

Sermon for Lent Two 20 March 2011, Rebecca Newland
John 3:1-17

Start from nowhere.

Aristotle said, "Man is a goal seeking animal. His life only has meaning if he is reaching out and searching for his goals". Christopher Hitchens said humans are meaning seekers as well but that doesn't mean there is any inherent meaning in the universe. We just need to get over it and get on with the advance of science and rationalism. Whether there is really something to find we are by nature seekers – seekers of adventure, seekers of asylum, seekers of happiness, wealth and health, seekers of love and friendship, seekers of peace and reconciliation, seekers of meaning. Well some of the things we seek are life-giving and enriching. Some of them end up being very disappointing. Human beings also seek God. Somewhere in us seems to be a drive that urges us to reclaim our lost home of Eden, the place where we are one with God and all of creation. This is what Lent is all about, doing whatever it takes to go home to God our true centre. Scientists have apparently now isolated a 'God' bit in our brain. As many have pointed out this does not prove anything about the existence or non-existence of God. However it does prove that we are wired for God, for seeking and experiencing the divine.

How we seek is an important question. Do we seek answers with openness and humility or do we seek with closed minds, prejudices and assumptions? Perhaps this type of seeking is simply to find support for what we already assume is true. Our motives, our state of mind can often be mixed and confused.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the nighttime. In John's gospel the darkness represents separation from God. Possibly Nicodemus comes at night because he is afraid of being seen as a follower of Christ. For Nicodemus the darkness is a safe place, a safe place to ponder the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven with one who appeared to know. So Nicodemus has the first quality of a disciple of Jesus – he is prepared to seek. However, like all seekers he also brought himself – all his baggage, agenda and assumptions. We find out that he is a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, a teacher in Israel. He is obviously a pretty important person with lots of learning and expertise.

In today's world he could be a Bishop or a top theologian or a well-known political leader. He comes to Jesus thinking that he has it all figured out - "I have seen your miracles, your signs and wonders, and I know that you are from God. I know who you are." But Jesus answers him, "No, there is more than that". Well he actually says, "*no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above*".

You can just imagine Nicodemus's confusion. He thinks he has it all worked out, that he has finally got the answers. But instead of applauding his ideas Jesus draws him into an amazing conversation. The whole dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus has great depth and is designed to bring us, the readers, to a deeper faith, beyond the obvious and what we think we know. John does this by an amazing use of words, words that when we translate them from the Greek lose their entire

nuance. I'll pick just one of the five obvious ones to illustrate this technique.

In verse 3, Jesus says, “*Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above*”. That’s in the NRSV translation. The NIV translation reads, “*I tell you the truth, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again*”. In the Jerusalem bible it is also ‘born from above and in the King James version it is the other one, born again. So which one is right? Born from above or born again? Well they both are. The Greek word “*anōthen*”, which the NRSV translates as born from above also means born again and it means both those things at one and the same time. This is critical to get into our heads. It means both things at the same time. There is no equivalent English or indeed Aramaic word that conveys that same meaning. So translators pick one or the other **but** as soon as they do they are only giving the reader 50% of the meaning. I think it is no mistake that John uses this complex word. What John asks the reader to do is to hold together the delicate balance of these two ideas – being born from above and being born again, being born from a particular place, above, and being born in time, again.

After stretching his mind with the notion of ‘*anōthen*’, Jesus then asks even more of Nicodemus with he says that no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless they are born of water and Spirit. The Greek word for Spirit is ‘*pneuma*’ and it too has a dual meaning – it means both Spirit and wind or breath. Jesus is telling Nicodemus a birth story – a story of spiritual renewal. He is telling Nicodemus that being a disciple, being part of and working towards the Kingdom of God is a spiritual reality and as such is a powerful life-giving mystery that we do not control or own.

Nicodemus of course is unable to do the delicate balancing act of thinking in this way.

He is unable to enter into the mystery of Jesus words.

