

Spark May 2024

John 3:1-17

You must be born again, said Jesus.

A few years ago, I might have started this sermon by asking what associations that phrase had for people. Born again. Born again Christians.

On the whole, it tended not to have *good* associations. Born again Christians, for most people I think, tended to mean people who were almost fanatical. Fundamentalist. Suspiciously American. Quite right wing. Very keen on converting everybody else. Bible bashers. The kind of people with little pamphlets and loudspeakers on Watford High Street.

I think these days, though, people are more likely to be a little mystified, to have *no idea* what 'born again' means. And if they do have an idea – if, for instance, they think it's a way of talking about a radical new start in life – they probably, I guess, think well, *why?* Why do I need to be born again? My life here and now might not be amazing, might not be perfect, but I don't actually feel any need to tear it up and start again, even if I could.

So this saying of Jesus, *you must be born again*, seeming, frankly, a bit bemusing, a bit irrelevant.

But think of it this way.

What Jesus came to tell us, and what He came to make happen, is that one day we are all going to enter a new kind of life.

Jesus called it the Kingdom of God. Others call it heaven. Whatever we call it, we barely have the words to describe it. It will make the very, very best of this life, this world, seem like nothing. It will make life now seem like black and white television, or a silent movie. Because of Jesus, we're headed for something fuller, richer, more vibrant than we can possibly begin to imagine. Now, we use words like joy and love and beauty and we have some sense of those things, and if we're lucky we sometimes know bits and pieces of them. Because of Jesus we're headed for a reality where they are everything and forever, where there is nothing but them, and where our entire being will be soaked in them.

That, says the Bible, is what we are made for. That's the life that God wants to give us.

And when Jesus says you must be born again, what he means is that you have no more control over getting into that new life than you did getting into this one. You didn't choose to be born. You didn't bring it about. You didn't earn it, or qualify for it. It just happened, boom, regardless of your efforts. Your mum made huge efforts – you, not so much. You got this life as a gift; and so, Jesus says, it will be with the new one.

That's the Gospel. The Kingdom of Heaven: joy, grace, beauty, love - all these things always and forever - are going to be yours without you deserving them, without you earning them.

At a heart-level, that comes as a great surprise. Many of us, I think, are driven, deep down, by the sense that we've got to succeed. That we've got to do well. Even if that's not in the straightforward make lots of money sense, we think, oh: I must be a good person. I must be a loving person. I must be a wise person. I must be the kind of person others can look up to. Never mind others, I must be able to look in the mirror and think, yes, I've done a good job with my life. That's what's life's *about*, we think.

Nicodemus in today's Bible story is precisely that kind of man. He's a good man. He's wise; he's respected; he's prayerful; he's humble – he has everything going for him. Jesus doesn't deny any of that. But it's as if he takes one look and says to Nicodemus, essentially, 'whatever.' As Shania Twain said, that don't impress me much. That's *not* what life's about. What life's about, what I'm going to give you, is so spectacularly more than this, so astoundingly richer and fuller and more glorious that, frankly, all your effort is neither here nor there. You must be born again.

Here's a slightly dangerous way of putting it. God isn't interested in how good you are. He's not even interested in making you good. His plan for you is off-the-chart bigger and brighter and more glorious than goodness. He wants to fill you up with His own life. Next to that, you worrying about how good you are is a bit like – actually, it's *exactly* like – a candle comparing itself to the Sun.

In fact, being good can even be a bit of a problem. Because the temptation will always be to think that that's what really counts. That really, we're pretty impressive. That other people should be impressed, and that even God should give us some credit. We're his kind of people, aren't we? Well, I suppose ... but only in the sense that candles and the Sun are both hot, or both bright. It would be a pretty stupid candle that thought it could *impress* the Sun. That thought the Sun *owed* it anything.

That's why Jesus often said that actually, it was the people who had completely screwed up their lives who were often closer to the Kingdom of Heaven. Who were more ready for what God wanted to give them. The drunks, the prostitutes, the failures, they're going into the Kingdom before you, he told the priests, the respectable, the impressive. They *know* they don't deserve it. They *know* it's all a gift. Blessed are the poor in spirit, he said. Theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.

You must be born again, he said to Nicodemus. To come into the Kingdom, know that it's got nothing to do with you. Forget all your impressiveness, all your effort. Just... well.... Just what? Exactly *how* does one go about being born again?

Well, two things – one from our side, one from God's.

From our side, simply to recognise, deep down, all that I've said this evening. What God wants to give us, where God wants to take us, is so far beyond us, so completely beyond any talk of deserving or qualifying or earning, that all we can do is throw up our hands and say: thank you. Please help. In fact, even the very, very best of us, if we really know what we're talking about, will have to say. Thank you. Sorry, I'm broken. Please help.

From God's side: Jesus said it. You must be born again, of water and the Spirit. Of water – baptism. Get yourself baptised. Jesus says that's where the new life begins to happen, that's the place where we get delivered into the new reality he has stored up for us. We'll still have to grow up into it, of course, just like we had to grow up into *this* life – but the moment of birth is baptism. And if you get to know John's Gospel really well, you'll see that's because St. John sees baptism as somehow linking up with, connecting us with, the event which makes it all happen, the true Birthday. That's the Crucifixion of Jesus. Think how John describes it: those cries of agony, as a woman in labour. Think of that strange moment at

the death of Jesus, when the soldier pierces his side and blood and water flow. Blood and water. This is *birth*. A body split open, blood and water flowing, children being born ... for John, this is where our new birth happens. We were born at the Cross. Jesus was our Mother.

Baptism, baptism pointing to the Cross. Things you can't do for yourself, things done to you, for you, perhaps before you even knew what was going on. Just like your ordinary life started out of your control, so does your new life. Yes, of course, you then need to grow in that life, to choose it, deliberately, again and again – but to start with, you must be born again. All your accomplishments, all your achievements, all your goodness, everything you think you've made of your life ...forget it. And equally, if you have failed and sinned and screwed up in the most dreadful of ways ... forget it. The Kingdom, and your share in it, does not depend on your performance. Wonderfully, gloriously, you're not saved by you. You're saved by Him, because He so loved the world that He gave his Only Son so that all believe in Him would not perish, but might have eternal life. To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

How can we born again – the fundamental prayer: I'm broken, please help. That's from our side.

From God's side – baptism, pointing to the Cross.