

Second Sunday of Lent, Year A

Genesis 12:1-4a , Romans 4:1-5, 13-17, John 3:1-17

Our gospel reading this morning includes one of the most famous verses in the bible, John 3:16

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

Here we have John's commentary on the episode in Jesus's life that he has just recounted.

Before we consider that let us pray

Nicodemus, we understand, is an important figure. Not only is he a Pharisee but he is a member of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin.

So here is this, probably older, respected figure, a teacher of the law of God, a teacher of the scriptures coming to Jesus, at night so most likely in secret.

In the chronology of John's gospel, it is not surprising if he comes in secret. Jesus, in the account immediately preceding, has upset the Jewish authorities by clearing the temple of the livestock sellers and the money changers that were there at the time of Passover. Nicodemus is too much of an authority figure to want it to be known that he is consorting with the upstart Rabbi Jesus.

So why does he come at all? In John's account it appears that he has come to acknowledge that Jesus is a God-sent teacher, just like himself. He addresses him respectfully as Rabbi, which literally means "great one".

But you don't go to the trouble of getting to see someone at night just to praise them. And his visit seems to be something to do with the "signs" that Jesus is performing. We don't know whether this was healings, the water into wine at the wedding in Cana or some other miracle. But Nicodemus sees in them a real liaison between God and Jesus. I guess he is curious. He approaches Jesus with courtesy, but it seems too that he is fencing into something.

But he never gets there. Jesus pre-empts his question. What was Nicodemus going to ask?

We cannot know of course. But almost certainly Jesus's answer comes out of left field. Nicodemus has claimed to have seen something of God in Jesus's actions. Perhaps he is expecting Jesus to be gratified by this.

But instead, he gets a statement about seeing the one thing which, as a Pharisee, he is really anxious to see, the kingdom of God.

"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

By seeing the kingdom of God, a Pharisee would mean seeing the establishment of God's kingdom at the end of this current age.

We should digress a moment here to appreciate that the words translated born again can equally well be translated born from above. And we need to encompass both meanings in our understanding of Jesus's words. We'll come back to that in a moment.

So here we have Nicodemus, a member of a section of Jewish society that makes great play of the observance of rules and regulations in order to usher in the end of the current age and the advent of the Messiah and God's kingdom, faced with a different reality.

Nicodemus is startled into a theological conversation about rebirth. Rebirth which Jesus has now reframed, not in terms of just seeing, but actually entering, the kingdom of God, not future but here and now.

Nicodemus seems astonished: *"How can someone be born when they are old?"*
"Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus patiently spells it out. *"Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."*

What does Jesus mean? He expects Nicodemus to understand. There are three explanations given.

Jesus means both natural birth and spiritual birth. In this explanation “water” is said to mean the amniotic fluid that surrounds a baby in the womb. This makes sense until you realise that Jews did not think in this way so Nicodemus is unlikely to have understood that this is what Jesus meant. And Jesus expects him to.

Jesus means rebirth by both water baptism and the Spirit. This makes more sense although it is said that Nicodemus would have had very little concept or experience of baptism for repentance and forgiveness of sins, although he might have heard of John the Baptist.

The third explanation comes from the translation born from above. This gives an indication that what Jesus is saying is that you must be born of both water and spirit from above, from God.

But despite this explanation Nicodemus still doesn’t get it. “How can this be?” he asks. He seems to be fixated on what one must do to enter the kingdom of God. And now it seems that it is Jesus’s turn to be astonished – at least he makes out that he is.

“You are Israel’s teacher, and do you not understand these things?”

Now I have to confess that, although I have read through the whole bible more than a few times, I had to go to a commentary to discover why Jesus thought Nicodemus ought to understand what Jesus is talking about.

And the commentaries direct me to Ezekiel 36:25-27:

(The Sovereign Lord declares) “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities 26 I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. 27 And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees. “

It is from above that we are born again. It is the Sovereign Lord who sprinkles the clean water of forgiveness on us – and of course, baptism does signify this – and who puts his Spirit within our hearts to change our nature from the inside. This is being born from above of water and the Spirit.

Of course, Ezekiel doesn't tell us how this is to be done. It is Jesus here who expands on it, anticipating his death on the cross by likening it to the serpent on the pole that Moses lifted up in the wilderness that saved those who had sinned provided they looked to it. (Numbers 21:4-9)

The people in the wilderness had a choice; whether to look at the serpent in order to be saved, or whether to die in their sin.

We too have a choice, either to believe in Jesus, in his saving death on the cross, and have eternal life or to perish.

John is the only gospel writer who gives us this account of Nicodemus. Why? Maybe because he wants to highlight aspects of the prologue that he writes in John 1. And the aspect we are considering this morning is of course, new birth, new birth into a new family, reflecting John 1:12-13

To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God— 13 children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.

Entry into the kingdom of God is not about what we do - we cannot do anything to gain entry - it is all about what God does, about the rebirth he facilitates by sprinkling us with clean water and resurrecting our dead hearts by his Spirit.

Actually that is not 100% true; there is one thing that we can do, and that is to believe. Believe in the name, the nature, of Jesus and in his death on the cross.

Amen