

Born of the Spirit...

... man-made religion vs spirit-inspired faith

The sermon given at the Parish Communion Service by the Vicar, the Revd. Canon Jonathan Baker, on 8^h March 2020, in Beverley Minster.

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

There was once a woman who was walking along a cliff top path when a sudden gust of wind blew her over the edge. Clutching out at anything as she fell, she caught hold of a small sapling growing out of the face of the cliff. And there she hung with nothing but empty space below and the stem of the sapling slowly bending beneath her weight. In desperation, she called out, "God ... if there is a God ... save me!" And much to her amazement, she heard a voice answering. It said, "My child, I love you and do not wish you to come to any harm. What you must do is simple: just let go of the sapling, and as you fall, I shall send an angel to catch you lest you strike your foot against a stone." So after a thoughtful pause, the woman looked up to heaven and called out, "Is there anyone else I can speak to?"

It's a lovely story which speaks both of the simplicity of faith, but also the challenge.

Many people make faith rather too complicated, or try to turn it into something it isn't: for some, faith becomes an intellectual acceptance of certain doctrines or statements about God, and for such folk, faith is part of a search for truth involving our reason and clear thinking; for others, faith is about being part of the church, being baptised and receiving the Eucharist and being in the planned giving scheme or on the coffee rota -it's about having a part to play in a community of faith; for still others, faith is about how you behave, following the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount and working out the difference between right and wrong in the choices we make in daily life.

In our gospel reading, Nicodemus the Pharisee would have been familiar with all three of these different aspects of faith: Nicodemus can lead a Bible study and talk about theology and he can probably smell a heretical opinion at 500 paces; he knows all about faith as an intellectual game; he's very much part of a faith community; Nicodemus is probably a former church warden; he's on the PCC; he's a

sideman; and he's proud of his synagogue; Nicodemus knows all about right and wrong. And keeping the rules; his religion will be more organised than most.

But Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, not just literally during the hours of darkness, but metaphorically as well, because he's full of doubts and questions. He's attracted to Jesus, but he can't say why and he's not sure how he should be responding.

I don't know whether you can identify at all with Nicodemus, but I think our churches are full of people a little bit like him: people whose faith might be intellectual; or a matter of belonging to the club; or about trying to do the right thing; but who are still, when it comes down to it, a little bit confused; who are seeking Jesus, as it were, by night, not quite understanding what they're doing; not seeing clearly, and so blundering about and perhaps bumping into each other; people who are still hanging on to the sapling, growing out of the face of the cliff, and who haven't yet discovered that they need to let go. You might have thought that Jesus would welcome Nicodemus - here's this religious leader, a teacher of Israel, coming to Jesus and wanting to understand him. And you might have thought this is the sort of response Jesus might have been looking for. But instead, Jesus says, "Truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Jesus, it seems, is looking for evidence of a 'spiritual birth', of a new life with its source not in this world. He seems to be dividing humanity into two kinds: those who are spiritually alive and those who aren't; "What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the spirit, his spirit," he says. It seems very stark, black and white.

And it must have been quite unnerving for Nicodemus, who's asking Jesus all these questions that show he doesn't quite 'get it', despite all his religious credentials. And I think what we're seeing in this passage is Jesus very skilfully making it clear that there is a difference between 'man-made' religion on the one hand, and 'spirit-inspired' faith on the other. 'Man-made' religion is when the human ego stays in control, and God is co-opted into serving our needs. There was quite a nice example of this in this week's Lent Course: if you saw it from the BBC series 'Broken', there was a little scene when a group of teachers at the Roman Catholic Church School were discussing arrangements for the Children's First Communion. But when the priest very gently expresses reservations about parents getting into debt because

they feel have to buy their daughters a special dress and lay on a special party, and he suggests very gently that the children might just wear school uniform instead, that suggestion provokes a walkout from the volunteer who had been organising it - and there was a sense that for that person, being in control was more important than including all the children.

And so often in church life, the human ego turns out to be more important than serving God. We see it over and over: wherever you see folk taking offence where none was intended; or getting upset, if their role is challenged; or refusing to share power with someone else; or getting upset because there's a last minute change of plan - there is evidence that the underlying motive is human-centered religion rather than spirit-inspired faith.

What faith does is take us out of ourselves so that all our attention is given to Jesus, and the example of faith, which Jesus gives in the passage, is this strange story of Moses and the bronze serpent. In this story in the Old Testament, the Israelites in the wilderness were grumbling against God, who rather unkindly sent poisonous snakes to punish them. And when Moses prayed for the people, he was told to make a bronze serpent and hang it on a pole and tell the people simply to look at it. And that's all. If they only looked at the bronze serpent on the pole, they would be saved from the real serpents all around them. And so their attention shifted away from themselves and their predicament, and on to the bronze serpent. And they looked with urgency because their lives depended upon it - that was showing faith. And Jesus compares himself to the bronze serpent: just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, he says, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

So it seems Christian faith is when we turn our attention away from ourselves and focus instead on the cross of Christ where Jesus was lifted up. Turning our attention away from ourselves is the bit where we let go of the sapling we are otherwise desperately clinging on to in our own strength. So Christian faith isn't just another lifestyle choice - it's a total commitment arising from a sense of urgency and a sense of utter helplessness in which we look towards Christ in order to place our lives in his hands - I give him my life so that his life might become mine: "For God so loved the

world that he gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but may have eternal life."

The great reformer, Martin Luther once said that, "Faith is a free surrender and a joyous wager on the unseen, untried and unknown goodness of God." So no wonder it's a bit scary; no wonder many people prefer to substitute human-centered religion in place of real saving-faith in Jesus. It takes quite a lot of courage to let go of that sapling. But eventually, Nicodemus did it, and by the end of John's gospel, it's clear he had made a choice and he was no longer seeking Jesus in darkness.

But I wonder this morning, what about you? What keeps you coming to church? Is it the power and the glory of this place and all the things that reinforce your sense of having life under control? Or is it the desire to throw yourself afresh into the hands of the living loving God, who gave his life for you, so that you might give your life to him.

If you've never done it before, maybe this morning is the time to discover a real Christian faith, and to make that 'free surrender and joyous wager on the unseen, untried and unknown goodness of God.'

Reading Texts

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

¹ What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness." ⁴ Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. ⁵ But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.

¹³ For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith. ¹⁴ If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void. ¹⁵ For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation. ¹⁶ For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, ¹⁷ as it is written, "I have made you the father of many nations")—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

John 3:1-17

¹ Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." ³ Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." ⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" ⁵ Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above.'" ⁸ 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." ⁹ Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" ¹⁰

Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? ¹¹ "Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷ "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.