

Sermon

‘You Must Be Born Again’

First Reading: Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

Gospel: John 3:1-17

“To be born again means that God loves us, that he cares about us and that he wants nothing more than to forgive us.”

He loves me just as I am but is not willing to leave me Just as I am.

Realizing that will make a profound difference in the way we experience life.

We all know that a new-born baby in the house or in the wider family brings all sorts of new and exciting changes to that household.

Whether we are a parent, grand-parent or relative – a new birth brings with it a host of new opportunities and challenges.

Of course it is such a wonderful and mysterious reality, we often stumble over ourselves when asked to explain to small children where babies come from.

No doubt Nicodemus experienced similar bewilderment when Jesus told him that those who would be God’s children must be born again.

What on earth is John’s intent when he relates this experience in John chapter three?

We have been discovering that John’s meaning in his gospel is often more profound than at first glance.

I like what Robert Kysar in his book “The Fourth Evangelist and his Gospel” says,

“John’s gospel is shallow enough for a child to wade in, and deep enough to drown an Elephant”

So when we read John’s recollection of Jesus words, “You must be born again” we should not make the mistake Nicodemus made in thinking of a physical birth in some maternity ward.

Jesus is saying something much more profound than that.

Our confusion comes from the way translators have rendered the Greek phrase “gennethe anothēn”.

It can be translated: born again, born anew, or more correctly, born from above. A heavenly birth.

In the old Hollywood musicals we often hear the director say, “Let’s take it from the top again”.

That’s in effect what Jesus is saying. You and I have stuffed our scene in the story of life so Jesus is giving us a chance at a new beginning.

To all of us who have stuffed our lives in one way or another Jesus is saying that there is a way to start over.

Often you and I can be like Nicodemus. We come to Jesus for some polite chit chat. But Jesus doesn’t do polite Chit Chat. The stakes are too high for Chit Chat.

One might ask oneself. “Where have I been a bit too chatty with Jesus instead of being a bit more serious about spiritual matters?”

Jesus goes straight to the heart of the matter with Nicodemus and tells him it is a matter of the heart; the sin filled heart in each one of us.

Jesus cuts to the chase and sweeps aside everything that Nicodemus stands for as a respected Teacher of the law in Israel.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that to get right with God he needs to be born from above; of water and Spirit.

Entry into the kingdom of God is not ever going to be achieved by human effort.

Spiritual re-birth takes place as a gift from God at our baptism and then keeps unfolding everyday as we follow Jesus.

To be born of water and Spirit is the beginning, middle and end of a life transforming divine action in my life and yours.

Now listen, it is important that we understand that being born anew each day is not something reserved for passive onlookers on Sunday morning.

New birth is meant to be experienced and lived out in daily life. It's about a living, breathing, transformation that has Jesus at its heart as our personal lord and Saviour.

I like what William Barclay says in his commentary on John's Gospel.

“To be born again means that God loves us, that he cares about us and that he wants nothing more than to forgive us.”

He loves me just as I am but is not willing to leave me Just as I am.

Realizing that will make a profound difference in the way we experience life.

Jews like Nicodemus believed that God was a God who demanded sacrifice.

That God was a stern judge ready to exact punishment on us for our failures when we fail to live up to his standards, which is all the time.

Interestingly that's what people including Luther, thought before Luther rediscovered the Gospel.

In fact, Jesus came to show us that the Father longs for his erring children to come back home.

It cost Jesus his life to show us that. It's his life, death and resurrection that gives us this new beginning,

We get peace with God, peace with our fellows, and peace with ourselves as a result.

We also get the assurance that the very best on earth is but a mere foretaste of the joy to come.

John concludes this pericope with reference to an incident that occurred during the peoples wilderness wanderings in the Exodus from Egypt.

Despite God's care of them the people sinned against him time and time again.

As judgement God sends a plague of snakes into their camp. Many are bitten and die.

But God always provides a way out whenever we sin.

God tells Moses to forge a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Anyone bitten, was to look at the pole in faith and be healed.

Now here is where the water gets deep enough to drown that Elephant.

John points us past the imagery of that event to a greater reality. It is a reality encapsulated in John 3:16. What some have called "The gospel in a nutshell".

That old serpent Satan has done a good job on us but if we look to Jesus on the cross we will be saved.

When we look to Jesus he gives us new life. We get born from above.

Do you remember the peanuts Characters Charlie Brown and Lucy?

Lucy says to Charlie Brown, "Discouraged again eh Charlie Brown?" "You know what your trouble is Charlie Brown. The trouble with you is that you are you."

Charlie Brown responds, "Well what in the world can I do about it?"

Lucy answers, "I don't pretend to be able to give advice...I just point out the problem."

What's your problem friend? John's image of the snake on the pole and Jesus command to be born anew indicates that the problem lies with us.

And here is the scary thing. You and I can't do a single thing about it.

But now here is the good news. Jesus can. His death and resurrection has changed everything.

If you and I will look to him we will be born anew from above.

Life will never be the same.

So come Just as we are and in our coming let us realise that God loves so much that he will not leave us just as we are.