

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Lent 2 Year A. 17th February 08

Genesis 12.1-4a John 3.1-17

'You must be born again'

Lent this year seems to be taking us back to Christian basics. Those of you who were in church last week will remember that we considered what sin is – how, by definition, it's whatever forms a separation, a barrier, between ourselves and God, between ourselves and other people, between ourselves and God's world. And you'll remember, too, that we thought a bit about why Christians have traditionally considered pride to be the fundamental sin – the most separating attitude of all.

Now, this week, we're called to consider that strange expression 'being born again'.

Some years ago I received a phone call which went something like this:

'Are you the vicar? I wonder if you can help me?...My daughter's joined some born-again Christians – she's been born again – and she says that if I'm not born again, I'll go to hell...I don't know what to think, and it's really worrying me. I believe in the Lord, and I lead a decent life, though I don't go to church. Do I have to be a born-again Christian to go to heaven?'

What do you think I should have said to that lady when I went to see her? (By the way, I had to go and see her rather secretly, because she didn't want her sons and husband to know she was talking to the vicar. And there was an interesting reason for that ...but I can't go into it with you now.)

Nicodemus, who was a churchgoer, as well as living a decent life (we suppose) also had puzzles and worries. So he made an appointment to see the Lord –and he did it secretly, too, for his own reasons.

We don't know exactly what Nicodemus' puzzles and worries were: perhaps surprise at the people Jesus was consorting with - how could he, so obviously a prophet from God – mix with riff-raff and public

sinners? That might have been a real question in a Pharisee's mind...Or perhaps, simply he wanted to ask, 'Jesus, who are you - really?'

But, whatever his questions, when Nicodemus kept his appointment, Jesus didn't even let him voice them. He didn't let him get past the polite preamble, '...no one can do the signs that you do, apart from the presence of God...' before he cut him short. 'That's enough of that', Jesus seemed to be thinking. 'Let me put a challenge to Nicodemus that will shake his whole perspective on things.'

And the challenge Jesus put is the challenge of change.

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

No change in our natural life is as great as the change of being born – no change, that is, until we get to death. But, important as death is to our faith, let's stick for the moment with birth.

It's the one occasion when you launch out into something entirely new without having any chance to foresee it, or having any signs in advance which might help you imagine it. It's a journey you make on your own, yet under pressure from beyond yourself. It opens up a whole new world. And that whole new world includes a whole new family.

This is what opening-up to God is like, says Jesus: it's a change which affects you radically and very individually, yet it's all about relationships.

No wonder it feels risky to say 'yes' to God – to be open to such incalculable and uncontrollable change. Opening-up to God, like physical birth, may be a sudden, swift process – but perhaps more often, like physical birth, it's a long process of movement under pressure – the pressure of God's hand, his Spirit, upon your life. Maybe for some of us, this process is as long as the whole of our physical lives.

What shall we say about God's Spirit? Christ told Nicodemus that he blows where he wills – not necessarily in the tidy channels of religious ritual and moral codes. And perhaps not only in the set

patterns of conversion that are recognised by some Christians as the patterns of being 'born again'. This, maybe, should have been part of my answer to the lady who rang me up – there's not only one way of being 'born again'.

But if I'd said that, I would have had to be careful not to underplay the necessity for radical change which the statement, 'you must be born again' contains. Members of so-called 'born-again' churches do have a real challenge to throw out to the rest of us. It's the challenge of what the New Testament calls *metanoia*, which some explain as repentance, and others as conversion. The challenge of being open to transformation in ways we can't negotiate in advance, or limit as we go along. The challenge of finding in our hearts a 'Yes' to God which is a bungee-jump of faith – a reliance that he will hold us even above the void of uncertainty about what our 'yes' has let us in for.

But let's stop a moment, and ask the question, 'what of baptism?' This is traditionally called the sacrament of rebirth or regeneration. And yet we administer it to those who are in no position to utter the heartfelt and

risky 'yes' of *metanoia*. What, should we say, is the meaning, in our faith, of being born of water and the Spirit?

It makes sense to me to see the Water of baptism as both a symbol, and a real stage in rebirth – a powerful sign that the Spirit is there to work in and on your life, from the very beginning, or at any point. But, like the breaking waters of natural birth, the water of baptism isn't either the beginning or the end of the experience of being born again (or born 'from above'). It's a part, a significant marker. And an important reminder that being born again is really brought about by the Spirit – not by ourselves.

Whether we belong to a Christian tradition which talks comfortably about being 'born again', and has a great deal of clarity about what that means in psychological terms, or whether – on the other hand – we're among the company of those whom William James called the 'once-born' – Christians who feel they've always believed, and have no traumatic or dramatic turning-point to look back to – the challenge to all of us must be about change, and about not being complacent. Sometimes (though by

no means always) people who've had a definite conversion experience move into a position of certainty bordering on rigidity. The change and transformation suggested by the phrase 'born-again' is all located in the past. 'Been there, done that, got the tee-shirt .' There's little room for the ever-blowing wind, little room for growth and development.

And, on the other hand, among those who are scared of the 'born-again' label, scared of 'that kind of church', there must be room for asking this question, 'underneath and alongside all your reservations about those kind of Christians (however justified you may feel those reservations to be) is there also a fear of encountering God in a way which really might change you? Is there a fear of losing life as you know it, so that you may find another kind of life by saying 'Yes'? Are you avoiding or ignoring the pressure of the Spirit on your life? Are you trying to tame God's claim upon you, by fitting it into the parameters of familiar religious practice, and decent moral code?

For all of us, the God who's 'in a box' – safely on the shelf to take down when we need him – isn't God at

all. And a faith which is safely in a box, with all its certainties secure and tight, probably isn't faith, either.

This great and well-known passage from St John's Gospel which is so much quoted, is challenging because it's mysterious. But within that mystery, surely, there is a God who is a free agent, who may riskily come and challenge us to change in some unimaginable ways. There is a Spirit, who is the main agent of change in our lives, if only we raise our sails to his wind. And there is Christ, raised up to draw us to himself by way of a journey which is as strange as birth – but which, like birth, offers the prospect of life we cannot now fully conceive, as its goal.