

12<sup>th</sup> March 2017

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

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**HYMNS:**     **25**    **“God is here! As we his people”**  
                  **359**   **“Lord Christ, we praise your sacrifice”**  
                  **320**   **“Father, whose everlasting love”**  
                  **503**   **“Love divine, all loves excelling”**

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**READINGS: Romans 4:1-5 & 13-17**  
**John 3: 1-17**

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### ***“THE GREAT LOVE OF GOD”***

Today we have heard two difficult passages of Scripture, firstly Paul writing about Abraham in his letter to the Romans and secondly, John writing in his deep and challenging Gospel about the need to be born again or be born from above (both are correct translations).

This is not easy stuff – it is not easy for preachers to grapple with and make understandable to you, the congregation and it is not easy for you, the congregation to listen to, understand and integrate in your spiritual lives.

The Bible is not a book, it is a library. The Bible is not a collection of stories, it is history, poetry, philosophy, theology and other things as well. The Bible is not just another book which we read, it reads us, not once but in each context where we find ourselves. So we have to try to rise to the challenge of having a dialogue even with difficult parts of the Bible.

Today’s readings are part of the set lectionary – the Bible reading programme which is used by many different churches across the world and which allows preachers and congregations to engage with most parts of the Bible, not just with our favourite bits, in a planned manner throughout the year.

The choice of Bible readings follow the Church year so our readings for today are readings to help us in our Lenten pilgrimage. So let us give our attention to the passage from John’s Gospel in particular – there is a lot going on there, so even then we shall need to focus down.

If you are familiar with this passage – it will be probably be because of two sentences. Firstly Jesus tells the enquiring Pharisee Nicodemus –“You must be born from above’ alternatively rendered, “you must be born again” – either translation is possible. This phrase has been focussed on by certain types of Christians and developed into a whole theory of conversion, even theology of conversion. We will return to this in a moment.

Secondly many of us are familiar with the verse John 3:16, “for God so loved the world that he gave us his only Son, so that whoever believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.”

You often see this passage on T-shirts – an indication that it is seen as a very important verse for our Christian life. Martin Luther said that this verse was the whole Gospel in a nutshell.

Some years ago at Pentecost – here in the Chapel, Leslie asked us for our favourite Bible verses and John 3:17 came out top. We went around the congregation listening to that same verse spoken in many different languages – it was a lived parable for the ‘world’ – the variety of humankind in our congregation were, in that moment, acknowledging God’s boundless love for the whole of humanity.

So, at the beginning of our passage and the end of our passage we have these two very important and much quoted sentences. We shall focus on them, while recognising that the rest of the passage is rich and asks for our further study.

It is Lent, a time for our own spiritual reflection. We have baptised three people – Kelly, Nya and Clay this morning. All of this is the context for our reflection today.

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above (or ‘born again’ as some translations give it). This is what Jesus says to the courageous and enquiring Nicodemus. This verse has been taken up by some Christian groups and has been used as a criterion by which people can be regarded as proper Christians... or not. In some congregations it is not uncommon for people to approach others, especially newcomers, and ask, ‘are you born again?’

For some people their entry into the Christian faith has been a tumultuous event – the day, the time, the place – all known and marked for the person because of the decision to follow Jesus made there and then.

Many evangelistic campaigns seek to create these tumultuous moments of decision. Do not misunderstand me, many people come to a deep and enduring faith in Jesus in this way but for some people this is seen as the only way in which to become a true Christian. Being ‘born again’, in this instant, decisive way is seen as the litmus test of whether one can be considered a real Christian or not. Unless you can give the time and place of your decision for Christ, some people will still consider you ripe for conversion!

So let’s look again at this passage from John’s Gospel. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a religious leader of the Jews – someone who had studied the Jewish scriptures and had sought to live a religious life. Nicodemus was also wealthy – we know that because when Jesus died Nicodemus bought spices to anoint his body – only a wealthy person could do that.

And it says that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night. This indicates that it was already getting difficult for the religious leaders of Judaism to be seen with the upstart teacher, Jesus. It was caution on Nicodemus’ part and we should not condemn him for that. The real wonder is that, with his background, Nicodemus came to Jesus at

all. It was nothing short of a miracle that Nicodemus overcame his prejudices and everything in his upbringing to come to Jesus. And, senior religious leader though he was Jesus did not give him an easy time. 'You must be born from above, Nicodemus.'

Let's pause there. Being born – for mother and child – is a painful and traumatic process. Many of you, especially those with recent experience, know this far better than I do. To be born is, for a baby, to be absolutely dependent, to emerge from the warmth and security of the womb into a new and frightening world. It is to begin to learn life and language from scratch. A new born baby is profoundly ignorant of the world and has to learn in the care of the parents.

For one who is already alive and adult, for Nicodemus being reborn or born from above is equally traumatic, nothing less than a kind of death – a complete break from all that has gone before – inherited tradition and tested experience.

Jesus is putting an exacting test before Nicodemus - asking him to acknowledge his ignorance of the spirit of God. Nicodemus may know the Law and the Scriptures but he still needs to understand how to enter the Kingdom of God. That- for Nicodemus and for us is no theory or idea. Entering the Kingdom is not something you merely observe – it is something you enter by being born of water and the spirit. Today we have baptised Kelly, Nya and Clay with water – they have begun their journey in the spirit. All of us, whether baptised today or 60 years ago are on that journey into the spirit of God – that birth from above.

We can choose baptism but it only takes us so far. To be born of the spirit is of a totally different order – it is not something that comes from ourselves – it is like the wind, out of our control and comprehension and we are called to be that dependent child and yield to it. This is scary stuff for all those people, who, like so many of us, seek to be 'in control' of our lives. John speaks in this passage of what he knows – there is no proof, no formula and we can run no experiments – life goes on, we do not get to repeat it again at the end and come back for another try. As has been said so often, 'this life is the only one we have – it is no rehearsal.'

To experience being 'born from above' means putting our trust in Jesus and this is where we return to the second verse on which we focussed at the beginning.

'God so loved the world,' John says, 'that he gave us Jesus his son' – he gave Jesus so that trusting in him we may not perish. God so loves the world – even a world that hates him. God does not seek to condemn us or any of his sons and daughters.

In Lent we are on a spiritual pilgrimage – indeed our whole lives are a spiritual pilgrimage and it is so easy for us to get lost along the way. We need landmarks – especially when we feel ourselves to be in the wilderness, tempted by the lures of the world. One of the most helpful ways in which we can create landmarks for ourselves is for us to seek to exercise acts of compassion. As we do that we make ourselves vulnerable, we put our own lives and interests at risk and this places us in the embrace of the spirit. It means we can stand where the spirit can wash over us – we do not get to choose what the spirit may give us or how it will touch us.

What we can do is to trust in the God who loved the world so much that he gave his only son for us. Such love is scandalous, even crazy but it is what we believe every time we say those familiar verses John 3:16. Amen