

Can we be born again? 05-03-2023

Today the Gospel-writer we know as John recounts a story in which Jesus enters into a conversation with a Pharisee called Nicodemus. Nicodemus is one of the good guys. Nicodemus is learned and respected and he is looking for a serious conversation with Jesus; after making it clear that he respects Jesus' opinion: "You are a worker of wonders, Jesus, so you know what you are talking about". The implication is that Nicodemus can talk to Jesus as an equal because he has earned that right -- because Nicodemus has studied, and because Nicodemus has been a serious and faithful devotee of his faith. You, Jesus, because you have performed such wonders you must have some serious insights into the mind of God. OK, responds Jesus, but unless you are ready to be reborn your insight into God's mind, and God's ways, will be limited.

Born again? Say what? Back to the womb? Even if I wanted to, I could not do that! Has no one ever told you, Nicodemus, that there is more than one way to be born. You are indeed born of the flesh, but it is also possible for you to be born of the Spirit -

I wonder, if Jesus was talking to us, today, whether he might have put it another way. "Nicodemus", he might have said, "get a life! Your learning is not much use to you or anyone else, if you have become stuck in a physical rut - if you think that the things you touch and feel are all that there is. Get a life, mate! Dare to recognise another reality. Find a better you! Become a different you! Be born again."

Jesus might say to us:

"Look again at the world you live in. What do you see? Do you see the great achievements of your civilisation that have caused trouble? Do you see a virus that will not go away? Do you see yet another war a century after the great War-to-end-all-Wars? Do you see the world that has entered into a state of climate chaos; that has passed more than one tipping point. Do you see a world that has lost its way while you Nicodemus, for all your learning, fill your time with silly questions, not realising that a new world is waiting in the wings. Don't waste time Nicodemus with silly questions. Build a new life based on spirit as well as flesh."

What are we doing here this morning my good friends? Are we stuck in a rut? Are we playing with words? Are we looking into the abyss -- or perhaps multiple abysses? Are we seeing the end of a world that we imagined would be our place and the place of our descendants for ever, or are we on the brink of a new world? Can we live into the new opportunity to build a better life; to build on the great virtues of faith, love, and charity and build upon the best in us to grasp and sow the seeds of a new beginning.

The call to be re-born is not a new one. It goes back to Jesus of course, and the church has preached rebirth as long as it has been around. "Have you been born again?" some Christian people will ask, and the answer they are expecting is, of course, "Yes I have been reborn, I have accepted. Jesus as my saviour and from now on all will be well. But all is not well is it, and being reborn is not just a matter of accepting Jesus as saviour -- because we must ask, we must always ask, what being reborn means for us, and for our time.

Was Nicodemus reborn? Did he accept Jesus as his Saviour? We don't know. We do know that he occurs again in the Gospels as the person who helps Joseph of Arimathea place Jesus in the tomb. Are these the actions of a reborn person or simply the act of a good person who would like to think that

being reborn and being good are related. I suspect that there are some exceptions to that. There are some people who claim to be a reborn, who have accepted Jesus as Saviour, but who behave in ways we would not expect of such a person.

In a world where there is no global crisis, let alone, three or more global crises at once, we might be forgiven for understanding rebirth as a personal matter between the believer and his or her Saviour. But in the world in crisis, a world subject to global crises that affect absolutely everyone; black-and-white, red and blue, left and right, rich and poor, we can no longer delude ourselves into thinking that this is all there is to it. The global crisis, by definition is, well, global, and the response needs to be global too.

So, where does that leave us? Where does that leave us as seekers of salvation, as seekers of answers, as seekers of guidance. What do we do in this church, Will our actions be different to those of people outside these walls. Like them we feel overwhelmed. Like them we feel threatened. Like them we feel confused. We are all in the same boat waiting for someone (maybe Jesus) to still the storm.

There is no simple answer, but if our faith means anything it, perhaps, should mean that we have hope, and that this hope is not just that the crisis will go away, that we will find the Silver Bullet that solves the problem. No, the problem will not go away like that. It is too late for that. We can ask that a degree of cleverness will lead to an amelioration of the problem, but it won't go away. It's here to stay.

Our faith, if it is to mean anything, must lead us to a change of heart, and a change of mind – to seek out newness; newness of life, and a renewed determination and a renewed cultivation of hope. Our job is not to despair. Our job is to demonstrate that new life is possible. Our job is to be reborn. Our job is to connect with the Spirit that dwells amongst us. We dwell on the brink of a new creation. We, as humans, have messed up the old creation. But we have the tools and the motivation to show how a new creation starts here. It starts with us here, now!

Jesus, in effect, is asking Nicodemus to free himself from the straight-jacket of his religion. Jesus offers Nicodemus, the challenge to free himself from his learning, his understanding of how he should read the mind of God and the read his world as well. This religion of Nicodemus is not helping and we might reasonably ask, in this time of crisis, is our religion helping us, and how, and if not, how can we change that?

It all seems a bit much doesn't it, but life is Malcolm Fraser once said, was not meant to be easy, and faith was not meant to be easy either. In Jesus' words:

"You must be born from above." 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.

May it be so.