

Being Born Again

John 3:1-17

Last Sunday we witnessed the dramatic sacrament of baptism. Tim declared his faith and his desire to follow Jesus with all his heart and for all his life. He was baptised in the water symbolising the process of dying and rising with Christ. And he was baptised into the life of Christ and into the body of Christ – the community of faith here at Westgate of which Tim is now a full and active member. Our church community here owes its identity and existence to the activity of the living Spirit of God who calls us and bonds us together in worship and in mission.

Now I happen to be in the unique position of being able to observe Tim pretty closely both before and after his baptism. And, though this was a hugely significant event for Tim, Tim himself is still the same person he was the week before. He looks the same, feels the same, sounds the same – in fact, he still tends to act the same... he is mostly kind, intelligent, fairly skinny and still uses the floor to store his clothing..

But without embarrassing Tim any more than I need to I can tell you with confidence that there is a transformation taking place in Tim that was symbolised and recognised last Sunday...

You see, Baptism is a rite and sacrament that each of us is challenge to travel because it affirms that at the very heart of our faith is a relational and transformational vision. Or to put it in other words, the very meaning of Christian faith is a living and dynamic relationship with God and a changing personal and social way of seeing things. And it happens bit by bit and little by little - it is a daily, weekly and even hourly awakening to seeing the world as God sees it..

Today is Trinity Sunday in the church year and traditionally it is a time when we celebrate and reflect on the metaphor of the Trinity (God the father, son and Holy Spirit) the one in three and three in one idea of God. Thus we have readings that speak both of the awesome, powerful all encompassing vision of God and the idea of God revealed in Jesus teaching as the Spirit transforms us from the inside out..

This morning I would like to reflect for a few minutes on this idea of personal transformation by looking again at this story of Jesus and Nicodemous. It is in this passage that this term being Born Again is found. In recent times the term being a “Born again” Christian has been monopolised somewhat by an understanding that basically means accepting a certain set of beliefs – often expressed using the formula, “Do you believe in Jesus Christ as your personal lord and saviour?”

And in some circles this formula is used to define whether you are born again or not – whether you are “in” or “out”.

But when we put this term born again back into its context – we see that it is a process, a reconnection, a transformation that is being talked about.

So I would like to reclaim this term “born again” and suggest that it is something we all need experience.

So let’s take a fresh look at:

1. The call to be born again
2. The need to be born again
- and
3. The process of being born again...

1. The Call to be Born Again

The story of Nicodemous and Jesus in the third chapter of John is deeply symbolic and full of allusions and pointers to the message of John and the New Testament as a whole.

(you might like to open the Bibles to John 3 as we take a closer look at this story.)

First of all, we read that "He came to Jesus by night." Here is the first of the story's double meanings. It is night: Nicodemus is in the dark. Symbolism of light and darkness is very common in John: Jesus is the light shining in the darkness, the light of the world, the true light that enlightens every person, the one who gives sight to those who are blind. Though Nicodemus comes to the light, he has not yet seen the light. He addresses Jesus in flattering terms: "And he said to Jesus, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.'"

In what seems like a misconnection, Jesus responds by changing the subject. It's as if he hasn't heard what Nicodemus is saying - or perhaps has heard beneath his words and heard him very well. In any case, what follows is the key verse of the text: "Jesus answered him,

'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'"

Like "night," the phrase contains a double meaning: the Greek for "born from above" can also be translated "born again" or "born anew." Translating unfortunately requires choosing between the two, but John intends both meanings: to be born "again/anew" is to be born "from above," that is, to be born of the Spirit.

Nicodemus doesn't get it. He's a literalist, like many other characters in John's gospel. Taking Jesus' words literally, he misses the point: "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" He's still in the dark.

So Jesus repeats the point: "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born anew.'"

The word "water" also has a double meaning. On the one hand, to the readers of John's gospel, it would evoke baptism; on the other hand, in the bit about "flesh," it refers to the waters of birth. Though one is born "of water," "of the flesh," one must also be born "of the Spirit" that is, anew and from above – from the life of God..

As the text continues, Jesus emphasizes the connection to the Spirit: "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." Yet another double meaning, indeed triple meaning: in Greek, the word for "wind" is also the word for "breath" and "Spirit." The breath of God, the Spirit of God, is the source of rebirth. To be born again is to enter new life through and in the Spirit a life centred in the Spirit of God.

Though the phrase “born again” doesn’t occur very often, the idea certainly does. It is found in another form often referred to as “dying and rising” and especially in the letters of Paul..

This process of personal transformation is at the centre of the Christian life... and it involves death and resurrection.. It means dying to an old way of being and being born into a new way of being, dying to an old identity and being born into a new identity – a way of being and an identity centre in the sacred in the Spirit in Christ in god...

This is a message for us – to open ourselves to being transformed by the life of God – “Born from above”

2. The Need to be Born Again

Why do we need to be born again? Why do we need to die to an old way of being and be born into a new way of being – into a life centred in God?

