

Genesis 12. 1-4a

Psalm 121

Romans 4. 1-5, 13-17

John 3. 1- 21

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But I want to pull this verse down; pull it back into context. Into the context of the whole of chapter; back into the context of the whole Gospel and in some way unhitch it from the way it has been overcooked by the evangelical tradition. I don't know about you, I certainly experienced it as a means of manipulation. I recall the sense that the verse was used as a kind of waddy with its suggestion that I might perish unless I believed; a seed of uncertainty about a vengeful God sown in an impressionable adolescent mind.

I feel Nicodemus is I feel a slightly tragic character. Some commentators suggest he is ingenuous, a bit creepy in his coming by night and his questioning of Jesus. There is some thought he is a member of the Sanhedrin, an elite, senior council of elders; experienced, respected, with the wisdom of years. But: *Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things,* asks Jesus? Nicodemus has been a disciplined devotee of the tradition; and he has gained respect and honour for his devotion and discipline. He is a leader amongst the religious community of Jerusalem. But he seems to know there is something more to all this religious observance and he seeks Jesus out to explore what that might be.

Nicodemus *feels* tragic to me because his response to Jesus seems a bit dumb: *must a man enter a second time into his mother's womb?* In terms of John's gospel, he is still blind. He is a literalist; birth can only be physical is the implication of his response to Jesus. He is incapable of symbolic thought. And in this interaction between him and Jesus, John is seeking to draw us into the essence of what the religious life is about – about symbol, metaphor, allusion. When we wish to speak about the nature of God and how the life of God may be present to us, we can only hint; we can only speak obliquely through language which suggests something much more than our words can ever express. We seek to touch on the mystical, the mysterious; but we only have concrete, everyday language available to us.

Symbolic language is the essence of the language of John's Gospel; it's why so much of John's imagery is used in our Christian liturgy. John is a Gospel that is in its language at every turn deeply symbolic and sometimes like quicksilver; at other times the complete reverse of what the words normally mean. Birth is about the birth of something else. Darkness is about that which overshadows life. Light is that which imparts a sense of clarity and insight. Glory in John is about the glory of the cross; how can an instrument of torture and execution bring about glory – apart from a metaphor to set our minds on new paths of imagination?

When Jesus says to Nicodemus that he must be born from above he uses a word which means both to be born from above and to be born anew. In Greek it's a word which defies our rational grasp of it. And likewise, when Jesus talks about seeing throughout the Gospel he is not talking about seeing with the eyes but seeing with the eyes of the heart; what Hindus would call the inner-eye; the third eye. What also might be called enlightenment. When the gospel speaks of the light shining in the darkness, it is not talking about that phenomena which we call light, emitted in waves between. 430, and 750 trillion hertz. but it is speaking of that experience of God which breaks into our confusion, our hopelessness and despair and grants us a peace which settles our anxiety. An experience which feels like light in the darkness.

So, the notion of being born again – born anew – is symbolic language. Symbolic of something we catch when we encounter the life of God. Dorothy Lee writes: *Symbols by their nature are two sided, linked both to the infinite and to the finite. They involve simultaneously the affirmation and the negation of the concrete image, in order that it may reach toward the infinite.* It is like this, but it is not this. So, Jesus is saying to Nicodemus that you must be born anew – but it's not being born as you once were from your mother's womb; yet it is something like a real birth; something that will happen to you at the right time, be out of your control, we don't know how long it will take and we have little control of it, it will be painful and tumultuous; and it will give you life. Receiving the life of God is like your real birth, but it is much more than this. And we need to anticipate it; watch for it; prepare for it; hope for it.

It's also important for us as we touch on language as suggestive of the divine life to understand the nature of this life Jesus is alerting his hearers to. Jesus says that the gist of what he is speaking of is eternal life. *Sodso aeterno* – in the ancient Greek. Eternal life. Now some of us, certainly too many of us, were led to believe that the expressions *eternal life* and *everlasting life* are interchangeable. Eternal life equals everlasting time, goes the thinking. No. Absolutely not. No such notion as everlasting life is mentioned in the Gospels – indeed in the whole Christian Scriptures. Everlasting life is not a thing in the gospel. And Jesus is not concerned that we gain some kind of everlasting tick-tock time but that we in our human reality come to know and experience the reality and mystery of the life of God. This is eternal life. John portrays it as something we receive. *But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,* says the prologue to the gospel. In receiving eternal life we gain a sense that our mundane, human existence is touched with the wonder and brilliance and joy of the life of heaven; even in the midst of the messiness and the pain of our lives.

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Nicodemus comes out of the darkness seeking Jesus, the true light. We hear Jesus conclude what he has to say to Nicodemus with these words: *But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.*' The whole of this brief scene

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So what do we have to say? What might we have to offer? We need to get to grips ourselves – personally and collectively – with what this born-again life is about if we are to have anything to say. Our task is to realise for ourselves this eternal life that we have the opportunity to live now. To live fully and not timidly or provisionally. This eternal life is a life that, as Paul says, we see through a veil and yet we stake our lives and our everything on it.

This is the divine life which is infused with the strange possibility that water and the spirit brings; the life that the bread and the wine nourishes; it's the life which involves the seeing which sees beneath the surface of things mundane to see the presence of God; this is the life which knows what the light shining in the darkness looks like and makes time and space for its breaking in; this is the life whereby we can hold others who find themselves in the darkness and to be hopeful on their behalf that the dawn will come; this is the life which waits and is ready for the word to reveal the arrival of the bridegroom. And we live this life by surrounding ourselves with everyday symbols which suggest to us that God is close; through text; through poetry; through art; through items of furniture that speak to us of our common life in which we seek the presence of God: font, candle, table, word; through our speaking, through our silence, through our singing. We take these mundane things and activities and we honour them in life-giving rituals; we accord them the sacred possibility that eternal life may be revealed to us.

