

## 26<sup>th</sup> May 2024 – Trinity Sunday: John 3:1-17 ‘For God so loved the world’

Being present for the birth of my children remains one of the great experiences of my life. To witness new life coming into the world is something incredibly special. To know that, nine months previously, this amazing human being was just a single egg invisible to the naked eye is nothing short of miraculous. And not only that, this tiny bundle of flesh has a unique personality and set of gifts. It's mind-boggling. I still remember the births of both my children vividly.

The phrase ‘born again’, which famously traces back to this passage, remains one of the foundational principles of faith. It has been damaged by misuse and corrupted by parodies: when you hear the phrase you might think of a preacher in sharp suit yelling from stage ‘You must be born again’ – and maybe that puts us off. But, whatever we think about the style, let's not miss the substance: there is no other way – that is the message of the New Testament – in fact it's the message of Jesus himself. Those words are not a later Christian summary of the gospel, **it's what Jesus himself says at the heart of this famous passage, to Nicodemus: ‘You must be born again.’**

It answers that most fundamental of questions: how do we truly know God? What Jesus means is that we don't just take up a new path, but we become a new person – in spiritual terms, we are born again. Jesus is the way and the truth, yes – but he's also the life, the one who makes all things new. He calls *all* of us just like he calls Nicodemus: ‘You must be born again.’

The idea that our spiritual lives can be re-created seems too good to be true. Nicodemus was plainly confused – ‘surely we can't re-enter our mother's womb’?! We might feel like Nicodemus: it makes no sense to us. We know you can't go back into the womb, but why does Jesus insist that what he is saying is true? How can we explain it? We too may reflect on the events that have scarred our souls: the hidden thoughts and prejudices that shame us, the good things we didn't do, the love that seems to run out so quickly – and wonder how such a fresh start could be possible.

But, as Jesus reminded his disciples elsewhere, what is impossible for human beings is possible for God – with God, all things are possible (Mark 10:27). *Jesus came to give us all the miracle of new birth.* A slate wiped clean, scarred souls healed, the abiding presence of God to revive our life's journey. We may not have the dramatic ‘darkness to light’ testimony that some have, but our new birth is no less true or real.

So if the way to salvation is to be born again, and only God can actually make that happen since we can't birth ourselves, then how does He do it? This is where we encounter the Trinity. Today is Trinity Sunday, a moment in the year when we celebrate our understanding that God is 3-in-1 – one being with three natures: Father, Son and Spirit.

At one level this understanding of God will always remain a mystery, something too big to get our limited human minds around. But on another level, it also makes intuitive sense: **it gives us a deep and rich view of the Almighty. We want, we need a three-dimensional God for our real lives, our three-dimensional world.** And the Trinity is not some sort of neat theological soundbite, there's no one verse or passage in the bible which sets out ‘the doctrine of the Trinity’. But, as the early Christians reflected deeply on the nature of God, the wisdom of Scripture and their lived experience as followers of Jesus, they came to understand the Trinity as a reality. And this is one of those passages that helped them to understand it, because here we see the three natures of God working together for the salvation of our world.

Let's start with **the love of the Father**: (v16) ‘For God so loved the world...’ So begins the most famous verse of scripture. And whilst it's true that Jesus doesn't use the parental name, it's clear that it is the Father Jesus is describing here: God in heaven.

In this great statement, Jesus sets out God the Father's fundamental orientation towards the world. His judgement is just, but his heart is always for mercy. *His desire is to save, not to destroy.* He knows that all of us deserve condemnation; we've all fallen short, and all played our part, however big or small in the corruption of the world. And yet... and yet – his heart is inclined to forgive, to show mercy: (v17) 'For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.'

So, in Christ he offers us that hope, that future, that salvation: (v16) 'For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son.' So, alongside the love of the Father we also see **the gift of the Son**. The Son who comes to earth, walks among us, and is then, as Jesus says, 'lifted up' for our salvation: **God in history**. He draws on a story from Numbers 21, when Moses was instructed to put a bronze snake on a pole, and all who looked on it were saved from death. Jesus tells us that he has the same mission as the snake: he must be lifted up, to save us from death.

What is so extraordinary about this image is that it binds together two things that seem impossible to put together. Jesus was lifted up on a cross, despised and rejected, seemingly disgraced. And yet this act of extraordinary sacrifice becomes our salvation. **In the world's eyes, it was disgrace – in God's eyes, it was glory**, 'lifted up' for the healing of the world. *The ultimate act of humility becoming the act of greatest glory and exaltation.* Only God could have come up with an idea like that, couldn't he? It turns all our human ways of thinking about glory upside-down. And indeed it births a new understanding of love, a new word in fact: *agape* – love as selfless sacrifice.

But if we stopped there, we would still fall short of the full meaning of being born again. Sadly, the caricatures often do stop there. But Jesus wants Nicodemus to understand that God's rescue plan is offering not just salvation, but new, abundant life. And this is where we need the third person of the Trinity: alongside the love of the Father and the gift of the Son, we need **the life of the Spirit**.

Jesus is very clear that **this state of being 'born again' is to be born of the Spirit (vv5-6)**. And he describes the work of the Spirit as being like a wind. You may not be able to see it – but you can always see its effects. We need this wind; we don't often like it – whether for what it does to our hair or our leaf blowers – but, say, for our trees to survive, we need it: in Autumn to detach those dead leaves, forming mulch (and fuel) for the winter; and in Spring to blow the pollen and seeds. It might be unpredictable – 'the wind blows where it pleases' – but at its heart, the wind brings life.

Pentecost last week reminded us that **this wind of the Spirit is now poured out on every follower of Jesus: God in our hearts**. For the first disciples, the promise of Jesus to be born of the Spirit happened then – but for us, living after Pentecost, it happens when we come to Jesus and offer our lives to him: 'the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, all whom the Lord will call.'. **The love of the Father sends the gift of the Son who releases the life of the Spirit. God in heaven, God in history, God in our hearts.** This is our good news, this is what being born again really means, and this is why we need the Trinity – unless we had all three natures of God, the plan doesn't work. Without the love of the Father there is no hope. Without the gift of the Son there is no rescue. Without the life of the Spirit there is no renewal.

And this promise is still available to all who receive it. Nicodemus was strangely drawn to Jesus, but scared – he came at night so no-one would see. Jesus received him anyway. He receives all who come: however falteringly, wonderingly, doubtfully. He can deal with your doubts and dreams, your fears and your failures: 'whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.' Maybe today is the day to receive that promise: perhaps for the first time or the hundredth, it doesn't matter. The wind blows where it pleases: will you receive the love of the Father, the gift of the Son and the life of the Spirit today? Amen.