

Lent Two: Being Born Again

We hear some well known readings this morning: the call of Abram, Paul's interpretation of what Abram's response meant – that it is by faith and not by works that we are reckoned righteous; and the instruction that we need to be born a second time.

And what might this all mean in terms of the Lenten journey? Well if we start with the overarching story of God's unfolding love for humanity then we remember that last week we focused on the mirror images of the story of our expulsion from the garden of innocence into the world of struggle and Jesus being driven into the wilderness as one of us and for us. And that it is through struggle that we become most truly ourselves.

This week we also have a pair of images that shed light on one another. We have the call of Abram, or the first account of the promise of God that through Abram a great nation would be created and that he would become a blessing to many. But he had to go from the land of his family and all that was familiar in order to be shown the land that God would give him.

And in the gospel story we have Nicodemus, a religious Jew – a Pharisee – who had to come to believe and trust things beyond the truth that his religion had taught him. Such as that one had to be born again – to go beyond all that he knew and had grown into as a responsible adult person of faith!

And if we think of how these images might relate to the journey of Jesus toward his destined suffering and redemptive death these stories also speak to the need to go beyond life as it had been lived up until then. For up until then Jesus had been living the life of a teacher and a healer. Now he is headed toward Jerusalem and whole different level of engagement with the human condition – no longer teaching and healing on the edges but into the heart of the city, the temple - centre of power, religion, humanity - there to become the focal point of opposing forces and to bear in his flesh our failure to reconcile such divisions.

To speak of second birth in preparation for his death is a beautiful clue as to how the early faith community came to understand the meaning of Jesus' death. Not so much a payment to the law as a being born in to a higher, more spiritual life – universal reconciling love - into which we too must also be born. Just as we need to sometimes go into the wilderness to struggle, so we too sometimes need to follow God's call into new lands and find ourselves born into a world different to the one we thought we inhabited.

Now I want to say a little bit about the language of second birth because it is a phrase which in some ways has been hijacked. In some circles there is much emphasis on the need to be born a second time and sadly there has come to be a formulaic understanding of what that means. There are those who are so confident that they know the formula by which God gifts the spirit to people that they can declare who is born again and who is not.

While there is a range of born again theologies they all seem to include the notion that body and spirit are quite irreconcilably separate and that our normal physical life, our first birth of water, makes us less than created in the image of God – that is body without spirit. I have to say I find this nonsense and nowhere supported in Scripture. Everything in the creation story in Genesis says that God saw all that was created, including us, and declared us good and in God's own image. No hint of incompleteness.

And surely if there were God wouldn't have waited millennium to announce the second stage?!

Many of the born again philosophies associate second birth with a particular form of conversion experience that includes a prayer of repentance, acceptance of Jesus as Lord and personal Saviour, and an identifiable moment of receiving the spirit sometimes including the experience of being slain or physically overwhelmed. While I have no difficulty with the idea that that is how some people experience a second birth I would argue strongly that there are no grounds for saying that is the only meaning. While Jesus insists that a birth of the spirit is essential to a fully alive faith he does not prescribe how it is to happen and there is no suggestion that it is connected with Nicodemus accepting that Jesus' forthcoming death as salvific or that him as Saviour. Rather Jesus emphasises how like the wind the spirit that is to be received is like, how unknowable and how unpredictable it is – how it will blow you this way and that. "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Some proponents of second birth philosophy insist that there are certain marks of people born again – usually to do with acceptance of their theology and their version of salvation. Once again this certainty about what being born again means is at complete odds with the uncertainty Jesus guarantees this experience will bring. Beware formulas about salvation – they are invariably the inventions of human's not divine dictates!

The image or metaphor of second birth, like so many in John's gospel, is a much more universal and open ended image than that. Indeed it beautifully anticipates Jesus' words to the Greeks just before his death when they ask what his death means and he says to them that unless a grain of wheat shall die it remains just one grain but that if it dies it becomes many, which is a wonderful image of life, death and new life or rebirth.

If wrestling in the wilderness, like Jesus, leads us into knowing ourselves more truly then giving ourselves over to following the nudging of the Spirit into new lands and new levels of life leads to blessing. Just how soon and where such blessings might bloom is what is less clearly known before we set out and where the faith of Abram is needed!

So during this Lent think back over what promptings you have followed in your life and where it has led you. And search your heart and your mind for what might be prompting you now. Where do you experience the refreshing and disturbing breeze of the Spirit's movement? What new and unexplored lands have the sense of promise and dislocation about them? Just as Lent is a time of letting old things prepare to die so to it is season of identifying what new things call us forward.

Discerning which is which is neither easy nor obvious. That is why it is a struggle and a journey, not merely a spring cleaning of what we are certain.

Even so, come Lord Jesus Christ.