This is why set this space aside; this is why we gather in the way in which we do. And in our gathering we give ourselves over to these things, placing ourselves between the mundane and the eternal and anticipate that we may receive the light of life.

May it be so.

Andrew Boyle

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When Jesus says to Nicodemus that he must be born from above he uses a word which means both to be born from above and to be born anew. In Greek it's a word which defies our rational grasp of it. And likewise, when Jesus talks about seeing throughout the Gospel he is not talking about seeing with the eyes but seeing with the eyes of the heart; what Hindus would call the inner-eye; the third eye. What also might be called enlightenment. When the gospel speaks of the light shining in the darkness, it is not talking about that phenomena which we call light, emitted in waves between. 430, and 750 trillion hertz. but it is speaking of that experience of God which breaks into our confusion, our hopelessness and despair and grants us a peace which settles our anxiety. An experience which feels like light in the darkness.

So, the notion of being born again – born anew – is symbolic language. Symbolic of something we catch when we encounter the life of God. Dorothy Lee writes: *Symbols by their nature are two sided, linked both to the infinite and to the finite. They involve simultaneously the affirmation and the negation of the concrete image, in order that it may reach toward the infinite.* It is like this, but it is not this. So, Jesus is saying to Nicodemus that you must be born anew – but it's not being born as you once were from your mother's womb; yet it is something like a real birth; something that will happen to you at the right time, be out of your control, we don't know how long it will take and we have little control of it, it will be painful and tumultuous; and it will give you life. Receiving the life of God is like your real birth, but it is much more than this. And we need to anticipate it; watch for it; prepare for it; hope for it.

It's also important for us as we touch on language as suggestive of the divine life to understand the nature of this life Jesus is alerting his hearers to. Jesus says that the gist of what he is speaking of is eternal life. *Sodso aeterno* – in the ancient Greek. Eternal life. Now some of us, certainly too many of us, were led to believe that the expressions *eternal life* and *everlasting life* are interchangeable. Eternal life equals everlasting time, goes the thinking. No. Absolutely not. No such notion as everlasting life is mentioned in the Gospels – indeed in the whole Christian Scriptures. Everlasting life is not a thing in the gospel. And Jesus is not concerned that we gain some kind of everlasting tick-tock time but that we in our human reality come to know and experience the reality and mystery of the life of God. This is eternal life. John portrays it as something we receive. *But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,* says the prologue to the gospel. In receiving eternal life we gain a sense that our mundane, human existence is touched with the wonder and brilliance and joy of the life of heaven; even in the midst of the messiness and the pain of our lives.

In the letter to the Romans – not the section we've heard today – Paul writes: *For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.* Whenever I can I try and work this reading into a funeral liturgy because it speaks of the Christian hope – not because it hopes for something now for the person who has died but that this passage affirms something which the Christian has already been inhabiting – the eternal life of God which transcends both life and death. And while death is now our reality they are still held in the life of God.

Nicodemus comes out of the darkness seeking Jesus, the true light. We hear Jesus conclude what he has to say to Nicodemus with these words: *But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.*' The whole of this brief scene

has become overshadowed by verse 3.16 but the play across the story is the movement from darkness to light.

As there is a movement from darkness to light in this scene so there is a movement in Nicodemus across the length of the Gospel. At the end of John's Gospel after the crucifixion we do meet Nicodemus again. It is he who comes bearing spices and ointments to embalm the body of Jesus. In Matthew and Mark and Luke it is the women bearing spices; in John it is Nicodemus. He steps out of league with those who prefer darkness recognising that in this one who has just been brutally murdered, lies the light of life.

We wonder if the church has anything to say to the world any longer. We had a lot to say, but nobody much was listening it seems; or decided after a while they were not interested in a bribe to live this life provisionally with the hope of some everlasting tick tock time after this. But we were selling a pup. We were not reading our texts with integrity and were promoting a hope that there was not a basis for in the scriptures we proclaimed to be so precious. Tragic really.

So what do we have to say? What might we have to offer? We need to get to grips ourselves – personally and collectively – with what this born-again life is about if we are to have anything to say. Our task is to realise for ourselves this eternal life that we have the opportunity to live now. To live fully and not timidly or provisionally. This eternal life is a life that, as Paul says, we see through a veil and yet we stake our lives and our everything on it.

This is the divine life which is infused with the strange possibility that water and the spirit brings; the life that the bread and the wine nourishes; it's the life which involves the seeing which sees beneath the surface of things mundane to see the presence of God; this is the life which knows what the light shining in the darkness looks like and makes time and space for its breaking in; this is the life whereby we can hold others who find themselves in the darkness and to be hopeful on their behalf that the dawn will come; this is the life which waits and is ready for the word to reveal the arrival of the bridegroom. And we live this life by surrounding ourselves with everyday symbols which suggest to us that God is close; through text; through poetry; through art; through items of furniture that speak to us of our common life in which we seek the presence of God: font, candle, table, word; through our speaking, through our silence, through our singing. We take these mundane things and activities and we honour them in life-giving rituals; we accord them the sacred possibility that eternal life may be revealed to us.

This is why set this space aside; this is why we gather in the way in which we do. And in our gathering we give ourselves over to these things, placing ourselves between the mundane and the eternal and anticipate that we may receive the light of life.

May it be so.

Andrew Boyle