But something in Nicodemus compels him to keep seeking. In the midst of his confusion he wants to find the answer, he wants to get closer to God. So he asks, “How are these things possible?” “How can this be?” Like all literalists Nicodemus wants to understand things as fully as possible. He thinks that if he just get more piece of information and slot it into the case he is building he will be certain and sure.

He will have enough facts to move forward. Again he is on the wrong foot. Jesus has already told him - this is not about what you do, the wind blows wherever it pleases.

The Spirit moves in unpredictable ways.

Mainline Protestantism has always been a little uncomfortable and wary about taking the Holy Spirit too seriously. The Holy Spirit is much more about an experiential faith and less about tradition and reason. It is about newness, power and movement and those of us who like things to stay the way they are can be

nervous. This is probably a good thing on one level. There are quite a few nutty things that go on under the cover of "it was the Holy Spirit that moved me or told me". However, our reticence can short change us and stifle the possibilities that God is sending our way.

In this passage Jesus puts the Spirit at the centre of the religious life. Jesus says, You do not give birth to yourself. You cannot give birth to yourself. God is the one who breathes life into you and gives you birth from above, birth into eternal life.

Eternal life in this passage is not about a heavenly existence with accompanying choirs of angels for an endless eternity. It is life, now and in the future, lived in the unending presence of God, the ultimate goal of all religious and spiritual seekers.

And this, life is presented as a spiritual gift, the gift of God's love in Jesus Christ, in his death and resurrection. If one receives the gift, one receives eternal life, because ones life is reshaped and redefined by this gift. We do not have to do anything. We only have to accept the gift. This is one of the greatest, if not the greatest stumbling blocks in the Christian life. We want it to be hard and complicated and involve effort on our part. We want to earn this eternal life. We want to control it. We want it to be about how good we are when it is only ever about how good God is.

It seems to me that we are not so different from Nicodemus. We have our preconceived ideas about God and the way the whole religious life thing works and we skim across the surface of our relationship with God. Like Nicodemus we somehow think we have to do a whole lot of things to get close to God and unwittingly we put so many things in the way of the Spirit.

Perhaps we need to start from nothing. The Zen teacher Suzuki Roshi calls this approach 'beginners mind'. Beginners mind implies that we enter the presence of mystery and bow down, because we are in awe of our own ignorance and our own inability to ever get things right. We let ourselves adjust to the fact that we will never be perfect 'pray-ers', or accomplished Holy men and women. We acknowledge that our knowing is only every partial and bereft of the full truth.

We will always be at square one. 'Not knowing' and 'knowing nothing' is a fine way to approach any relationship – with God, with our partners, wives and husbands, with our friends – even after thirty years. Imagine if we let go of all we think we know about our partners? When I know nothing and am willing to embrace that, I am soft, I can be directed and helped, I can be loved, I can be moved by the breath of God. It seems to me that Jesus very skillfully got Nicodemus to a place where he could be open to the Spirit and therefore open to a new way of life and thought.

When Nicodemus let go of what he thought he knew, and began to allow himself to be born of the wind, things changed for him. In the chapters that follow, we read that Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus in the darkness of night, later publicly, spoke up for Jesus. Then after Jesus' death on the cross when all the

disciples had fled, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus came forward to prepare Jesus' body for burial. Nicodemus was no longer intimidated or afraid. He came to realize that he was born from above not by his own doing but by the love of God who birthed him anew and gave him a life of boldness.

What would it mean for us to understand that we are born of the Spirit? What if we were to stop telling God what we know? What if we did not hold back but allowed the wind to take us to places not on our agenda or our prayer list? Can we allow ourselves to be vulnerable to the untamed wind of God? Can we listen for what we have been unwilling to hear? Can we see in one another not something to critique or judge but rather the image of the God who has given us birth? Can we let go of knowing and needing to know the answers and allow God's love to bring us into eternal life with him? I wonder can we? Let us pray...