

St Brandon's, Sermon for Trinity Sunday, 30th May 2021.

Romans 8:12-17, Psalm 29, John 3.1-17

Born Again

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I wonder, if I was to ask you to put your hand up if you are a Born Again Christian – that is, you would say of yourself that you have been ‘born again’ or had a ‘born-again’ experience, I wonder how many of you would?

Preaching through zoom, I’d not see the answer anyway, so you are saved from actually waving at me but somehow, I really don’t expect we’d be seeing a forest of waving arms from St Brandon’s; perhaps a small handful?

Its not really our language, is it.

Perhaps the very phrase ‘born again’ is making you wriggle or feel a little perplexed?

If, however, you have an evangelical background, you may be feeling pretty comfortable with the term ‘born again’ as meaning something like ‘conversion’ and very much a core theme from the evangelical perspective: isn’t it interesting how different we all are in the Christian family!

But perhaps seeing difference gets in the way of seeing similarity - that is, if we were to look at the text without hearing the phrase as owned by others, perhaps we could own it more.

This conversation Jesus has with Nicodemus, as told by John, is an important and revelatory one, as flagged up by the phrase “Very truly, I tell you”, the expression used when we are to listen up for a truth and sign of what and who Jesus is in God.

Nicodemus is approaching this conversation with an attitude of 'We know' - he is a learned Pharisee, confident he knows Jesus to be a teacher from God. End of matter. But Jesus is ready to show him a far bigger and more complex picture of who he really is, starting with a correction: this kind of knowledge Nicodemus is talking about is not sufficient if Nicodemus is to see – be part of, the Kingdom of God. To participate in that, he needs to be born again.

Now comes a mix-up of two meanings for this Greek word, the word can mean 'again', though it generally meant 'above', so Nicodemus is even more confused by thinking Jesus means 'again' as if it were a literal, physical return to the womb.

Jesus states it as an absolute necessity that a person needs to be born of the Spirit, as well as of water. Now, remember, John the Baptist has been baptising with water and teaching about the one who will come after him who will baptise with the Holy Spirit (its in the first chapter of John, if you want to look it up later), so this reference to being born of Spirit and water might have resonated with Nicodemus from John's prophetic teaching if he'd been able to make the link between baptism and new life/birth – or believe it.

When Nicodemus doesn't get it, "*How can these things be?*", it's Jesus' cue to reveal himself.

Jesus reveals himself as one who is in direct contact with God, by using the plural – ... (come one, it's Trinity Sunday, you know why Jesus speaks of himself as 'We'!) :

“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.”

Despite Nicodemus having failed to believe what is already seen and said on earth, (such as the matter of baptism), Jesus is ready to reveal God’s plan to Nicodemus. The plan for an extraordinary love act of the Son being raised on the cross to save all who believe – to save the world. Here, Nicodemus is directly instructed, as a teacher of Israel, that God’s saving plan will be for everyone - and will be through the cross. And the teaching is not in vain, Nicodemus becomes a secret disciple of Jesus. Nicodemus will have discovered for himself, the power of the Holy Spirit coming on him at Pentecost, the Spirit that can help him see the Kingdom of God, which is the path to eternal life.

Well, where does that leave us at St Brandon’s?

In a fortnight, baby Hugh Funnell will be baptised, and Anna will ask God to bless the water that Hugh, being baptised in it, may be cleansed, and filled with the Holy Spirit. This is the start of Hugh’s being born again in water and Spirit, adopted as a child of God, welcomed into the family of St Brandon’s. And we know that it is an eradicable seal on Hugh’s life. Nothing will take that from him, nothing will diminish its power in him and claim on him.

But. There is a But. Experience tells us there is a But.

In order for that power in him to be exercised, in order for that claim on him to be evident, Hugh needs to respond as he grows, with a growing faith.

Pre-2018, our previous, wordier order of service for baptisms finished at the font with a prayer addressed specifically to the baby, commissioning them to do just this. I loved that intimate moment of prayer, in that prayer we would pray for growth in friendship with God, and in service. These are the practical implications and out-workings of the in-dwelling Spirit: growth in friendship with God, and in service.

This is what Paul writes about with urgency to the Romans: Paul has discovered for himself that when he has learnt to be intimate with God, relating to him as a child that loves and trusts their Daddy, responding in freedom not fear, it is the Holy Spirit at work in him. The Holy Spirit will lead us into that relationship if we let it. The Holy Spirit is that gift in us that prompts us to pray in love and longing for God's hurting world, and in thanks and wonder for God's good provision. It is the Holy Spirit in us that enables us to understand Jesus's teachings as we read the bible, and stirs up the burning desire in us to follow Christ and love as the Spirit shows us, he loves us. Following Christ means opening ourselves further to scripture and to the invitation throughout the gospels to know and be alert to the one-ness of Father and Son. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit we are invited to enter that same one-ness.

Last Trinity Sunday Deborah showed us the Rubelev icon: three seated figures, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, seated around a

square table, on the fourth side of which is the place for us..
We are invited to join the intimacy of that holy threesome:
the Father pats the place at his side and says to us, "Come, my child";
Jesus pats the place at his side and says "Come, friend",
the Holy Spirit holds out its hands and says "I will bring you".

Paul experienced a life-changing, blinding moment of conversion: he would put his hand up as a born-again! Its not unknown. But most of us work on the little conversions that slowly, slowly, turn us into new beings. Beings who are Spirit-led as fully as we have learnt to trust and dare. Beings who try to love and work for God's world.

I'd like to finish by praying for each of us, that prayer that commissioned new lives, newly entrusted to the Holy Spirit in baptism:

Child of God, today God has touched you with his love
and given you a place among his people.
God promises to be with you
in joy and in sorrow,
to be your guide in life,
and to bring you safely to heaven.
In baptism God invites you on a life-long journey.
Together with all God's people
you must explore the way of Jesus
and grow in friendship with God,
in love for his people,

and in serving others.

With us you will listen to the word of God
and receive the gifts of God.

May God bless you in your walk with him,
today and always.

Amen