

Born into a new Kingdom

Psalm 72:1-7, John 3:1-8

24 November 2019

“I have tried and tried, but this whole God-thing is just too big for me” - said a friend of mine recently and she continued - “I feel like giving up and just do the best I can without it”. I have known her long enough and well enough to agree with her about her trying. Through her family she has inherited some religious practices and over the years she has also developed her own spirituality. Having a keen intellect and a scientific education however made her question the received wisdom of her upbringing. Then after some truly traumatic experiences in her adult life, - in spite of her conscientious daily devotions - her faith got a real battering and she has now reached the stage when the old certainties are not making sense anymore and in fact, have all but disappeared.

Well, the Biblical figure of Nicodemus is not quite there yet, but the fact - that, a man in his position as a leading Pharisee, would seek out Jesus, the controversial Galilean teacher – must mean that he has some dissatisfaction, some unanswered questions in his religious life. Even if he is only there as a secret representative of the Jewish Council to collect evidence about Jesus, he brings with him the un-acknowledged fear and unease of that whole body, whose religious attitudes are being challenged by Jesus.

As the discussion develops between Jesus and this symbol of the Jewish establishment, it becomes clear that Jesus is not pulling his punches. Nicodemus begins with a reference to his own knowledge of God and a compliment to Jesus. But even before he could bring himself to actually asking his question, Jesus cuts across the social niceties and directly addresses the inner anxiety that lies behind the polite approach. As if he were saying: Nicodemus, thus far your identity was a person with the God-knowledge, that gave you a standing and a status among your folks, yet you could never be quite sure if that was enough. There is a much larger, more spacious circle of belonging, for which the shorthand is *the kingdom of God*.

Then he explains that this realm, - which, rather than being a place, or a time after death, *is*, in fact, a new kind of existence, with new kind of identity markers. Entering it will make such a difference

that it can only be described as a new birth. Now, when we think of birth in the ordinary sense, we think of the the joy with which a new life is welcomed into this world. Year after year we celebrate the day and birthdays are occasions for family gatherings and thanksgiving. I believe, this weekend Olga and her family were celebrating a significant Birthday. So congratulations to Olga and to anybody else who is celebrating their birthday around this time and we wish you all God’s blessing on your future years. When Jesus talks of a new birth he is not negating this, our human birth. Using the phrase being *born from water*, he affirms our bodily being, which has started with the breaking of the waters of childbirth. But he adds that this new birth is also *from the spirit*, indicating the glorious enhancement and re-calibration of our human existence as we enter the Kingdom of God.

Introducing the Spirit into the equation points to the risks involved in this new birth. Nicodemus would have to learn to leave behind the *‘we know how God works’* attitude and enter into the ‘uncertainties’ of a Spirit-led life. The wind, that blows where it wills, is another understanding of the Hebrew word meaning Spirit. So, to put our life on that wind requires an awful lot of trust. Like human birth it is not under our control. Only one thing is certain about it, which is, that like human birth it will lead us from our own personal, comfortable little cocoon into the world of others, with whom we will now have to share our existence. Translating the picture into the spiritual experience described by Jesus, means that this birth entails a movement from the individual to the communal understanding of the life of faith. Perhaps my friend’s disenchantment with God stems from the fact that she is trying to do it all alone without the support of a community. Because whatever else our understanding of a Kingdom may be, it cannot be imagined without the group of people who belong to it and share their allegiance to its Ruler. So, entering into it will bring about a shared identity with the rest of its members.

Then, how does that plan out in our current day Western societies, where excessive individualism is the order of the day? So much so, that even the Church is not immune to it. We know that in some parts of the Christian community the measure of ‘having arrived’ is to have a one-to-one, personal relationship with Jesus. What’s more, you can now buy a Personalised Bible, in which some 7000 personal pronouns are replaced by your own Christian name. If your name is Paul, for example, you can read the 23rd Psalm

addressing you as *The Lord is Paul's Shepherd, Paul shall not want.*
Or Psalm 8 affirming that

*You have made Paul a little lower than God,
And crowned Paul with glory and honour.
You make Paul a ruler over the works of your hands.
You have put all things under Paul's feet.*

Understandably, there are a lot of approving comments about this Bible on the internet. We all need to know that we matter to God as individuals and we do. And there is an important role our personal devotions and prayers play in our Christian life. But to understand our faith in a purely personal way robs it of its historical aspect, of its much wider dimensions and in the final resort, it is not really Biblical.

The thought world of the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament is based on God's relationship with a particular group of people, Israel, through whom all the nations would be blessed. And the story continues in the New Testament. Jesus, although he felt a very strong personal connection to God, and a unique calling from God, yet he was never a loner. The first thing he did was, he chose a group of people to share in his mission and his central message was about the coming Kingdom, which he also understood in terms of people together living in God's way.

So, if our imaginary Christian, Paul reads his Personalised Bible and comes across the message '*Paul is the light of the world*', (*Matthew 5: 14*) and is tempted to feel that it is about him, and only about him, because he is being personally addressed, perhaps he should read on as the next sentence elaborating on the picture is: '*A town that stands on a hill cannot be hidden*'. It is, at least, a town-ful of people, who are charged with the task of lighting up the neighbourhood. How could Paul do it on his own?

We could, of course, blame the English language for the misunderstanding, because it does not make a distinction between the second person singular and the second person plural. So it leaves it up to the reader, or the hearer of the text to decide whether one person on their own or a whole group is being addressed. Be that as it may, the new birth Nicodemus is called into, and its

association with the free-flowing Spirit means an invitation into the Kingdom, God's larger community.

We have already expressed our delight over our new members' decision to join our community here at AFC. They have re-affirmed their faith in God and showed their willingness to share the worship and service of this small corner of the Kingdom. How can we respond knowing that with them we may now be able to do, what we could not do without them?

Our church Book Reading Group has just finished their latest book by Paula Gooder, Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral, entitled *Phoebe*. As the title indicates it is an imaginative retelling of the story of Phoebe, a biblical character briefly mentioned in Paul's letter to the Romans. She was a fellow worker with Paul in the Corinthian church and she was entrusted to deliver Paul's letter to the church at Rome. There is a scene in the book when a Jewish Christian, Herodion pours his heart out to the members of the church and bemoans the fact that having lost his only brother over his conversion to Christianity, he was now quite alone in the world. The answer from the church was: *Not quite alone, Herodion. You may not have chosen us, but we are your new family now. We love you and you belong to us.*

Although, the circumstances are quite different, yet we could not say it more eloquently to Heather and Olga: we are your new family now. We love you and you belong to us. So, as we continue on this wind-swept, Spirit-led journey together, may we all joyfully look to Jesus, the King of our hearts, 'the pioneer and perfecter of our faith'. Let it be so.

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