

John 3:1-17 Sermon for 11am

Being 'Born again' is one of those phrases that I get a bit nervous about using. Lots of people just don't understand it, and the media tends to misrepresent it, so that now we see it as an embarrassing label for generally American types of Christianity which get lampooned at will. If we meet someone who announces that they are a 'born-again-Christian' we tend to make judgments about them really quickly and tend to sidle away quickly.

How sad, then, that the origin of this phrase "born again" is on the lips of Jesus himself. Something that our leader, our saviour and our master thought was important enough to spend time talking about has become something to be ashamed of and a subject of mockery. Our reading this morning is all about it and so we are going to have a look at what being born again actually means, removing it from its contemporary media-led ridicule and putting it back in its original story. And I think that when we do that we will discover much more about what it means to be a Christian and a true follower of Jesus.

A Pharisee named Nicodemus visited Jesus at night for a chat. As a respected member of the religious and academic elite, it's possible from the language that he represented a number of his colleagues. Certainly, he would have been an exemplary Jew who needed to know who this Jesus figure was. Like many of us and like most people outside of church as well, he wasn't anti-Jesus – he calls him 'rabbi', a title of respect – but perhaps was just not yet open to all of what Jesus was teaching. His problem was that he knew that Jesus had to be someone special and someone who God approved of because all the reports of the miraculous things that Jesus did couldn't have happened if he was God's enemy. But quite how Jesus fitted in to his existing Jewish thinking was a puzzle. He was looking for a Messiah, someone to come and save the Jewish people and restore the Kingdom to them, liberating them from their Roman oppressors and restoring the purity of God's rule. But it's clear that he didn't quite think Jesus was this figure in the way he asked his question. Really his question was a subtle "who are you?" rather than an excited "are you the one?"

Jesus's response is to tell him that no-one can see God's Kingdom, this Kingdom restoration he had been expecting and hoping for, without being born again from above. Quite an obscure thing to say and Nicodemus is confused and goes down a literal line of questioning about birthing in his desperation to get some sort of handle on the conversation. And so we have a Jewish expert just as confused as we are when we hear the phrase "born again". What does it really mean? Why do some Christians claim it and parade it while other conveniently let it go? Obviously Jesus didn't mean a biological process of birthing, but what did he mean?

Jesus's second response is to say that no-one can enter God's Kingdom without being born of water and spirit. He's not saying something different from what he said earlier so just forget anything you've heard about a two-stage process of becoming a Christian based on water and then spirit. This is all about being born again from above. If you don't believe me on that, take a wander into New Testament Greek and notice the preposition for the word "of" is singular. This isn't a two-step process that Jesus is talking about.

The next couple of verses reiterate and clarify some of the confusion for our friend Nicodemus. Flesh gives birth to flesh. Babies are born from physical bodies. Spirit gives birth to spirit. So God's spirit gives birth to spiritual people. This spirit is not controlled by humans – it's not the same as human procreation. Instead we have no power over where God's spirit does and doesn't work. So

Nicodemus can forget all the strange images he has of trying to climb back inside a womb, and so on. He's just got to admit he doesn't understand – How can these things be?, he asks.

Jesus's response of surprise that he is a teacher but doesn't understand, isn't meant as mockery. Instead it's genuine surprise that Nicodemus hasn't put the puzzle together in his head. But it serves us well since it gives us another window on what being 'born again' means. Nicodemus was an expert in the Old Testament, the first part of the Bible and the bit that we share with the Jews. The meaning of being born again must be something that Nicodemus could have worked out from this Jewish scripture. For us, this means that we can also set aside our popular image of the water and spirit that Jesus referred to as meaning John the Baptist's baptism in the river and then the Holy Spirit coming at Pentecost. Neither are Jewish Scripture and one hadn't even happened yet when this conversation took place!

So I've said a lot about what it doesn't mean to be "Born Again of water and spirit from above", but what does it mean? Well, in the Jewish Scriptures water and spirit were images of cleansing and new life. I can't take you through all of it because of time, but water was required for ritual washing, and even the washing of the whole world in Noah's flood myth. God's spirit is associated with new life at the beginning of creation as it hovered over the water, but also at other times, like in a valley full of dry bones which comes back to life in a vision to the prophet Ezekiel. There are lots more, but you get the idea. Water and Spirit taken together – this cleansing and begetting of life – indicate transforming renewal. A renewal which is "from above" – from God, and not simply some human ethical or philosophical system. To be Born Again is to be transformed by God into a new creation. It's not just an alteration of lifestyle or a subtle shift of behaviour or emphasis, or even an adoption of a belief system. It is a complete renewal, just as dramatic as being born into a new life itself.

And this is what is required to see or enter the Kingdom of God. Just like Nicodemus, it doesn't matter how well educated or how well credentialed we are, even in theology or ethics, if we aren't Born Again, transformed by God then we cannot detect his Kingdom and we cannot be a part of it.

So how can we be Born Again? How can we embrace the whole life renewal that God offers us?

The answer is simply through Jesus, the only one who has ascended and descended from heaven. Jesus refers to an old story of the time when hundreds of years earlier the people of Israel were in the wilderness and they disobeyed God and suffered a plague of snakes. At this time, Moses, who was their leader at the time, prayed for mercy and on God's instructions made a bronze snake statue which was erected in the camp so that anyone who was bitten by the poisonous snakes could look at the bronze snake and their life would be miraculously saved. As well as being a great story of God saving his people despite them not deserving it, this story is Jesus's example of how someone can be Born Again.

Son of Man is one of Jesus's favourite self-designations – to explain why is a long story for another day – but the Son of Man will be lifted up just like the bronze snake so that all who look to him and believe in him will have eternal life. The "lifting up" is one of the gospel writer, John's, ways of referring to Jesus being lifted up and put on a cross at Easter. And so we have the story finally – that Jesus died on the cross so that anyone who looked to Jesus and believed could have a dramatic renewal of life resulting in eternal life in God.

This takes us to the most famous verse in the Bible – John 3:16 – In this way God loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life. God loves the world so that despite its going its own way and trusting in its own greatness and cleverness, God sent his only son to be that bronze snake in the wilderness for us so that we need

only believe in him to see and enter God's Kingdom where life is secure, where life is reborn, and where a new world awaits – not just in the future but here and now for those who can see it.

God therefore didn't send Jesus into the world to condemn us, but to save us. Jesus's coming didn't put in place some moral system to trap us into a boring existence or to enable us to look down on other people and moralise down our noses at them. Jesus's coming didn't create a system where the religious elite could tell everyone about a new power structure that they could control. Jesus's coming didn't happen just to give a weird status to a fundamentalist few Christians who claim a label that other mock and abuse.

Instead, Jesus came into the world to be the one thing that stands high when everything else falls down. Jesus came into the world to be the lighthouse when our lives fall into darkness. Jesus came into the world to offer renewal and transformation when life has turned shabby and messy and grimy. Jesus come into the world to be the one who I look to when the snakes of despair or monotony nibble my incessantly. Jesus is the one to look to when my world is ending. Jesus is the one to look to when the venom of anger and hurt needs drawn out of our lives. Jesus is the one who's shadow gives shelter when the floods and storms of life threaten to flatten us. It is Jesus who was lifted up for us, to give us life and it is because God loves us enough.

Let's chose today to look at Jesus again, either for the first time or the thousandth time, for our rebirth and our transformation and let's leave this building as new people who are basking in the shadow of Jesus who came to save us, and as people who are looking for God's Kingdom to come in all its glory. Amen.