
Born Again

John 3.1-17

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on February 17, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

My father was the kind of person who, if he found something funny, would find the same thing funnier the second time, and even funnier each time he repeated the joke. One of my happiest memories of our life together is late in the evening when I had a French test the next morning. He would help me practice my French verb conjugations, especially the irregular ones. There were two verb forms he tested me on repeatedly and they never ceased to tickle him because he couldn't imagine when anyone would ever be in a position to use them. Of course I remember them to this day. One was the perfect tense of the verb to die – *j'ai mouru* – "I have died." The other was the future tense of the verb to be born – *je naîtrai* – "I will be born."

I will be born. Fancy being in a position to say that. It's an undoubted fact that far and away the most stressful experience any one of us has in our lives occurs over the minutes or hours or even days that follow our mothers' waters breaking. Putting it in simple terms, it's mighty cozy in the womb, it ain't easy getting out, and your skull gets bashed about so much that its bones have to remain soft until after the short but momentous journey is all over. It's not surprising most babies come out screaming their head off and wanting their money back. In fact if a working definition of freedom would be that you're never made to do anything you haven't agreed to do and you get the maximum physical and emotional comfort level the maximum amount of the time, then being born rightly qualifies as the worst experience of our lives. It's possible some of us never get over it.

We've gathered this morning around a text in which Jesus says to a leading scholar and teacher of his day, "You can't see the kingdom of God unless you are born again." On the face of it, it's hard to see how that can be good news. As we've just been recalling, being born is a complete nightmare – no light, confined spaces, pain, coercion, the unknown – it's come straight out of a horror movie. And Jesus is saying we've got to do it all over again. If that's the good news, what, we may ask, is the bad news? Nicodemus, however, is not a man especially in touch with his feelings. He's not thinking about the psychology, he's thinking about the biology and the physics. "But grown-ups are too big to fit back in." he says. "How does it work? Could you just draw that for me? I think even the gynecologists at Duke are going to struggle to pull this one off." "Oh no," says Jesus. "It's not just a trick of getting a big clumsy genie back into a little tiny bottle; this is about a wholesale transformation – body, mind and spirit. It's going to make the first birth look like a picnic." Nicodemus then turns into a cartoon character whose eyes expand and rotate like the dials of a slot machine.

The most curious thing about this whole exchange is that a verse of John's gospel that contains enormous mystery, wonder and, to say the least, lack of clarity has become arguably the single most important verse in the American church. I say that because around 40% of Americans describe themselves as born-again Christians. The phrase "born again" makes a lot of people, Christian and non-Christian alike, feel uncomfortable, I think for a number of reasons.

(1) In the first place it's become associated in the last 30 years with a particular political agenda and a set of conservative stances on controversial social issues such as abortion and gay marriage. It's hard to believe these issues were at the front of Jesus' mind when he struck up a conversation with Nicodemus, but such issues certainly seem to be in the minds of those who see being born again as becoming a potential member of a political block vote. My sense is that this view is at best a caricature, and most of those among us who describe themselves as born again have a somewhat broader perspective on social issues. But there's no doubt it's a caricature with a wide circulation.

(2) In the second place the term "born again" seems to be used to create a hierarchy among Christians. In certain circles it's not considered good enough to believe in Christ, to be actively involved in the Church, to be seeking to grow in faith and to practice discipleship by searching out and standing among the people and issues closest to God's heart – all these are looked down upon unless one can narrate a conversion experience that fulfils the description "born again." The result is that many Christians much of the time feel pretty second-rate because they know faith is a matter of God's grace and can't be

manufactured and so they can't make themselves have a dramatic experience while God seems to have no interest in giving them one. Again this is an exaggerated picture, but there's enough truth in it to shape many Christians' lives significantly.

(3) In the third place the experience of being born again seems to displace everything else that's important about Christianity. What matters is not who Jesus is or how Jesus lived, not how Christians relate to one another in the Church or to the neighbor or the stranger in the world. All that matters is *my* personal experience on a specific day in the past and *my* certainty that this experience gives me a passport to heaven when I die. In other words Christianity stops being about Jesus and the Church and the new world breaking in and instead becomes all about *me*. This describes a general tendency rather than a universal reality, but again there's enough in the tendency to attract a lot of reservations.

That's a brief summary of why the term "born again" is the elephant in the room whenever the Church gathers to read John chapter 3. This legacy is a terrible shame, not only because it tends to discredit some of the finest and most faithful Christians in this country and on this campus, but because I do believe the term "born again" could and perhaps should be integral to the whole Church's understanding of itself. Let me explain why.

In Plato's book *The Republic* he describes the experience of being in a deep cave, one that slopes downwards at an angle. Near the bottom of the cave are a group of people. The people are facing the back wall of the cave at its deepest point. Above and behind them, nearer the cave entrance, is a fire, which provides all the light in the cave. Between the people's backs and the fire is a puppeteer. The puppeteer moves around puppets depicting animals, plants and other things, and these shadow images are reflected on the back wall, which becomes like a cinema screen. This is the only reality the people in the cave know.

