

John 3.1-17; Genesis 12:1-4a; Romans 4.1-5, 13-17(T2)
Second Sunday of Lent: 12th March 2017.
8 & 10 @ St. Andrew's, Totteridge

May the words of my mouth...

I wonder how many of you have been accosted by enthusiastic Christians asking you if you have been 'saved' yet? Or, if you have been 'born again?' If the question means, 'have you had a particularly emotional conversion experience,' then here's how I respond to those kinds of questions: 'No.' But if the question is, 'Have you given your whole life to Jesus?', your answer should be 'Yes! I try to be born again every day!' And then I quote St. Paul who famously offered '[a more excellent way](#)' and who, even though he could speak in tongues, was quite happy to accept that there are a good many Christians who can't (1 Cor. 12:30), saying that this did not invalidate them in any way.

The idea is to stop relying on our own achievements and live life each day as though we're beginning it again, trusting only in God's love. To try, really hard, to live a life of unselfish love as Jesus asked, and to make this paramount. Of course, I often fail and I'm often quite cross with myself when I do, but then I should depend on God's forgiveness to bring me to heaven, not my own virtues. So, if I want love, long life and happiness, I know I must continually try to be born again: to make a fresh start, to give my whole life to Jesus.

This all relates to what we really want out of life. If we really want love, long life and happiness, then we need to reflect on those most famous lines of scripture:

["God so loved the world that he sent his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."](#)

God offers us the chance to be loved, to have a very long life, as long as eternity, and with it, salvation – and what does salvation mean? A range of things, but amongst them, to be set free from fear, from guilt, from despair, from all things which make us unhappy. But at what cost? Well, no less than a complete shift in perception, in the same way that our ability to 'see' changes radically between night and day.

Jesus offered love, life and salvation to Nicodemus, a Pharisee, one of the most narrow-minded, moralistic sects of the Jewish religion. Nicodemus gets off to a good start by visiting Jesus at night and recognising in him someone who couldn't do what he's done '[apart from the presence of God](#)' (Jn.3:2). But as with many of his kind, Nicodemus thought that, to please God, you must read every law in the Old Testament and apply them strictly to your own life.

Only this would earn you entry into the kingdom of God, which most Jews believed would be a new era in Earth history beginning in their lifetime, when the Jews would rule the world through a new King called the Messiah. This could only happen when every Jew had obeyed every law in the scriptures for 24 hours.

So you can imagine how angry the religious leaders were when Jesus came along and seemed to be saying, *'don't worry about the details. Just learn to love God and love your neighbour, and all will be well.'* He says to Nicodemus words to the effect of *'you can't even see the kingdom of God when it's right underneath your nose. The entry ticket depends, not on stricter morality, but on rebirth.'* In other words, he's trying to help Nicodemus 'see' in the dark.

The word Jesus used for 'rebirth' varies across different Bibles. Most give it as 'born-again.' NRSV has 'born from above', with 'born anew' in the footnotes. I think we can safely take from this that, to enter the kingdom of God, we must begin again, make a fresh start, but this time, one entirely dependent on God. The contrast is between 'flesh' & 'spirit' (Jn.3:6,8). Those who even want to glimpse the kingdom of God must give up seeing through the lens of flesh, and 'see' with the freedom of perception that the spirit brings (Bridget Nichols).

This doesn't mean that we don't have to expend energy – quite the contrary – but that we shouldn't boast of our achievements. Just as a new-born child is totally dependent on its parents, we must rely entirely on God's grace as we work to build God's earthly kingdom of justice and peace. Then we will receive love and happiness and, after we die, our life in Gods heavenly kingdom will not just be long, but eternal.

So to close, and Lent is a really good time to begin doing this, if you've never really tried to 'begin again' before, or if

you just feel that you're slipping a bit in the 'spiritual rebirth stakes', then why not try a simple prayer like this:

Dear Jesus, I want to be born again, to give my whole life to you, doing what you want me to, and trusting, not in what I have done, but in your grace and forgiveness alone, that you will lead me safely to heaven, come what may. Amen.

Spoken in the name of the Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

John 3.1-17 Nicodemus Visits Jesus

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, '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.' ³Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' ⁴Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' ⁵Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." ⁸The 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.' ⁹Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' ¹⁰Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹ 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

¹⁷ 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Genesis 12:1-4a The Call of Abram

Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. ²I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ³I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

⁴ So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

Romans 4.1-5, 13-17 **The Example of Abraham**

4 What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? ²For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.' ⁴Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. ⁵But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

God's Promise Realized through Faith

13 For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.

16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, ¹⁷as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations')—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.