



Resurrection Journeys

Session 2: Open to the unexpected and surprising

Jesus Teaches Nicodemus

John 3.1-17

Last week, my daughter had a cultural day at school, where all the children were invited to bring in a cultural object or piece of clothing representing something of where they were from. In a fine Dad moment, I noted this after school on a Friday and forgot all about it until 3 minutes before we had to leave on Monday morning. Rummaging through her wardrobe, desperately looking for something that would fit, thankfully, we managed to settle on a cheerleading dress, in light of her Grandpa being American. Dad duties accomplished, more or less.

What comes to mind when you think about where you are from? Assured knowledge and confidence? A sense of shame or uncertainty from yourself or others? Maybe rummaging in a wardrobe for anything that will fit? In many of our neighbourhoods, we are all too aware of how the question of where we are from has been. It is being weaponised to divide us. Some of us have been burdened with shame, ignored or discriminated against because of where we are from, and others of us have felt our sense of identity and belonging has been stripped away by powers beyond our control. For us as churches, perhaps we exist in a fragile space between the heritage laid for us and an uncertain future, the now and the not yet of

the kingdom of heaven. We ask where we are from, and where we are going. How do we carry, interact with, serve or shape the stories of our neighbourhoods? How do we offer belonging, refuge, even hope to those who feel left behind? Nicodemus knew where he was from. A pharisee – righteous and upstanding, a member of the ruling council – belonging to the elite of his nation, he knew who he was.

But at the dead of night, he ventures to an unknown place to meet this itinerant preacher and miracle worker from Galilee. Galilee – a place that Nicodemus' colleagues would later sneer at – 'no prophet comes from Galilee.'

This powerful man of the establishment seeks the marginalised figure of Jesus of Nazareth, in the darkness, presumably for fear of being found out, but maybe also reflecting the doubt and uncertainty in his soul.

"We know you are a teacher that has come from God", he begins, trying to stamp his authority and assert not only the credentials of where he is from but also define Jesus too. "He is the powerful one, and this Jesus needs to speak on his terms".

But Jesus has other ideas.

None can see God's kingdom unless they are born again or born from above. None can see God's kingdom unless they are born again or born from above.

Words that pull the rug from under Nicodemus' feet, words that send him spiralling into questions of 'how can this be?' Words that threaten his power and unsettle him. However, if we read his story throughout John's gospel, these words initiated a journey of transformation and faith.

Now in many Christian circles, the words 'born again' have come to mean something very particular, and in the charismatic and Pentecostal tradition I was raised in, they were often used to distinguish or judge between what was considered true faith and what claimed to be faith but was considered not. Ironical, given that Jesus is using these words to challenge someone who thinks he knows who has faith and who doesn't, who is in and who is out.

Indeed, much has been written on the language of ‘born from above’ and ‘born of water and the Spirit,’ the commentator Craig Kenner offers the suggestion that it refers to a rite of conversion for Gentile outsiders becoming part of the Jewish religion, seeing themselves as infants to learn from the start what faith was all about.

So in this case, we see Jesus challenging, maybe even offending, this upstanding member of institutional religion that he needs to become as if a child again, learning from the start, forging a new way and a new identity. In very practical terms, as Kenner says, Nicodemus, a member of the ruling elite, is being asked to identify with the marginalised followers of Jesus.

Across our diocese, we see an incredible heritage of churches and Christian communities that have loved and shaped the heritage of our neighbourhoods for hundreds or even thousands of years. Two local churches in East London that have inspired and shaped my journey, recently celebrated 50th and 150th birthdays – and I know for other churches that makes them mere infants – but how incredible to think of the impact of their gospel witness over that time, and the legacy of those who first envisioned them. A great inspiration to us at Christchurch Three Mills, who celebrated our 5th birthday this year and yearn to build a story of radical love and welcome that will last.

And yet, there is a sense where we can too readily cling to our past that may shut us off from the move of God in our present and future. Indeed, each time we come to God in prayer, when we gather and listen and contemplate God’s work, we are in a way opening ourselves to an uncertain future, asking God to guide us into the unknown, willing if need be perhaps to be born again, and learn afresh what God might offer today, to be open to new things and new possibilities, wherever they may come from.

For as Christ tells Nicodemus, the wind blows wherever it pleases, and so it is with everyone born of the Spirit. I think when I came to prepare this, I believed that this verse said, the wind blows where it pleases and so it is with the Spirit. Now that is certainly true, the Spirit moves we know in all kinds of ways and places beyond control, but this verse points us to something else. That those born of the Spirit cannot be pinned down or

categorised or contained, but that they may surprise us or be found in unexpected places.

You are precious, where you are from, and the story you carry is so vital; your roots should not be overlooked, ignored or sneered at. And yet, if you are a follower of Jesus, you, along with us, have another identity; you are born from above, you have the capacity to be such incredibly good news in your neighbourhood, you have the chance to go with the wind of the Spirit, bringing hope and life in even the most unexpected of places.

In their incredible book, *Being Interrupted*, Al Barret and Ruth Harley offer the idea that we all too readily in the gospels identify ourselves with Jesus as initiator, bringing the church's mission to the outsiders, acting on our communities. But if we take a moment to stand with Nicodemus, and to find the message of God coming to us from this marginalised man from Nazareth – as is said elsewhere in John's gospel, what good can come from Nazareth? Then we might notice something about God's work and our neighbourhoods.

The church, and certainly our own churches, do not have a monopoly on the things of God. The Spirit is moving beyond the walls of our church in even the most unexpected of places. Amongst people or places that we may have written off because of where they are from, or their wealth, or status or background or behaviour. Those born of the Spirit are not easily contained or defined, they are certainly not just those sitting in our pews or seats on a Sunday morning, the Spirit is at work in magnificent and marvellous ways all around us and we, like Nicodemus, are invited to step out, being in some ways born again to learn afresh what God is doing and, amazingly and magnificently, to be able to join in.

This place on our estate where I am standing was, until a couple of years ago, an unsightly corner, used for illegal parking, anti-social behaviour and disruption to those who live around. The church, in being present in our neighbourhood, got to know local people concerned about it, worked with the council and other partners to get these planters installed, put up lights in winter and began to form a community space here. Helping create a space that is safer, more joy-filled, more productive and more welcoming

than before. It is still a work in progress, but in spaces like this, we see the Spirit at work. When we open ourselves to people and places that we may have been closed to before, we catch God at work in new ways.

There are churches throughout our diocese doing this incredible work and indeed opening ourselves to the work of God beyond what we accomplish. But also, there are those of us who feel written off or ignored because of where we come from, or are perceived to have come from, and I want to say that that is fundamentally wrong and not of the gospel. For whilst the wind blows where it pleases, there is a clear trajectory in the work of God, and it is seen in here – For God so loved the world that God gave God's only son. And in John's theology, the world is not generic; it is the neighbourhood – Christ moved into the neighbourhood, Christ did not come to condemn the neighbourhood but to save it. God emptied Godself on the cross so that each of us and our communities would know that there is space in the life of God for us. Your neighbourhood, your heritage, your community, you are valued by God, you are seen, and you hold the potential to represent to us all something precious and unique of who God is and how God works. We would be a lesser representation of the image and love of God if we did not have you. But where else is God at work?

Where in your community, or on your estate, or in your town is God at work that you may have missed before?

Where are those born of the Spirit that you may have written off because they were not like you?

Where can you be open this week to the unexpected work of God, the wind of the Spirit, and how can you, or you as a church, start to join in?

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