

St.Aidan's West Epping, 13th January 2019

BORN AGAIN

(Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; John 3:1-21)

Born again! A phrase often used to describe people making a new start. It might be a footballer changing their club, or their position, or even their code. It might be a politician changing their political allegiance. It might be someone changing their occupation or lifestyle. But of course we most often hear the phrase used to describe certain types of Christians. "I'm a born again Christian", people would sometimes say to me when I visited them in hospital. And the unspoken question was "What about you? Are you a born-again Christian?"

Jesus coined the term when he was talking to a clean-living devoted and respected religious leader called Nicodemus. Nicodemus came to Jesus one night, perhaps because many of the religious leaders did not approve of this upstart preacher from Galilee, and it might not be wise to let people know that he had visited him. On the other hand, his nighttime visit might simply be because he wanted undisturbed time with Jesus, and when he was away from the crowds at night would be his only real chance.

Nicodemus began by paying his respects to Jesus. "God must have sent you as a teacher. Otherwise you would not be able to do the wonderful miracles you have been doing." No doubt he had some particular things he wanted to raise with Jesus, but Jesus cut straight to the chase. "If you want to enter God's kingdom, you must be born again", he told Nicodemus. Now Nicodemus would have thought like most Pharisees that he already belonged to God's kingdom: many people might not, but devoted law-keeping Pharisees would surely have a place in the kingdom.

"Born again": starting life all over again. Or "born from above", as our translation puts it, for Jesus' word certainly has that connotation. In fact, I think that "born from above" is more helpful than "born again", for part of Jesus' point is that this second birth is from above: in other words, it comes from God himself. As the conversation continued, Nicodemus realized that he had a lot to think about. Jesus was challenging his whole way of thinking about how God relates to people. And as John's Gospel goes on, we see a couple of signs that Nicodemus continued to think about Jesus' words, and even made a response to the message of Jesus. Indeed, at

the end of the Gospel, he assists Joseph of Arimathea in burying the body of Jesus, even though it will make him ineligible to take part in the great Passover Festival, which would have been very important to him.

But what about this phrase which is bandied about in different circles? What does it mean to be born again, born from above? Is it something to be left for a bunch of religious weirdoes? Is a born-again Christian just another alternative to being Anglican or Catholic or so on?

In fact, if we take Jesus' words seriously we must recognize that **every genuine Christian is a born-again Christian**. That doesn't mean that we need to take on board all the paraphernalia some people associate with that term. But we do need to check some of our assumptions, to make sure that we don't make the same mistake as Nicodemus and others like him.

Christians are not defined by their lifestyle or their religious practices or even their morality. If that was the case, Jesus would not have needed to challenge Nicodemus.

What Jesus is saying is that you may be religious, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you have been born again. You may go to church or pray or read the Bible, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you are born again. You may believe that God exists and believe the story of Jesus, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you have been born again. You may be a kind and moral and upright person, but that doesn't necessarily mean that you have been born again. You may even turn over a new leaf and make all sorts of wonderful resolutions, but even that is not really the same as being born again.

Now all these are good things. They are important things. They're certainly worth doing. They can please God, and they benefit us and they benefit others. But they're not the same as being born again. They're not what make you a genuine Christian. Nor for that matter is taking part in an emotional rally, or having some great dramatic spiritual experience.

What Jesus says to Nicodemus, he says to us. "You must be born again. You must be born from above." Being a Christian is something so new that it is a totally new start. Not that we *look* any different. Nor will we

necessarily *feel* any different. I might not be able to point to an exact time or occasion when I was born again. But new birth is at the heart of what it means to be a Christian.

The big question then is: **how do we do it?** And the answer is “we don’t do it at all”. **Being born again is not something we do for ourselves: it is something God does for us.**

After all, in the ordinary world, we don’t “born” ourselves. We owe our birth to our parents. We don’t bring ourselves into existence. And so it is in the spiritual world, in the kingdom of God. As Christians we have been given new birth, new life, a uniquely new start.

But if we don’t arrange new birth for ourselves, how does it happen, how does it work? Let’s move forward in today’s Gospel to that famous verse, a verse that has been described as “the Gospel in a nutshell.” Many of us could probably say it from memory in one version or another. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life.”

Let’s see where it all starts: **it starts with the love of God.** God made us, he provides for us, he wants a lasting friendship with us. Even his laws are for our benefit, though we break those laws. And so often when it comes to the crunch, we choose our way rather than God’s way. But God still loves us, even though too often we push him away, we reject his authority. God loves all people: whatever our race, whatever our character, whatever our lifestyle, whatever our religious outlook. And God wants people everywhere to open up to his love.

But God’s love is not sentimentality. God’s love is righteous. It would not be right for him to ignore our disobedience. He can’t sweep it under the carpet, and say it’s all OK. He has to deal with evil: he must put things right.

But in his love, God has acted for the world’s sake. “God so loved the world **that he gave**”. What did he give? The most precious gift he could: his only Son, bearing God’s own nature, sharing in his Father’s divinity, and perfectly loved by his Father. In fact, God was giving his very self, willingly, in love beyond measure. Jesus Christ is God’s incredible gift to the world, a gift for all people.

In Christ, God became a human being: he was born, grew up, taught, healed, suffered, died and rose again. He went through hell for our sake. Jesus came as God’s gift so that we might be forgiven, and that we might be born again to eternal life, God’s kind of life, life in true relationship with God. Forgiveness is costly, and God in Christ bore that cost.

How then do we receive that gift, that blessing? Our verse also answers that one! The blessings of forgiveness and new life are for **whoever believes in Christ.** And we find out what that means from the previous verses. Jesus reminds Nicodemus of a story from when the people of Israel were wandering in the desert following their rescue from slavery in Egypt. In response to their continued grumbling and rejection of him, God sent a huge number of snakes which bit the Israelites, killing many of them. God then told Moses to make a large bronze snake and put it on a pole. Anyone who looked at that snake would be healed. Anyone who refused to look would die. It wasn’t a huge ask. They needed to make that minimal effort to look at the snake. They needed to believe that it might bring them healing. If they refused to, they missed out on that possibility.

Well, says Jesus, just as that snake was lifted up as a means of salvation, so **I** am to be lifted up. If you look to me in faith, you will be saved. Of course, he was talking about the cross, where he was lifted up and did battle with all the evil of the world, and won the victory. Hence our sin was dealt with, and our spiritual problem was solved.

Yes, **faith**, a simple genuine trust in Jesus, is what God seeks. That openness to God’s forgiveness in Christ. That readiness to allow him to show us the way through life. Of course, faith is not an empty thing. Faith is lived out. Faith puts us back in touch with the God who made us and loves us **and** knows the best way for us to live.

How are we born again? By opening us **in faith** to the love of God in Jesus Christ. As we do that, God welcomes us into his kingdom, and through his Spirit he brings us new life, a life to be lived as followers of Jesus Christ. Through Jesus, we who trust and follow him are citizens of God’s eternal kingdom. We have not yet arrived, and we haven’t yet experienced the fullness of that new life. But here and now we are forgiven. Here and now we have eternal life. And through Christ we have become God’s friends, God’s beloved people, for eternity. Amen.

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