. Now, few people associate Bonfire Night with anti-Catholic sentiment. Indeed, many looking up at the colourful displays would be surprised to learn of its origins. But as Christians we are called to be people of memory, and that includes the willingness to reflect honestly on the past, even when it is uncomfortable.

We are not bound to the conflicts of earlier centuries, but neither should we forget them. If we are to be ministers of reconciliation, as Paul calls us to be,

then part of that calling is to reckon with how division, suspicion, and fear have shaped our national and religious story. That doesn't mean refusing to enjoy the fireworks or banning the bonfire, but it might mean approaching the tradition with a little more awareness. It means asking: what kind of story are we retelling when we gather each 5th of November?

The truth is, the story of Guy Fawkes is not a simple one. It's not just about a failed terrorist plot; it's about what happens when people of faith lose trust in one another. It's about how unresolved injustice, however old, can lead to anger, and how unchecked power can lead to cruelty. And it's about the danger of reducing complex human lives to easy labels: traitor, heretic, enemy, threat. These lessons are not only historical. In a world that is seeing increasing religious tension, political polarisation, and tribal rhetoric, the temptation to divide people into "us" and "them" is very much alive. Whether it's across faiths, ideologies, or communities, we are constantly encouraged to fear what we do not understand. But fear is not the way of Christ.

> *"God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them… In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love." (1 John 4:16–18)*

Jesus did not shy away from those who disagreed with him or who were 'different' from him. He spoke with Samaritans, ate with tax collectors, welcomed the unclean, and crossed every boundary set by the culture of the time. His example calls us not to retreat from difference, but to meet it with courage, curiosity, and compassion.

The Church, thankfully, has changed a great deal since the 17th century. Catholic and Protestant Christians now work together in countless ways. We no longer burn each other in effigy; we light candles side by side. That alone is reason to give thanks, but we must not mistake this progress for completion. Reconciliation is not a one-time event, it is an ongoing choice to live with grace, to seek truth together, and to value the image of God in every person, even those whose history has been written as *other*.

So this Bonfire Night, as we warm our hands by the flames or look up at the sky ablaze with colour, we might quietly ask: what story are we telling here? What history are we carrying? What are we celebrating? And what future are we pointing towards? If we can remember the past with humility, and hold the present with compassion, we are able to reshape the narrative into one in which enemies become friends, memory becomes hope, and the noisiest night of the year becomes a space for peace.