

Born Again, of Water and Spirit

A sermon preached by Dr Tony Lemon, Licensed Lay Minister, at St. Peter's, Wolvercote on Sunday 17th February, 2008.

John 3, v. 3

'In truth, in very truth I tell you, unless a man has been born over again he cannot see the kingdom of God'.

For most of his ministry we see Jesus surrounded by ordinary people, but in today's Gospel he is for once in conversation with one of the aristocracy of Jerusalem. Nicodemus is wealthy, and is a pharisee. He has many honours, but he is evidently puzzled, and feels something to be lacking in his life – not an uncommon feeling even among those who enjoy all the outward trappings of worldly success in terms of both income and status. He senses that Jesus really has something to offer – that his new movement perhaps really does come from God. But he is, like most people in such positions, cautious and diplomatic. He doesn't want to commit himself irrevocably, which could cause him to lose influence and power. So he comes by night to where Jesus is seated with the disciples.

He begins with compliments, recognising that Jesus comes from God, and citing as evidence the miracles that he has performed – a second-best kind of approval, based not on the quality of Jesus' teaching but on the evidence of signs: recognition, perhaps, rather than true understanding.

Jesus' response is characteristic. He is no respecter of outward, worldly position. He is not interested in Nicodemus' compliments, and immediately sees the limitations of his understanding. So he sweeps aside the compliments and comes straight to the point. Sympathetic interest is no good: what is needed is commitment, a completely new start. Unless a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God: in other words, unless he makes a completely fresh start, he cannot even begin to know what we are talking about – the kingdom of God – let alone begin to learn and to experience its true meaning and significance.

The phrase 'born anew', this idea of rebirth, runs all through the Epistles – in the letters of Peter, Titus and James, but above all in those of Paul, the source so strongly inspiring much evangelical Christianity. And Jesus' words to Nicodemus, as re-echoed and interpreted by Paul, are of course words which have led many people, especially in the USA (from George Bush downwards) but in Britain too, to describe themselves as 'reborn Christians'.

It seems that Jesus' technique in dealing with some of those who approach him – especially those with enough theological knowledge to be susceptible to such a technique – is to counter their first question or statement with something which does not directly answer them. Usually Jesus' response is something challenging but quite difficult to understand (rather like Rowan Williams!). Often this happens a second time when the enquirer responds with a further question. Only then, in his third response, does Jesus elaborate with a clearer discourse. In this way, perhaps, Jesus the teacher makes people think things out for themselves, rather than laying everything out on a plate for them. What we think out and manage to grasp after an intellectual struggle will mean more, and is more likely to stay with us.

So it is with Jesus' response that a man must be born anew if he is to see the Kingdom of God. The words that he uses can mean a number of things – radical or complete rebirth, beginning again, being born from above – but all overlap, and we don't need to choose between them. What is clear is that this is a rebirth we cannot achieve for ourselves – as Nicodemus is quick to point out: how can a man be born again when he is old? It sounds a literalist interpretation, but Nicodemus does not just mean physiological birth – he is a sophisticated man and he probably understands Jesus more than that – but he knows that he has based his whole life on the tradition of the Jewish church, conforming to it in so many ways – how can he break from all this and start again? He has invested far too much human capital to contemplate such a fundamental change.

Yet that is in effect what Jesus is saying. Rebirth is something that we can't accomplish for ourselves, but it is not rebirth in our mother's womb, but rebirth of *water* and the *spirit*. Rebirth of water – the baptism of John with its symbolism of cleansing. Rebirth of the spirit, because the source if the rebirth is mere flesh, that is where it stays: it needs Jesus to take possession of our lives for a fundamental change to take place. It is not just a question of forgetting and forgiving the past – if that were all, we might well go on and simply make the same mistakes all over again. Instead, rebirth must involve the entry of a new power into our lives – a power that enables us to be and to do what we can never do by our own unaided efforts. That power is the strengthening power of the Holy Spirit.

This is, of course, a crude simplification of something which it is very difficult for us to grasp – and something that is all too easily misunderstood and misapplied. It is abundantly clear from this passage and others in the New Testament that some form of rebirth and renewal is essential for all Christians. Yet only some Christians proclaim themselves 'reborn', and many if not most of us here today are probably uncomfortable with this terminology, and with the way in which some Christians use it to label themselves. Indeed, because today's Gospel immediately brings to mind those who proclaim themselves 'born again', and all that we associate with such Christian movements, even the Gospel itself may give us problems.

Why is this so? St. Peter's declares itself on its website as 'liberal Catholic' and, I think it is fair to say, we wear the 'Catholic' lightly. Last Saturday I attended a conference at Trinity College on 'Affirming Christian liberalism', where Professor Keith Ward gave a very fine address. He pointed out that Christianity is essentially a liberal faith – Jesus himself, while teaching that people must keep the Jewish law, kept it in a liberal or humane way himself, for example in his approach to teaching on the Sabbath. All faiths, he argued, need to become more liberal as they struggle to survive in a changing world: even when knowledge changes so much, surely this must have some effect on religious beliefs? Christian liberalism therefore seeks to interpret scripture in the light of the historical context of the time in which it was written, and to make sense of faith in the context of the world which we know and experience today.

If I try to analyse my own reactions, I think I can identify three problems with the way the 'reborn Christian' label is commonly used today. First of all, it is divisive. It implies that there are two fundamentally different kinds of Christians – those who have been reborn and those who have not. And those who have not, if Jesus is to be believed, cannot even begin to see the Kingdom of God – they

have not even begun on the Christian journey. But surely reality is not like this at all. Christians may not be united, but they are not divided in this clearcut way, and it is unhelpful and destructive to portray God's people in this way. The reality is that they – *we* – are all at different stages of a journey: some nearer to the end, some just beginning, some perhaps going backwards and struggling with the very concept of faith.

The second problem follows from this. Rebirth is not, for most people, something that happens at a particular moment in time. The conversion of Paul on the road to Damascus is not a helpful model for most of us – perhaps St. Augustine is a more helpful role model. In this sense 'birth' is perhaps misleading, because a process rather than an event is what is at issue – a process of renewal and re-creation. Rebirth is the *opening of ourselves to this process, so that we can gradually grow in Christian life and faith.*

My third problem with 'born-again Christians' is the implicit exclusiveness, arrogance and judgementalism of what they claim. They may intend none of these things: their intention may simply be to proclaim the joy of a mature Christian faith and to encourage others to find it – and of course many do. But the practical effect, for many Christians and for many more people outside the Church altogether, is profoundly alienating in its seeming exclusiveness. 'We have got it right, and ours is the only way' seems to be the gist of the message. There is no acknowledgement of the enormous struggle which many fine people have in finding faith that proves itself true in their own lives – that ultimate truth which authenticates itself, for the basis of belief is ultimately experience. Nor, crucially, is there any recognition or acknowledgement of the infinite complexity and variation of the human personality: we are all individuals, reacting differently. Surely this complex variation makes any single model of Christian experience not only facile but, because it will seem to rule out Christianity for so many people, dangerous and potentially counter-productive to true Christian witness.

Rebirth, renewal, recreation – these are certainly vital themes in the Christian faith, and they imply not intellectual understanding but experience. But the experience is, for most people, not something that comes in a blinding flash, but something into which we may grow, by degrees: often painfully, often unsure and full of doubts, sometimes conscious of falling backwards, but persevering in the effort to open ourselves to God's truth, and to let that truth speak and work through our own day-to-day lives.