

Sermon preached by Rev Rachel McDougall

St Paul's Canterbury

Lent 3A 2023

Being born anew

Europe is depressed wrote the Nuremberg Chronicle in 1493.
There was little vision or hope.

The society had experienced a lot of downers coming out of the plagues, the breakdown of feudal order and the corruption and hypocrisy of the church.

Europe had not had a scientific discovery for a 1000 years.

It was in a sorry state. The Nuremberg Chronicle's authors were so depressed that they left several pages blank so that the readers could record for themselves the rest of events until the end of the world.

Europe was stuck. Their imagination was gridlocked.

They saw no way through back to China and those lovely spices as they were hemmed in by the Moors on one side.

On the other side they were hemmed in by the equator.

They thought you could not cross the equator.

They thought if you crossed it, you would fall off the edge of the earth.

The renaissance, the renewal happened when intrepid explorers were able to overcome the barriers that people had put in place – they crossed the equator and discovered you didn't fall off.

Other explorers opened up new horizons including the discovery of the Americas.

All of this led to an explosion of new understandings and discoveries and the imagination found new horizons.

I think this is a bit like what is happening in the story of Nicodemus and Jesus that we have heard today.

Nicodemus, a religious leader comes at night to speak with Jesus. He is seeking Jesus out privately, not wanting to be seen as being aligned with him.

He's heard of the signs and believes that there is something about Jesus but this doesn't take him very far.

Before this story there had been people who believed in Jesus because of the signs but Jesus doesn't trust them because faith needs to be deeper, more than belief in miracles.

This is the challenge for Nicodemus.

Jesus challenges Nicodemus by saying no one can see the kingdom of God without being 'anwthen'.

The Greek word that Jesus uses has at least two meanings. It can mean being born again, and being born from above. Jesus meant both.

Translations usually go for one or the other.

So did Nicodemus. He gets caught up in the literal meaning of being born again for a second time. He can't get his head around it.

Nicodemus is the sort of person whose learnt the religious rules since childhood.

He is well versed in the law and likes the safety of the rules and what he can control.

He draws great comfort from what he knows and expects his world to stay within those confines.

His imagination is gridlocked.

He cannot see beyond what he can measure and control to imagine what it might mean to be born from above, to be born anew.

Surely I know all the rules, if I do the right things that is what keeps me right with God you can hear him thinking.

Jesus is inviting him to go over the equator from what he knows and sail into the unknown.

Jesus uses the image of the wind, which we can't see or control or know where it comes from or goes to.

Jesus is pointing to the reality of the mystery of God that is beyond our control.

The Spirit is present but often in ways that are hard to define and pops up where we least expect it.

Nicodemus is still caught up in his wonderings as he muses 'how can these things be'. It is as if he has tripped over all the rules he knows in his head and is trapped by them and can't see anything else – even if part of him senses that there is something more to all of this.

Jesus goes on to say for God so loved the world that he gave his only son that everyone who believes may have eternal life.

These words are one of the most well-known verses in the bible for a reason – because they keep on reminding us that the gospel is about love not about rules, it is about relationships not about ticking boxes.

What fascinates me about this reading is that Jesus keeps engaging with Nicodemus where he is and keeps the conversation going. He doesn't just shut it down.

He keeps inviting Nicodemus to enter a new reality, a relationship of trust..

At the end of the conversation, we don't know which way Nicodemus will go or whether he is going anywhere.

Perhaps the reason why this is, is that we are meant to see ourselves in Nicodemus.

He is someone who doesn't get it all right, who struggles to see beyond what he knows and can control.

He is very human. How much do we like being in control?

How often do we find not being in control really difficult?

I think I find it hard because it is a reminder that I am not completely autonomous, but reliant on others and there are times when I don't like that because it makes me feel vulnerable.

How often do we want to keep things the same, because we can control stuff that way, so we want to keep God in God's box too.

Yet our spiritual journey is one that is not static, it is always on the move.

There is always the invitation from God to keep seeing beyond the horizon to allow the Spirit of love to move anew through us.

We are invited to view things from a different direction to imagine how two different things can be true at once – that being born from above is about being born anew, renewed in our lives and in our spirits.

Lent is not about rules about what we don't do or strictly giving up stuff so that we become fixated on the rules rather than what it is meant to be teaching us.

Lent is a times for lengthening, to expand the soul, to grow in our experience of God and be open to God's voice of love in the shadows and constricted places within us, to learn to see anew.

We can be fearful about what might happen when we cross a barrier. We might be fearful of falling off the edge of the world like those early sailors.

Jesus broke that barrier in being lifted up on the cross and leads the way. Nico himself by the end of John's gospel is further along the way as he brings spices to Jesus' tomb.

He reminds us that we are all works in progress.

He promises us that the way of the Spirit, of the wind is a lifegiving way, a way of love, a way to a deeper quality of life, of wholeness of a life that is beyond what we can imagine.

[The Place Where We Are Right](#)

From the place where we are right

Flowers will never grow

In the spring.

The place where we are right

Is hard and trampled

Like a yard.

*But doubts and loves
Dig up the world
Like a mole, a plow.
And a whisper will be heard in the place
Where the ruined
House once stood.*

Yehuda Amichai

Or

*God, I believe,
wants to surprise us,
for God hides in the world
hoping to be discovered.
But we, fixed on
our sacred imaginings,
clutching our icons
and performing perfectly
our sacred rituals,
trample, unseeing,
on the holy beneath our feet,
and pass by, not minding,
the blank-eyed crowds
milling all around us
unrecognized,
longing to be discovered,
longing to be surprised.
God- longing to be uttered.*

Edwina Gateley

*Lectons:
Genesis 12.1-4
Psalm 121
John 3.1-17*