Perhaps the simplest answer is that we all need to be reconnected..

Marcus Borg tells a story he heard about a three-year-old girl. She was the firstborn and only child in her family, but now her mother was pregnant again, and the little girl was very excited about having a new brother or sister. Within a few hours of the parents bringing a new baby boy home from the hospital, the girl made a request: she wanted to be alone with her new brother in his room with the door shut. Her insistence about being alone with the baby with the door shut made her parents a bit uneasy, but then they remembered that they had installed an intercom system in anticipation of the baby's arrival, so they realized they could let their daughter do this, and if they heard the slightest indication that anything strange was happening, they could be in the baby's room in an instant.

So they let the little girl go into the baby's room, shut the door, and raced to the intercom listening station. They heard their daughter's footsteps moving across the baby's room, imagined her standing over the baby's crib, and then they heard her saying to her three-day-old brother, "Tell me about God I've almost forgotten."

The story is both haunting and evocative, for it suggests that we come from God, and that when we are very young, we still remember this, still know this. But the process of growing up, of learning about this world, is a process of increasingly forgetting the one from whom we came and in whom we live. The birth and intensification of self-consciousness, of self-awareness, involves a separation from God.

The birth of self-consciousness is the birth of the separated self. When this happens, the natural and inevitable result is self-concern. The two go together: the separated self and the self-centered self.

The birth of self-consciousness, of the separated self, is one of the central meanings of the Garden of Eden story, what is sometimes known as "the fall"-is some-thing we go through early in our own lives.

We have all experienced this. It cannot be avoided; and it is utterly necessary. But the problem is that self-awareness and self-consciousness become increasingly shaped by the culture we live in which at present is a culture that encourages individualism and self-referencing to an extreme all-defining thing.

You hear this in the relentless messages of the advertisers that underline the three A's of self-worth in our culture: appearance, achievement, and affluence. "Because you deserve it!" is the message we hear over and over again..

Anne Manne in an excellent essay just published titled, "What about me? – the New Narcissism" talks about this characteristic of our culture especially as it plays out in the Australian context..

"By any historical standards, (she concludes), our society is marked by a radical individualism obsessed with the self. And it is a very particular self. It is a self on display, measured by externals and appearance, in pursuit of success and material prosperity more than care for others, of popularity and notice more than respect."

Thus we need to be born again. As Marcus Borg puts it..

It is the road of return from our exile, the way to recover our true self, the path of beginning to live our lives from the inside out rather than from the outside in, the exodus from our individual and collective selfishness. To be born again involves dying to the false self., that that identity, to that way of being, and to be born in to an identity centred in the Spirit, in Christ, in God. It is the process of internal redefinition of the self whereby a real person is born within us.

3. The Process of being Born Again

This born again experience can be sudden and dramatic. It can involve a dramatic revelation, a vision, a traumatic event that turns you around. Like Saul on the Damascus road and experience in which he totally changed and even changed his name to Paul.

But for most of us, being born again is not a single intense experience, but a gradual and bit by bit process (as Tim described his experience last week). Dying to an old way of being and living into a new way of being, is a process that continues through a life time.

But the born again metaphor not only applies to a single dramatic event or a lifelong process, but also the the shorter rhythms of our lives. And even to the micro rythms of daily life.

One of my favourite Leunig prayers is this one.

Across the difficult terrain of our existence we have attempted to build a highway and in so doing have lost our footpath. Lead us to our footpath: Lead us there where in simplicity we may move at the speed of natural creatures and feel the earth's love beneath our feet. Lead us there where step-by-step we may feel the movement of creation in our hearts. And lead us there where side-by-side we may feel the embrace of the common soul. Nothing can be loved at speed. Lead us to the slow path; to the joyous insights of the pilgrim; another way of knowing: another way of being.

This happens often when I am walking in the park in the early morning.. In the act of remembering God and, of seeing myself being defined not by what others see but by the very being of God found in all creation. I sometimes fell a lightness of being – a rising out of my self-preoccupation and walls of unrealised achievement..

Conclusion

I've talked about being born again as an invitation, a call, the answer to the need we all have to be released from a profound selfishness and a process that happens, daily and continually throughout our lives as we follow Christ into the future.

But being born again is the work of the Spirit - we can't make it happen – by wanting, wishing it to happen or by believing the right beliefs.. But while we can't make it happen we can be a midwife to the process.

The purpose of faith and spirituality is exactly this - to help birth the new self and nourish the new life... We can do this in a number of ways...

By paying attention to the relationship, spending time in conscious Christian practices of prayer, worship, community and ministry to others..

Finally, being born again begins a new life. Paul speaks of the new life “in Christ” in amazing terms. It is a life marked by freedom, joy, peace and love. Four of his favourite words: freedom from the voices of all the would-be lords of our lives, the joy of the exuberant life; the peace of reconnection to what is, the peace that passes all understanding; and love – the love of God for us and love of God in us.

“Jesus said, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above."