

St Mark's, Niagara on the Lake
The Second Sunday in Lent, year 'A'
5 March 2023
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We just heard Jesus tell Nicodemus that he must be “born from above.” Other translations say “born again” which is the commonly-used version. How often have we heard someone talk about being “born again”? It’s a phrase beloved of a certain kind of Christian who, in William Sloane Coffin’s words, “Tend to have all the answers because they allow none of the questions.” They can even tell you where and when they were born again.

But if Jesus was talking about being born again, it wasn’t of the evangelical revival-meeting type. He was talking about a change of thinking which leads to a change of life. He was talking about re-examining old beliefs and assumptions. He was talking about going in a different direction. He was talking of conversion. The etymology of “convert” is about exactly that: being turned around or being turned in a different direction.

“How hold on, Rector,” you’re thinking, “Isn’t this what people who speak about being born again are talking about? They were living in a certain way, going down a certain path, making certain choices and then turned to Jesus and started anew? They were converted from one style of life to another?” Perhaps they were. But when Jesus spoke of being born again, he was speaking to a member of the religious establishment, a man who by all accounts *was* on the right path, lived the right way, and made the right choices.

Except—our version says “born from above,” not “born again.” Most scholars agree that “born from above” is a more accurate translation of the Greek. The difference is subtle, but important. It seems to me that to speak of being “born again,” is to speak of one more experience to be claimed and recounted, something which gives a person status. “Have you been born again?” is a question asked by people who feel spiritually superior. But to “be born from above” is a different experience altogether. To be born from above is to have felt the quickening of the spirit within, to have the dead person within animated, even to become a fundamentally different person.

So Jesus is talking to Nicodemus about, among other things, recalibrating long-held religious views. These days we’d talk about stepping outside the box. We’re told that Nicodemus goes to Jesus by night and the obvious reason he does so is because he didn’t want to be seen. After all, he was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. He sat on the Sanhedrin, that assembly of both secular and sacred power which was reserved for the very few, for those who were wealthy, accomplished, and connected. He was in every way esteemed and important. And yet here he is talking to this rabbi with less-than-orthodox ideas. No wonder he came by night!

But I wonder if he went at night for another reason. This man who seemingly had it all together, who had influence and status and respect, didn't have peace. He was troubled in his own soul and in his turmoil he went to Jesus looking for the answers to the ultimate questions. Nicodemus not only wants to go in a different direction, he wants to be a different person. Or at least he wants to be his authentic self. Status and accomplishment and esteem won't get him through the dark night of the soul. Only this unusual—and unusually appealing—teacher who he's had his eye on for some time can do that.

You and I know the feeling. We're not unlike Nicodemus. We know how the questions, the doubts, the anxieties which we keep at bay during the day have a way of surfacing at night when there's nothing else to distract us. Despite appearances, we're not at peace with ourselves being assaulted by night by the mercurial waves of doubt and fear and questioning. So long as we're busy and consumed with one important venture or another, so long as others seek our opinions and expertise, so long as we operate within the hypnotizing Klieg lights of the world, we're at peace. But in those dark times of doubt, fear, and questioning we see the reality of ourselves—the reality of who we really are—and this knowledge unsettles us.

And this is what makes us seek out again the One we've long kept our eye on, the One we know can convert us. Our spiritual selves are forged in these encounters in the dark as we begin to learn what it is to be truly born from above—which isn't about making a public profession of faith. Nor is it about remembering the hour when we let Christ into our lives—as if this is another event among many to be diarized. It's about dying to the old and rising to the new, which is to say it is about staring into the dark and differentiating between who we wish to be and who we really are. It's about seeing beyond the inauthentic self to the true self. It's about responding to the voice of God which whispers persistently beneath the clamour of the world's siren song and our own internal dialogues. It's akin to coming out by which we show the world that we are not the people we have been mistaken for, who we have mistaken ourselves to be. To be born from above is to be enabled to step out of the shadows to be seen for who and whose we really are.

And here's where things get interesting. You and I—the Church—are experiencing a dark night of the soul. It's been going on for a while, but the darkness is becoming ever deeper. The power and prestige we've claimed for ourselves are being seen for what they are: threadbare and coercive. Our local communities are beset with ennui, and exhaustion, riven with strife and struggling to survive. We're going the wrong way—and we all know it. So what's to be done?

Is it not, in this dark time, to turn around and embrace the One who is lifted high above us on the tree of Calvary in an example of how giving it all up is the way to gain it all? Is that not the Lenten journey in a nutshell? We say we're following Jesus yet we also expect to escape his fate, namely death. But if we want to share his resurrection life, we *can't* escape it. This is the great truth we must be converted to.

As she awaited execution in prison, Mary Queen of Scots embroidered on her cloth of state: "In my end is my beginning." Or, as two stanzas in a hymn by Erik Routley say:

*See how its branches reach to us in welcome;
hear what the voice says, "Come to me, ye weary!
Give me your sickness, give me all your sorrow.
I will give blessing."*

*This is my ending; this my resurrection;
into your hands, Lord, I commit my spirit.
This have I searched for; now I can possess it.
This ground is holy!*