

*born again*  
a sermon preached on  
*trinity sunday*  
27 May 2018  
at  
*st john's*  
ANGLICAN CHURCH CAMBERWELL  
*by father ken hewlett*

the lections: Isaiah 6: 1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17.

‘No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above’ (John 3.3)

Or in the old translation,

‘Unless a man be born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven’

Are we born again Christians? What mind picture do we have of born again Christians? Some of us have probably met ‘born again Christians’ and have felt that when we have heard their testimony it has sounded like more a testimony to self-righteousness than to the grace of God. This is often followed by a tirade against every church other than the Pentecostal assembly the speaker belonged to as it and only it preached the full gospel.

This morning in an attempt to rehabilitate what for some might be an alien or unattractive concept, let us consider the encounter Jesus had with Nicodemus and the words spoke from three different perspectives.

1. ‘Born again’ in the Bible:

The good or the bad news is that the term ‘born again’ has been eliminated from many modern translations of the bible. The revised English version retains the phrase in two places. The first is when Nicodemus comes to see Jesus under cover of darkness after indicating that he believes Jesus to a teacher sent by God. He is given the reply: ‘In truth I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he has been born again’ (John 3.3).

The second place where the term appears is in the first letter of Peter: ‘You have been born again, not of mortal but of immortal parentage, through the living and enduring Word of God’ (1 Peter 1; 23).

There is one other allusion to the term in the letter to Titus: ‘Not for any good deeds of your own, but because he was merciful God saved us through the water of rebirth and the renewing power of the Holy Spirit’ (Titus 3:5).

And that is it! There are hundreds of verses in scripture about repentance, about prayer and fasting, about loving and serving, about money and malicious gossip. But there are at best three verses in the whole of Holy Scripture will allude to being born again. And these do not have an obvious internal consistency. Jesus tells Nicodemus that being born again is a pre-requisite for seeing the kingdom of God.

Peter writes as if his readers had been born again but hadn’t quite realised it; Paul speaks of the phenomenon as a gift of God’s grace. In none of these places is being born again identified with some kind of instantaneous psycho-spiritual experience which becomes the hallmark of personal discipleship. Indeed in the letters of 1 Peter and Titus, being born again is a reality for

the community of faith rather than for the private C. V. of members. Only in the encounter of Jesus with Nicodemus is being born again a direct word to an individual.

It is interesting to note that there are other occasions when Jesus says specific words to individuals, yet none of these is taken to be as universally binding as this injunction to Nicodemus. When he tells the rich young man to 'go sell all you have and give to the poor' (Mark 10:21) we are careful not to universalise this as a condition of discipleship. When Jesus tells a leper 'to go show yourself to the priest and make the offering as laid down by Moses for your cleansing' (Mark 1.44), we do not incorporate that as a liturgical dismissal in services of healing. So we must be wary of giving a rare word to a peculiar individual the kind of weight we do not give to equally singular other words of Jesus.

## 2. The Peculiar Individual called Nicodemus.

Let us now consider this Nicodemus whom Jesus encountered. What do we know of him? Not very much. He comes to Jesus by night and engages him in what seems to be conversation about spiritual gynaecology (John 3.1-21). In a more combative mood he speaks in favour of giving Jesus a fine hearing in a meeting where his fellow Pharisees are defaming him (John 7.42-52). There is one more fleeting glimpse of him when he brings a large amount of spices to help Joseph of Arimathaea bury the body of Jesus after the crucifixion (John 19. 39-42). Just as we are looking at a rare text, we are also looking at a very limited biography. However, when Jesus said to Nicodemus, 'Unless you are born of water and the spirit, you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven', these words would have connected in a peculiar way with Nicodemus for to his way of thinking, water and spirit were not important; blood and legalism were. Nicodemus like St Paul was a Pharisee, and like St Paul, Nicodemus would have held clearly to lineage and legalism, pedigree and propriety. The Pharisees were keen to recite their blood line and Nicodemus would have been able to offer a testimony to genealogical purity just like St Paul, but Jesus isn't interested. In the new community Jesus comes to initiate, water is thicker than blood. The water of baptism by which we become members of the body of Christ, is thicker than the blood of the finest pedigree stretching all the way back to Abraham. In the Body of Christ, water is thicker than blood. The acknowledgement of this may be regarded as one litmus test as to whether or not we have been born again.

The second tenant of faith which Nicodemus shared with St Paul had to do with legalism. After his conversion Paul considered such mean-spirited legalism a displacement activity. Jesus had no time for the pettiness of legalism. But perhaps Nicodemus had not got there yet. Perhaps he still believed that rue righteousness, godly goodness came from keeping the law. So Jesus is keen to reveal to him that righteousness comes from accepting that God's transforming love brings true fulfilment in faith and life.

Maybe this could be the second litmus test as to whether we are born again: do we accept that the grace of God is primary, redeeming all our attempts at goodness through trying to do the proper thing? Righteousness does not come from keeping the law; it comes from being moved to the very core of our being by the Holy Spirit who leads us to the truth that goodness is not an achievement but a gift from God.

When Jesus says these words to Nicodemus, he is placing the water of baptism on a higher plain than the claims of pedigree, and exalting the grace of God above the supposed merits of subservience to legalism.

## 3. Nicodemus a changed man.

We do not always know what happened to the people to whom Jesus directed a particular word. We do not know if the rich young man eventually sold all his goods and gave it to the poor. We do not know if the healed leper made the proscribed sacrifices, but we do know a little ... and it is only a little... about Nicodemus after his one-to-one meeting with Jesus.

In our two subsequent glimpses of him he is acting in a very unpharisaical way. Firstly, he seems to defend the indefensible; he asserts the right of Jesus to have a hearing in opposition to his own co-religionists who want to prosecute Jesus. And curiously the derision heaped on him has to do with the supposed genealogy of Jesus. Here, while the Pharisees attest that lineage is the guarantee of the genuine article, Nicodemus indicates that it has gone beyond that. He no longer believes that those who belong to God come from within a self-obsessed charmed circle.

And on the final occasion, we glimpse Nicodemus doing something which no self-respecting Pharisee would tolerate. He is helping handle the dead body of Jesus, thereby risking contamination during the most sacred festival of the Passover. He has somehow discovered that the love of God is greater than legalism, and if this means that he has to get his hands dirty and break the rules in order to show compassion, then that is what he must do.

In these things, Nicodemus shows that he has been regenerated not by blood and legalism, but by water and the spirit, then perhaps being born again is not the cataclysmic personal experience coveted by the hyper-pious as a spiritual qualification.

Maybe, more of us, who feel similarly compelled by the grace of God to live differently for Jesus, should claim to be born again... as long as we always acknowledge that God alone is our midwife.