

Ye Must Be Born Again: Sermon Preached on Sunday 5th March 2023 (Second Sunday of Lent)

Preached at St John's, Devizes

Romans 4:1-5, 4:13-17; John 3:1-17

“How can anyone be born after having grown old?”

“Ye must be born again.” I saw this phrase a lot when I was a kid growing up in Belfast, on the noticeboards of churches and sometimes on posters stuck up on lamp-posts. It made very little sense to me, just as it initially made very little sense to Nicodemus in today's Gospel reading.

As I became older, I started noticing that the street preachers who popped up in the city centre on Saturday afternoons liked using it. They were quite clear that they were born again, and therefore that they were proper Christians: and they were also clear that the rest of us were not proper Christians – especially if we happened to be Catholics.

Aged around eighteen, I found myself walking past a church where an Evangelical youth rally was about to start, and going in out of curiosity. I came forward at the altar call because I did indeed want a closer personal relationship with Jesus; perhaps, in the way of the young, I wanted some of the obvious sense of certainty that the people leading the rally seemed to have. I was quickly disappointed, however – on hearing my obviously Catholic name and the strongly Republican part of the city I came from, the people holding the rally clearly coveted a convert and a ‘conquest’. I found it the experience so nauseating that I bade my farewells and left as soon as I politely could.

I'm sure I'm not the only person here who has had experiences like this. This makes us rather nervous when we hear the phrase “you must be born again”. Indeed, it might seem that the translators of the Bible version we use in St John's are nervous about it as well. They prefer the phrase: “You must be born from above”. Now, let's be clear that this is not some get-out-clause invented by

liberal New Testament scholars. The same Greek word “anōthen” can be translated either way. In any case, this matters little – whichever word is chosen to translate this phrase, Jesus is very clearly speaking of the idea of a rebirth – a heavenly, spiritual, rebirth.

But here’s the rub – in this story, being reborn isn’t something that people choose for themselves. “The wind blows where it chooses”, as Jesus says. If we are ‘born again’ it is because the Holy Spirit has blown its way into our lives for reasons of its own. It is not in our gift or our choosing. It isn’t something that we should wear as some sort of badge of pride or see as a prize for our achievements. To be born again is a gift of God the Holy Spirit.

St Paul, writing in our epistle reading today, hammers this point home. God’s promises to us rest entirely on grace, not on whether we keep the Law of Moses or any other set of rules or laws. The reality is that none of us ever keeps to the rules all the time. Once we get ourselves trapped in the mind-set where we think Christianity is about tallying how often others break the rules and congratulating ourselves if we can convince ourselves that we keep them all the time – or, well, nearly all the time – then we find ourselves killing true faith. “The law brings wrath”, writes St Paul starkly. True faith is all about trusting in God’s goodness and love for us, and not in our own ego. St Paul is clear that God’s promises to us – of a new and full life in this world and eternal life in the world to come – rest on His grace, not on anything we happen to have achieved.

Grace can be a difficult word to define, but we all know what it is when we see it. Indeed, “grace” is like many aspects of Jesus’ teaching – if we try to hold on too tightly to it, if we try to define it too rigidly, somehow we undermine what it’s all about. If we try to control the means of our salvation, to rigidly define the terms on which God leads us to eternal life, we find ourselves grabbing a weapon to condemn others and losing our hold on God’s gift to us.

(Yes, even the people at that cringe-making altar call when I was eighteen are within the love and grace of God!)

Being born again is not a one-off event but the work of a lifetime. It is a continuous renewal aided by prayer, the sacraments, and God's gift to us in Scripture. Indeed, our being born again is something that will only be completed by God in the life-to-come. No matter how young or old we are, we always have room to grow spiritually and room to deepen our love for God and our neighbour. We will never reach the limit of all that the Holy Spirit is capable of loving us into, nor will we ever reach a point where we no longer need God's grace.

Those posters I saw when I was a boy presented a mechanistic idea, full of fear, that Hell was inevitable for most people and that being born-again was a sort of cosmic lottery ticket to escape it. But being born again should be something completely different: something that is life-giving, something that calls us into deeper harmony with God, our fellow human beings, and the whole of creation. Any real experience of being born again from above, any real experience of the Holy Spirit transforming our lives and our experience of God, should leave us aware that we are far from being completed as the people God intended us to be, and that the Holy Spirit will not yet have finished with us.

It should also leave us captivated with delight at the universe God made and overjoyed that He made us part of it. How does that all chime with the current season in the Church's year, which is Lent, which is supposed to be a time of fasting and austerity?

In Lent, we are to pattern our lives on Jesus' journey into the wilderness at the start of His public ministry. Lent should be a time when we are free to slough off of the old ways – sin, the need for material goods, the vain things of the world that charm us most. It's a time when we try to die to all the junk that fills our lives and prevents us from living life to the full – it is when we do that that we make space for the Holy Spirit to blow in and around us, filling us with love, and joy, and new life.

Perhaps one way we might make space for that to happen is to practice being more grateful for this world that God loves so much and all that He has given us in it? Certainly life has its share of disappointments, and physical and mental

pain, and loss. I've had plenty myself. None of that explains, however, why we live in a culture which seems to be so charged with resentment, and bitterness, and taking offence. One thing people notice about South Sudanese Anglicans when they visit us is how that despite being materially poorer than we can imagine, they are much more grateful they are for the blessings that they do have.

To be grateful for the simplest things in life – the arrival of spring, clean water to drink and wash in, friends to love and be loved by – is one thing we can do to subvert the toxicity of our social media-driven culture, and its delight in being self-righteously offended all the time. This simple way of putting grace into practice may even allow the Holy Spirit to make us born again from above: reborn to new full life in this world, and eternal life in the world to come.

Now praise, glory, and honour be to God who is with us in times of plenty and times of austerity, in all the earth and for ever and ever. Amen.