Now, suppose one of the people down in the cave were to get up – or to be picked up. Either way, suppose that person somehow made their way all the way up to the entrance of the cave. Three things would almost immediately happen to them. First of all they'd be practically blinded by the overwhelming light, having always previously lived with next to no light at all. Second they'd be overwhelmed to discover that the reality of the world outside the cave far exceeded the reality of the cave by any imaginable measure. And third they would instantly and painfully begin the process of renarrating the history of their own lives and the nature of reality in the light of this wholesale new experience of the way things really are.

I want to suggest to you that that's what it's like to become a Christian. Becoming a Christian is like coming out of that cave. It's not necessarily a sudden thing, because it's possible to see the light while still remaining far down in the cave and it's possible to linger at any point on the way, especially at the entrance of the cave, and it's even possible to go back into the cave if the world outside is just too much, too scary, or too wonderful to take in. It's not primarily about your own efforts, because you can be carried up to the entrance of the cave and you'd probably never know the entrance was there unless someone came down and told you. It's not necessarily a judgement on people of other faiths or none, because the important thing is not to obsess too much on the benightedness of the cave and the importance of getting out of it. The point is to concentrate on what it's like to live outside of that cave. And that's what Jesus does with Nicodemus, a man who appears pretty keen to stick to the cave he knows, and pretty reluctant to be brought out of it. Notice that he comes to Jesus by night.

Jesus tells Nicodemus "This is what it's like to live in the wondrous and dazzling new world outside the cave" – otherwise known as "the kingdom of God." Jesus starts by saying it's a world of "water and the Spirit." This makes us think of baptism – which for many, perhaps most, Christians is exactly what being "born again" means. But I think in this context water means the ordinary and Spirit means the extraordinary. So Jesus is saying the wondrous new life includes the divine but it continues to include the very mundane. Water means life, and Spirit means eternal life. Water means our full humanity, our neediness, our doubt, our hopes, our love. And Spirit means God's full divinity, searching for us, transforming us, shaping its life to love us. And of course Jesus is the place where water and Spirit, humanity and divinity, meet.

Next Jesus says "the wind blows where it chooses." It's always worth remembering that wind and spirit are the same word in both Greek and Hebrew. The only real problem with the familiar language of being "born again" is if it suggests God has only one way of operating. But here we're told that the wind blows where it wills, that

the Spirit isn't subject to conventional limitations and always retains an aura of mystery. Don't live in a smaller world than God has given you. If the cave was a kind of prison, don't turn this new world into a new prison. The amazing world outside the cave is a world where God's activity is limitless.

Last and most significantly Jesus talks about being "lifted up." The fabulous life outside the cave involves being lifted up. But in the background we know that for Jesus being lifted up didn't just mean the resurrection and ascension. It meant being lifted up on the cross. The world outside the cave is a fantastic one, but we are lifted into it through the lifting up of Jesus' cross. Leaving the cave is not without cost or pain or trauma, but the heat of that transformation is borne for us by Jesus.

So we discover the qualities of the dazzling new life outside the cave by studying the life of Jesus. In Jesus we see God's divinity most fully revealed through our full humanity. In Jesus we see the limitless potential of the Holy Spirit. And in Jesus we see that God's purpose is to lift us up, to lift us out of the cave, and so we imitate Christ most closely when we are lifting others up – lifting others out of the cave. When Jesus is asked to describe the kingdom of God he describes his own incarnation, ministry, and resurrection. Jesus is the shape of the dazzling new life we've been given.

And these insights should indicate what's missing from the conventional caricature of being born again. The conventional caricature is simply way too limited. (1) In the first place Jesus is about a whole lot more than creating a political machine to manipulate American elections. (2) In the second place the Spirit has much more than one manner of helping us out of the cave and into dazzling new life. (3) And in the third place God is a great deal less bothered about our having a particular personal experience than about our lives being lifted up like Jesus' was and about us spending our lives lifting up the lives of others.

So there's more to faith than being born again. But being born again is still central to the language of faith. Because emerging from the cave is also a straightforward description of what it's like to be born. A baby moves from a small, restricted, but curiously secure space with no light into the limitless reality of life. Being born is just like emerging from a cave. Being born is the moment in life that shows how the wondrous creative power of God is revealed through our vulnerable humanity. Being born is the moment we emerge into limitless possibility. And the moment we are born we are lifted up, by careful medical professional or overwhelmed parent. So coming to faith is just like being born.

And there's one more birth. There's one more emergence from the cave. The promise of Jesus is not just that when we live in him we shall enter limitless life, like a prisoner emerging from a cave or a baby emerging from the womb. The promise goes one stage further. It's that Jesus' tomb was also a cave. Jesus went into a cave to bring us out of the cave. When Jesus emerged from the cave that first Easter morning, he broke the shackles of our imprisoned life and offered us dazzling newness. The reality is that we shall die, and we ourselves will be placed in the cave. This isn't just about the past, it's about the future. For some of us the near future. But Nicodemus learns that Jesus was lifted up, that nothing can constrain the Spirit, and that God is most fully revealed in our most human moments. And so the promise is that, after the lightlessness and fear and constraint of death, we shall be born again to eternal life with God. So the good news is not so much "You *must* be born again" or "Unless you are born again." The good news is, "You *shall* be born again, and you shall emerge from the cave of death to the light of life."

My father was right. It really is the best verb in the language. "I will be born." Again.