

*born again*  
a sermon preached on the  
*second sunday in lent*  
12 March 2017  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
by *fr david moore*, vicar

the lections: Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5,13-17; John 3:1-17

“No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again”.<sup>1</sup> ‘Born again’? What does this mean? Through a series of historical mis-steps the term has erroneously become a description of religious status, qualification even. The ‘born again’ are the insiders, the true believers, with special spiritual gifts. All others are second rate, not true Christians, outsiders even.

Can this be what John the Evangelist had in mind? Emphatically Not! It’s a long and messy story, how Christianity managed to get from the Johannine community’s teaching to this shocking distortion.

Here’s a condensed version. The community for whom John the evangelist wrote were people of Jewish inheritance, and in particular the Jewish Wisdom tradition. Nearly two thousand years of anti-semitic institutional Christianity has blinded us to this fact. There are numerous markers of the Jewish wisdom tradition in John’s gospel. But if you want to see the clearest expression of this, then read John’s ‘Prologue’<sup>2</sup> side-by-side with Jewish Wisdom literature, especially, Proverbs 8:21-32.

The key thing about Jewish Wisdom tradition is this: Wisdom was considered to be an integral aspect of God, and, crucially, immanent, *within* humans, not a distant monarchical external supernatural being. God had come out of the heavens, and become a reality closer to humans than their very breath.

Wisdom and John’s Logos are functionally equivalent; in the beginning with God.<sup>3</sup> We can hear how this has influenced John’s gospel, in those striking Johannine metaphors of abiding, branches and vine,<sup>4</sup> of being one with the Father.<sup>5</sup> In Jewish Wisdom tradition, “God was not perceived as a being, no matter how majestic, distant or otherworldly. God must be understood as a verb, calling, informing and shaping us and all creation into being all that we were created to be.”<sup>6</sup> Not a noun, but a verb.

What happened to this Jewish Wisdom insight? Unfortunately, it met with Greek dualism, and empire Christianity. Greek thinkers had little or no understanding of Jewish mysticism. And thus in the early centuries of the development of the Church as institution, accelerating after Emperor Constantine’s edict, this vision of Johannine one-ness was replaced with Greek dualism and institutional belonging. Heaven versus earth. God versus humankind. Spirit versus matter. Souls versus bodies. The ‘saved’ versus the ‘damned’. For all his genius, this schism of reality is sadly patent throughout St Paul’s writings; presumably partly because of Paul’s Pharisaic background, preoccupied with law, and partly because of his pitch to a Greek-speaking world. It’s important to realise that none of these dualisms would have made any sense to John’s community, steeped in Jewish mysticism.

Fast forward, and now we are the inheritors of not only about seventeen centuries of Christian dualism, but also this dualism’s shocking reversal of the Johannine teaching about being ‘born again’. So much so, that it’s almost impossible for us Christians to conceive of this teaching in any way other than a dualistic framework.

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<sup>1</sup> John 3:3

<sup>2</sup> John 1:1-18

<sup>3</sup> John 1:2

<sup>4</sup> John 15:1-11

<sup>5</sup> John 17:11,22-23

<sup>6</sup> John Shelby Spong, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, New York: HarperOne, 2013, p57.

Let us allow the Lenten pilgrimage, then – and the inheritance of the Lectionary’s gift to us on Lent Two – to return us to the gospel, to deep reflection on our own experience. We recall that last Sunday’s gospel invited us into the raw experience of the wilderness.

Look at what we see in this famous Nicodemus encounter; Nicodemus comes to Jesus with a head-full of concepts, doctrines, rational ideas, and bounded categories of thought and law. And look at what happens in this conversation ‘by night’.<sup>7</sup> “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?”<sup>8</sup> Nicodemus is stuck in his head, in a concrete-literal mind: “Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”<sup>9</sup>

This is the question of the dualistic rational mind. Thus, Jesus’ blunt question to Nicodemus is still his question to the church: ‘Are we teachers, or students, of Christianity, and yet we do not understand these things; are we stuck in a concrete-literal mind?’

Sadly, much of Christianity – thanks to a combination of Greek dualism, empire power and institutional belonging – does indeed remain stuck in the concrete-literal mind, in the dualism of Greek philosophical thought. People continue to seek after Plato’s perfect forms, a supernatural God from another world, a noun; who visits this world, but only graces those who carry the right membership card in their wallets, who claim to have ‘Jesus as their personal Lord and Saviour’, who have the correct thoughts.

To us Jesus still warns and encourages: “The Spirit blows where she chooses, and you hear her sound, but you do not know where she comes from or where she goes.”<sup>10</sup> ‘Being born of the Spirit’, in the Johannine teaching, in contrast to the dualistic mindset, speaks of a new dimension of being in the divine life. It is the ‘abiding’ about which John will later speak.

Jesus articulates to the somewhat-stuck Nicodemus a new dimension of humanity; a new insight, a new consciousness, a new way of relating to the Holy. This new way depends on the priority of experience, encounter. Jesus gives witness to an immediate experience of his Father; and this is to be the way of the new humanity.

Lent is our annual refresher in this spiritual discipline of attending, to the immediate, direct experience of the God who is in us. This requires attending to the actual detail of our lives; *all the detail*, especially the truth we’d rather not face about ourselves, which always tends to be revealed by the crises of our lives, by those things, in St Paul’s memorable insight, which we do not want to do, which we do; and those things which we want to do, but do not.<sup>11</sup> As Richard Rohr puts it – in the book I have recommended to us all as Lenten reading – “God comes to us disguised as our life”.<sup>12</sup>

Jesus the Jewish Wisdom teacher will later reveal to his disciples how being ‘born of the Spirit’ takes expression: “When the Spirit of truth comes, she will guide you into all the truth”.<sup>13</sup>

The Lenten pilgrimage is openness to being guided into all the truth; beginning with the truth about ourselves. Our abiding in God is a function of our abiding in the truth about ourselves. For it is not the smooth and shiny, charming, well-rehearsed and gorgeously-packaged stories we tell about ourselves that set us free. Rather, the truth about who we really are sets us free; revealed to us by the Spirit who unveils our illusions, and who blows where she will.

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<sup>7</sup> John 3:2

<sup>8</sup> John 3:10

<sup>9</sup> John 3:4

<sup>10</sup> John 3:8

<sup>11</sup> Romans 7:15,19-20

<sup>12</sup> Richard Rohr, **Falling Upward: a spirituality for the two halves of life**, London: SPCK, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> John 16:13