

Précis of sermon by Rev. Timothy Haughton, Little Trinity Church, Toronto, July 22, 2018 “You Must be Born Again”

Jesus said that “You must be born again” but many might wonder why they would want to be “born again” and some associate born-again Christians with rigid, moralistic, judgmental individuals. An opinion poll in the US indicated that although 45% of Americans call themselves born-again Christians, 70 to 80% of Americans would not want to live next door to a born-again Christian.

The origin of the expression born-again comes from the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus in the third chapter of John which shows the necessity, the means and the results of being born again.

Scripture describes Nicodemus as a prominent Pharisee from a family with a long and great reputation in Israel who was a member of the Sanhedrin and the primary religious authority within the Jewish faith. The fact that he comes to Jesus at night has sparked debate amongst scholars. Some suggest that he was afraid to be seen meeting with Jesus in the daytime but Rev. Haughton suggests that despite Nicodemus’ wealth, power and influence, he is living “in the dark”.

Nicodemus acknowledges that Jesus is a teacher who comes from God and that through Jesus, the people have seen the power of God and the signs of God’s coming kingdom. But despite this acknowledgement, Jesus provides a stark rebuke to Nicodemus, telling him he doesn’t really see a thing (v3) - “Truly, truly, I say to you – unless one is born again they cannot see the kingdom of God”. This must have impacted Nicodemus greatly as the prevailing view at the time was that access to the kingdom of God was given to any child of Abraham and if there was anyone qualified for the kingdom of God in Israel by the standards of the day, Nicodemus would be it. But Jesus tells him that he doesn’t get it and that the only way to get to the Kingdom is to be born again.

This is difficult to understand and perhaps even harder to accept but Jesus is saying that none of us – exactly as we are – will inherit the Kingdom because of our very nature. John Calvin said “born-again means not the amendment of a part but the renewal of the whole”. In other words, we will not align our lives perfectly with God’s will unless we are born again – we need not an amendment of a part of our lives but we need a renewal of our whole lives. This is affirmed in verse 6 of John Chapter 3 by Jesus where he states that that which is born of flesh is flesh but that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit.

The fact that we need renewal of the whole may seem impossible and hopeless. To those like Nicodemus who have wealth and power and feel that they are good people or “acceptable”, this message may even seem unnecessary. For those who lack wealth and position – people who the world says are not okay, this message provides

incredible hope because it says that nothing in a person's life can ever disqualify them from heaven if they are born again.

So how does this occur? Nicodemus was certainly confused and asked how a person can get back into their mother's womb and be born a second time. Jesus restates the idea in verse 5 differently by indicating that "unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of heaven". Rev. Haughton directed us back to Ezekiel 36 where both water and Spirit are referenced and when the prophet looked forward to a time when God would sprinkle water on his people cleansing them from their sins and giving them the Spirit to melt their hearts, which would empower them to live with their wills in perfect alignment with God's. This Old Testament reference foreshadows the coming of Jesus and his empowering work by cleansing us from sin through his death and resurrection and the coming of the Spirit upon those who are cleansed.

Rev. Haughton also explained a confusing piece of Scripture in which Jesus speaks about Moses lifting up a serpent in the wilderness and comparing that to the Son of Man being lifted up so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life and may enter the Kingdom. He referred to this as one of the oddest and most obscure references that Jesus ever makes but it points back to the Book of Numbers Chapter 21. This chapter describes the behavior of the Israelites after their rescue from slavery in Egypt. As they wandered in the desert, they started to rebel against God and God responded by sending snakes into the Israeli camp. The Israelites are being bitten by the snakes and in fear the people come to Moses who prays to God and God directs Moses to make a bronze snake and to put it on a pole so that everyone bitten by a snake can look at the bronze snake and be healed. When Jesus references this Old Testament story, he is drawing a parallel to his own death and being lifted up on the cross and by looking up to Jesus, we can be cleansed of sin and empowered by his Spirit. Just as God sent a snake to deal with the snake problem in the desert, God sends the Son of God in human form to confront the problem of sinful man. In other words, man's primary problem is the reality of his very humanity but by looking up to Jesus and trusting in him and believing in him, you will be born again and cleansed of sin and given an empowering Spirit to live in an entirely new humanity.

So did Nicodemus receive this new birth? It is interesting to note in John 19 that after Jesus' death, Nicodemus with Joseph of Arimathea approached the Roman governor to ask permission to remove Jesus body for burial. This was a very public alignment with Jesus and one that would have placed Nicodemus in great jeopardy with his fellow Jews. This act of preparing Jesus' body for burial showed great courage and laid aside class and cultural pride in a very dramatic way to honour Jesus.

Rev. Haughton asked if we have received this gift of new birth by looking to Jesus. Do we long to see and feel and receive more of its fruit? Although this new birth is still a mystery, the results of rebirth can be seen. We were directed to look for rebirth in the way Jesus directed Nicodemus. Just as, Moses lifted up the serpent so that the people could be physically healed, we need to recognize that our primary problem is our

humanity and that we need a renewal of the whole by looking up to Jesus on the cross for our healing.