



Trinity Sunday

Sermon by Revd Alison Thabethe



Sunday 30 May 2021

READINGS

Isaiah 6: 1-8; Psalm 29; Romans 8: 12-17; John 3: 1-17

Born Again

John 3:16. It's often the first Bible verse that we learn in Sunday school. From the age of 5, my friends and I knew it by heart: 'For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.' Does anyone relate to that? It was the verse that said it all.

By the age of 10, I knew what it meant to be 'born again', and I had 'given my life to Jesus'. Or to use another expression that we frequently used, 'I knew Jesus as my personal Lord and Saviour.' The answer to the question, 'Are you born again?' was a sort of test to identify the 'real Christians.' Believing meant agreeing to a list of propositions: clear, distinct verbal formulations like these that summed up all I needed to know about my Christian faith. In my early 20s, the sound of those phrases rang like hollow clichés in my ears. They were too neat and formulaic. They defined a faith that felt too narrow and prescriptive. I wrestled with my distaste for what I called 'Christianese' and 'Sunday School answers' while my heart rebelled.

Don't misunderstand me. I am truly grateful for the foundation I had growing up in a Christian home. For the Sunday School teachers, the camps and youth groups, the hours of Bible study, first at home with my grandparents and later with my friends. These taught me to know and love the Bible, and through the Bible, to come to know and trust Jesus. What I had yet to learn, was that I relied on just one form of revelation. It valued knowledge, answers and certainty. God was revealed through the Bible and through doctrine. We spoke about Jesus 'in our heart', but believing happened in the head. Faith is our believing response to God's revelation. Theologian Avery Dulles wrote about different Models of Revelation: ways in which we encounter God. There are different types of revelation seen throughout the history of the church, and depending on our own personality, church background and so on, we learn to value some forms of revelation more highly than others, without even knowing it.

My tradition found God in doctrine and in Scripture. Reading right and thinking right. Other ways in which God reveals Godself to us include history, inner experience or as some refer to it spiritual or mystical experience, or in the form of a whole new encounter, leading us to new understanding and deeper awareness of God. For example, as Amanda Held-Opelt describes, 'When I can't hold on anymore, the Story still catches me, the Creator still holds me, the Spirit still hovers over what is uncertain and yet-to-be formed.'

We see some of these forms of revelation from God demonstrated by the interaction between Jesus and Nicodemus. As we examine the story of Nicodemus and his encounter with Jesus, let us also examine our own faith and try to identify the ways in which we personally come to know God, and if we have perhaps assumed, like Nicodemus did, that ours is the only way or the better way. Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish ruling council, which made him the equivalent of a politician, lawyer and teacher. He specialised in law, doctrine and scripture. He went to Jesus, calling him Rabbi, saying, 'We know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.' Already he was open to a different encounter, by seeing God's power at work in Jesus. It is the conversation that follows that takes Nicodemus out of his comfort zone, and into a new realm of faith.

The detail that John includes is that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night when it is dark. This has been taken to show that he is not ready to risk his reputation by being associated with this rabble rouser and his disciples. It makes the encounter less public and more personal. Some scholars suggest that the dark is not only literal but metaphorical, representing Nicodemus's initial lack of insight. Jesus does not provide Nicodemus with a rational answer. 'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.' This prompts perhaps the most unintellectual or embarrassing question that a man of his status could ask as Nicodemus literally pictures what it might mean to be born again.

This is what I find ironic. In so many ways the church has taken a metaphor – the language of imagination and possibility that carries us beyond our comprehension, and turned this very phrase and this very conversation into what it was not: the Christian formula for salvation. Today we are invited to revisit the words and hear them as if for the first time. Jesus was not providing a 'method.' His words are unsettling, disturbing and yet filled with possibility: 'The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.' I think our readings today encourage us to set aside any sense of certainty that might make us smug and to discover new ways of knowing and more ways of believing. Perhaps it is an opportunity for God to break into our experience in a life-transforming way.

Isaiah, worshipping in the temple, is taken up with an ecstatic experience and revelation of God's glory. God speaks directly to him. No one else may have even noticed anything unusual in Isaiah's behaviour that day, but for Isaiah, God was real, present, and challenging him to a new vision. In the temple that day, he encounters the living God and discovers his life's calling.

Bruce Epperly describes it like this: 'Senses aware perhaps for the first time to the majesty of creation and the Creator, Isaiah experiences the world as God-filled....' And then, 'Mysticism leads to mission'. Isaiah hears what we too can hear: God needs us. Who will speak for God? Who will be God's companion in healing the world? 'Here I am,' Isaiah replies.

We don't typically expect paranormal experiences and mystical encounters in the context of a church service on a Sunday morning. Yet, worship can be life-transforming. It can alter our senses and understanding of the world, prompting a new response to God's mission in our time and place.

To be 'born again' is just one translation of a Greek version of what Jesus spoke in Aramaic. It holds many meanings – it means to be 'born anew' and also to be 'born from above'. For me the mistake is to relegate

this rebirth to that once-off occasion, accompanied by the special prayer of assent. Rather we are 'born again' again and again, as we respond to God's revelation saying, 'Yes Lord, here I am.'

This week is known as Trinity Sunday in our church calendar. The gesture we make, forming the sign of the cross as we say the names of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is also a reminder of God's revelation – not just to our mind, but also the inner experience of our heart. And, as we cross our bodies from side to side in the name of the Spirit, we acknowledge God's revelation through others, and through us to others. God's call to transformation that reaches beyond the self.

The God we worship doesn't want to leave us as we are, but to continually transform us. Are we open to being surprised, unsettled, blown sideways a bit by the wind of the Spirit? God's Spirit calls us into being in new ways, to touch the world in new ways and to bring new life and hope as we live out our response to God's revelation that transcends all: 'For God so loved the world, that God gave his only Son.'