

LEYLAND UNITED REFORMED CHURCH
SERMON: Sunday 12th March 2017

Reading: John 3.1-17

Address

In our gospel reading, we have the famous story of the Pharisee Nicodemus, a respected and leading figure in Jerusalem, visiting Jesus.

Nicodemus visits at night and, as well as the secrecy this presents, it again is an example of John's recurring images of light and dark, blindness and sight, ignorance and insight.

Nicodemus arrives in darkness to ask Jesus a question.

We don't know whether this is a prearranged meeting, or that he has arrived and woken up the house where Jesus is staying. But it reads like a planned occasion, with direct and prepared questions and answers.

It also reads as though Nicodemus never actually got to ask his question. His opening words to Jesus are: "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God."

This sounds more like a preamble to a question.

Nicodemus is affirming Jesus as a Rabbi, a teacher, sent by God and empowered by God. This isn't a question. It is the words of an educated and respected man, acknowledging the person he is meeting with in readiness for putting his question.

Before the question can reach his lips, Jesus replies, and I've added some of the variety of translations we have: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above, born again."

Nicodemus is caught on the hop, his own question disappears, and he is straight into a debate with Jesus: "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

Nicodemus is responding literally. For him, the only way to be born is the biological way – metaphor is lost on him. But Jesus is speaking about the Kingdom of God, being baptized by water and the Spirit, and living out kingdom lives.

"Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above, born again.' ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

This is what Jesus means here about being born from above or born again. It is a recurring event, a decision we make every day to keep on following and living out the Way of Jesus.

For some of our sisters and brothers, being born again is a badge of honour. It is limited to being able to point to the date that they gave their lives to Jesus, affirmed a list of prescribed beliefs, which then meant they were saved. Saved as a one-off event that means, whatever happens, they are heading towards all the benefits of eternity and none of the theorized downsides.

This approach does make faith simpler. Agree to the list, turn up, take part as much as you want, adjust and tweak your behavior, and that's that. It narrows faith to a transaction. Jesus did this, I agree that he did, and my visa to the heavenly realm is stamped in readiness.

To me it feels as if that understanding just lifts two words from this passage, 'born again', and completely ignores the rest of it. The rest of the passage broadens out what being born from above, or born again, means. It is about entry into the kingdom of God, which is found in its fullness the other side of death, but breaks into the here and now as we strive after it, wait upon God, and encourage each other on the Way.

It is symbolized by our baptism, and is energized by the Spirit of God. It transforms our life, perspective and purpose to being part of God's dream for us. It is an invitation to adventure with God, to listen for the Spirit as it blows and step out in faith with it.

Being born from above, or born again, is about living transformed lives, following the Way of Jesus, trusting in God and relying on the Spirit. It is complicated, continuous, and unsettling, but is also joyous, invigorating and open to change with every breath we take. It is far from a simple transaction, it is a leap of faith into the life of God.

Nicodemus is completely flummoxed by all of this and despairs: "How can these things be?"

Jesus also is saddened that such a person, educated and a leader in the community, has such a narrow understanding: "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

Jesus is saddened that Nicodemus has such a literal, narrow and worldly understanding of faith, of what it means to trust in God and live God's dream for the world. Jesus has spoken about earthly and spiritual things, and Nicodemus does not understand.

¹¹ "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?"

Jesus then speaks as the one who has known both earth and heaven, who is raised as a sign of God to draw others to love God, follow the Way of Jesus, and live out the kingdom in the now in continuity with eternity. Declaring that the way we live now is where eternity can begin, if we believe Jesus, give our hearts minds and spirits to living his way, and live out the life of God.

¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

It is at this point that we get to that oft quoted verse, John 3:16, which needs to be heard in the context of what has gone before, and the verse afterwards:

¹⁶ "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.

God loves what God has created. God loves all of Creation, every rock and creature, every planet and star, every atom and particle. God loves, and in love Jesus was born, lived, died and became the Resurrected One. God's love in Jesus is not limited to his crucifixion, it flows from the dawn of time, within all of his life, and on into eternity. This overwhelming love transforms the words that come next. Belief is not just agreeing to a list of statements, it's older meaning is to believe, to give your heart, loyalty, fidelity and commitment. This is the way to eternal life. To take it as a means of limiting God's love, of stating that unless you affirm certain statements you are condemned to damnation, is to make the same mistake as Nicodemus and to have too literal, narrow and worldly an understanding of faith.

This reading of the text is then affirmed by the last verse we heard: ¹⁷ "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.

God in Christ is all about love, transformation, and calling people to live out God's kingdom in the here and now, in anticipation of eternity, not out of fear of condemnation and eternal torment.

We are called to give our hearts, loyalty, fidelity and commitment to following the Way of Jesus, as we are held in the love of God, and inspired, challenged and comforted by the Spirit.

Jesus answers, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."

Welcome to the adventure of faith, the call to give our hearts to God, to follow the Way of Christ each and every day, and to place our trust in the Spirit to guide our path. Welcome to New life in Christ! **Amen**