

new birth

a sermon preached on the

second Sunday in Lent

08th March 2020

at

st john's

ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL

by Rev Colleen Clayton

the lections: Genesis 12: 1-4a, John 3:1-17

In the name of the Creator who shares the sacred with us,
In the name of the Son who shares humanity with us,
In the name of the Spirit who unsettles and inspires us, Amen.

As I'm sure you are aware, we are currently in Year A of the Australian Lectionary; the Year of Matthew. Which doesn't really explain why our Gospel reading this morning, and for the next three weeks, is from the Gospel according to John.

Our lectionary has a three year cycle and devotes one year each to the Synoptic Gospels; Matthew, Mark and Luke. These three Gospels are called *synoptic* meaning that they give a comprehensive view of Jesus' life. Although there are distinct differences between them, they include many of the same stories, often in a similar sequence and sometimes with identical wording.

John's Gospel is quite different. Its style is far more imaginative and symbolic, drawing on many images that were already in use by the Jewish community to speak about God's law; life, light, bread, water, wine. In John's Gospel these images are used to speak about Jesus, the incarnate Word of God.

Instead of having a year of its own, John's Gospel is represented across all three years, mostly in Lent and Easter. In Lent we hear John's wonderful symbolic writing about who Jesus is, and in Easter we hear Jesus' parting messages for his disciples about how to be church.

Today's Gospel reading offers us the imagery of Jesus, the bringer of new birth (3:1-17), next week we will hear about Jesus the living water (4:5-42), then Jesus the light (9:1-41) and finally, Jesus the resurrection life (11:1-45).

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night, in the darkness of unbelief, and Jesus startles him by telling him that, unless he is born in a new way, he will not see God's realm. Poor Nicodemus sounds a bit silly in his conversation with Jesus, apparently failing to understand the metaphor. However, in the Greek, his misunderstanding makes a lot more sense.

The word that is used is *anōthen*. It is a word that can relate to both time and space. So, what Jesus said to Nicodemus could have been understood as either;

- unless you are born *again*, or
- unless you are born *from above*.¹

Jesus' subsequent explanation makes it clear the sense in which he is using the word.

Of course, we have the advantage over Nicodemus. We have read the prologue to John's Gospel, so we recognise that this interaction with Jesus reflects what John was writing about there; the light shining in the darkness, that the world does not know,

¹ Brendan Byrne, *Life Abounding: A reading of John's Gospel*, p65.

but through whom all who accept him are given the power to be born from above, to become children of God.

In his initial incomprehension, Nicodemus asks, *how can anyone be born after having grown old?* (3:4a) Even after it becomes clear that Jesus is talking about being born from above, Nicodemus asks, *how can these things be?* (3:9)

Nicodemus is a Pharisee and it is important not to immediately hear that title as pejorative. He is a well-educated man, an expert on the Jewish law, the law that was symbolised as life, light, bread, water, and wine. He knows and loves the scriptures and God, and yet he can't get his head around what Jesus is offering.

I wonder if part of what Nicodemus is struggling with is the question, *why?* Why, after a life of studying and growing to adulthood, would he want to begin again as a baby? Why should he hope for newness having reached maturity? Why would he want to go back to the beginning to rediscover God all over again? Why on earth would he look for the disruption of everything on which he has built his life? What could possibly be worth all that?

But Jesus, the bringer of new-birth, is offering the opportunity to get to know God in a new way; not just any way, but as a beloved child of God. Jesus invites Nicodemus, and us too, into the newness of a familial relationship with God. That means starting again. It means being willing to reconsider everything we think we know about God and what God is doing in us and in the world.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (3:16). Jesus' coming is life-giving. *Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him* (3:17). Jesus does not come to cast us off but to draw us closer, to invite us to get to know God in a life-giving way that makes us anew.

Today's reading from Genesis tells us another story of someone being called by God to start life anew. *Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing."* (12:1-2)

It is interesting that God's call begins with the words, *go from ...* In Abram's world, God's call was the equivalent of being told to give up absolutely everything; name, status, security, everything; and he is told to do this first, without any knowledge of what he is going to other than that God will show it to him.

Abram, like Nicodemus is being invited, in his settled maturity, to give up what he has worked towards in order that God can give him something new. It is a mind-boggling call, but Abram goes.

God promises Abram that he will be the beginning of a great nation, that he will be blessed and be given a great name. But this is not promised so that what Abram gives up will be worth it to him. All that God promises to give to Abram is given in order for Abram to be a blessing to others.

I wonder what God is calling each one of us to go from? I wonder what God would like to bring to new birth in us and in our community of St John's, Camberwell? I wonder what blessings God offers us in order that we might bless others? These are questions to ponder this Lent.

God calls each one of us to go from our settled lives and to live as children born from above, but not so that we can enjoy a private, holy moment of individual specialness, and guaranteed personal salvation. We must continue to journey into the unknown, into God's call to each one of us so that we can play our parts in fulfilling God's desire

for others to be blessed through us. Unless each of us is true to our own unique being, we cannot be the blessing that God intends us to be; we cannot enter God's realm.

That is not a statement of condemnation, *God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him* (John 3:17); it is simply a statement about the reality of human existence. It is not possible for us to bless others unless we allow God to bring us to new birth, to tell us where to go, and to bless us.

We are blessed to be a blessing. Blessed for a future beyond what we can see. Blessed as we go from our self-generated identity and security to find our true identity and salvation in God. Blessed to be a blessing.

I would like to finish by reading you some words that were used at a Mass to commemorate priests who had been martyred in El Salvador. It is entitled, *Prophets of a Future Not Our Own*.

It helps, now and then, to step back and take a long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts, it is even beyond our vision.
We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.
Nothing we do is complete, which is a way of saying that the Kingdom always lies beyond us.
No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No confession brings perfection.
No pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No program accomplishes the Church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.
This is what we are about.
We plant the seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.
We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.
We may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.
We are prophets of a future not our own.²

The Lord be with You.

² This prayer was first presented by Cardinal Dearden in 1979 and quoted by Pope Francis in 2015. This reflection is an excerpt from a homily written for Cardinal Dearden by then-Fr. Ken Untener on the occasion of the Mass for Deceased Priests, October 25, 1979. Pope Francis quoted Cardinal Dearden in his remarks to the Roman Curia on December 21, 2015. Fr. Untener was named bishop of Saginaw, Michigan, in 1980.