

Born from Above

SERMON · Grace, Sin and Transformation · 31 July 2016 (the Sacrament of Baptism, the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost)

John 3:1-8

John 3:5-7 (quoted)

Romans 8:9 (quoted)

Titus 3:5

Hebrews 6:4-6 (quoted)

Philippians 3:12 (quoted)

Ephesians 1:17-18 (quoted)

Today we will meditate on the theme ‘Born from Above’, an expression derived from an intriguing discourse Jesus gave to Nicodemus, read to us from John 3:1-8. This expression has been debated by theologians, Bible scholars, and Church leaders for centuries; the disagreement lies in the translation of the Greek word *anōthen*, which carries two distinct meanings, ‘born again’ and ‘born from above’. English has no single word that carries the same double meaning. While some argue that it means ‘born again’, others translate it as ‘born from above’; ask me, and I would say both expressions need to be understood in their context, but mean the same thing, since Jesus would never have expounded two conflicting ideas. It is necessary, nonetheless, that we understand the implications of both interpretations.

Let us first briefly look at the narrative. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a scholar in his own right; he was respected in society, and was a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest Jewish council. We find mention of him in three places in the Gospel: first, when he met Jesus incognito by night; second, during the trial of Jesus (John 7:50-51); and finally, when Nicodemus appears after the Crucifixion of Jesus to provide the customary embalming spices, in preparing His body for burial (John 19:39-42). During his conversation with Jesus, Nicodemus explores the notion of being literally born again from his mother's womb; most theologians agree that Nicodemus knew Jesus was not speaking of a literal rebirth. I see Nicodemus as a symbol of the inquirer, a person searching for the truth about God and the ways of God, already convinced that Jesus was an authentic voice from God, for otherwise Jesus would not have been able to perform the signs and miracles that He did.

The response of Jesus is the key to the right interpretation. He said: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again” (John 3:5-7). Water represents cleansing, symbolically used in Baptism; the Spirit is the indwelling Holy Spirit, received when one accepts Jesus.

The Son of Man has been lifted up on the Cross, so that whosoever believes in Him may be born from above, and so possess eternal life. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of Jesus; unless we are born from above, born spiritually, we cannot enter the kingdom of heaven, let alone see it come. Entering the kingdom of Jesus, possessing salvation, coming into His presence, and standing eternally justified before Him, is not something that can be gained by human effort or ingenuity; this requires a conversion of one's inner being. It requires being born from above, washed anew by the Spirit of God. Such a dynamic life-change demands a total renewal of the soul; our only hope lies in the hands of Jesus. Only the Spirit of God can renew our being; only He can give eternal life as a free gift. We apply that grace to ourselves by trusting Christ; it is when we reach out to Him as the only ground of our eternal security that we receive, as a gift of God, salvation. That is what is meant by being 'born from above'. The question today is: where does each one of us stand at present?

Every Christian should know that the basis of this salvation, freely offered in Christ, is found in His sacrificial death on the Cross; He rose again on our behalf. In the cross of Jesus, we too must die, and be raised with Him; we then appropriate His grace through the instrument of faith. This is the very essence of Christian belief. The theology encapsulated in our passage for today drives us to recognise the essential need for personal conversion: it is a great work of God's power, changing the human heart and infusing life into our dead spirits.

In 1967, the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Junior, told Americans much the same thing, in his address 'Where Do We Go from Here?', delivered to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in Atlanta. A nation that had kept people enslaved for two hundred and forty-four years, and called it normal, even God-ordained, and that now wages endless war across the globe, makes war an economic necessity, exploits the poor, consigns its children to environmental danger, and fills every moment with the white noise of the media, King said, is a nation that needs to be born again: 'America, you must be born again!' It seems to me that the time has come, taking this same cue from King, for us to shout from the rooftops: 'India, you must be born again.'

Let me briefly take you through the dangers of taking a hardened position on the meaning of what Jesus said to Nicodemus. Admittedly, for some believers there must have been a life-changing experience that pointed to the need to accept Jesus as their personal Saviour; there are also many believers who came into Christ from another faith, having received the call in varying manners. For all such persons, it is truly a 'born again' experience. But there are many others who are born into Christian families, and brought up in Christian traditions; I am

one such person myself, and I am sure many present here are too. Many would wonder when and where such people encountered Jesus in their lives. Having known Jesus from childhood, such persons grow stronger in faith, and the process continues still; there may have been several events in our lives that have drawn us closer to Jesus. Here, I am advocating being born again and again, always with the help of the indwelling Holy Spirit, since the purification of our inner self cannot stop with one event.

The other extreme is the claim that only those who receive the Holy Spirit in some dramatic manner, and are able to manifest Him by speaking in tongues or prophesying, can rightly be considered born from above. When it comes to integrating Bible teaching and present-day spiritual experience in our lives and in our churches, I find that our typical Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, and Pentecostal teachings and terminology about the Holy Spirit are far too rigid to explain adequately the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

In the Bible, the ‘baptism of the Holy Spirit’ is another way of referring to the new birth and the indwelling Spirit, rather than a separate experience in itself; the Bible knows of no Christian life without the Holy Spirit. ‘Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his’ (Romans 8:9). It is the indwelling Holy Spirit that regenerates, or causes rebirth, in us (Titus 3:5). I believe that speaking in tongues can be an evidence, but not the evidence; the Holy Spirit manifests Himself in us in many ways.

In the Holy Spirit, we seek God with all our hearts, as an ongoing pursuit; our ability to understand the mysteries of God is never quite adequate to describe them. God deals with each of us differently; each of us is wired uniquely, physically, emotionally, and spiritually, with our own personal abilities and gifts given to us by Jesus, and none of us ever has exactly the same experience as another. God gives us what we have faith for, and sometimes beyond it. We not only need to be refilled with the Spirit; we need our capacity for the Holy Spirit within our hearts to expand. A heart full of this world and its cares, and of hidden sin, leaves very little space for the Holy Spirit; with our own efforts, helped by Him, we must continue to cleanse our hearts, so that we create more room for the Holy Spirit to work in us, and to manifest Himself through us. David prayed, in Psalm 51:10-11: ‘Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me. Cast me not away from thy presence; and take not thy holy spirit from me.’ This should be our prayer throughout our lives.

A caution here is that, having received the Holy Spirit, or having been born from above, one needs to persevere in that state throughout one's life; many slide back, and forfeit the grace of

Jesus. In Hebrews we read: ‘For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame’ (Hebrews 6:4-6).

In conclusion, I want to say that each one of us is entitled to our own personal theology, our own understanding of God and His ways, without being unduly influenced by the interpretations, translations, studies, commentaries, and sermons of others. For my own part, I want to know Christ, and the power of His death on the Cross, His Resurrection, and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in this life to whatever extent is humanly possible. I take for myself the words of Philippians 3:12: ‘Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.’

Dear friends, my prayer for you and for me is the same prayer that Paul prayed for the believers in Ephesus: ‘That the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him: the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that ye may know what is the hope of his calling, and what the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints’ (Ephesians 1:17-18). Amen.