

'You must be born again'

Grace be with you and peace from God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ

*Can you fathom the mystery of God, or attain to the limits of the Almighty?
– Job 11, 7*

Collect:

Almighty and eternal God, through your Word and Spirit you created all things. In Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, you reveal your salvation in all the world. Through your Holy Spirit, you give us a share in your life and love. Keep us firm in this faith, and fill us with the vision of your glory, that we may serve and praise you all our days; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

1 In the presence of your people
I will praise your name,
for alone you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
Let us celebrate your goodness
and your steadfast love;
may your name be exalted
here on earth and in heaven above.

2 All who love you sing your praises
and proclaim your power,
for alone you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
You have not ignored our suffering
but have heard our cry;
may your power be exalted
here on earth and in heaven above.

3 All who seek your rule will praise you
and be satisfied;
for alone you are holy,
enthroned on the praises of Israel.
All the peoples of the nations
will bow down to you;

may your rule be exalted
here on earth and in heaven above.

Brent Chambers (b. 1948) and Bert Polman (b.1945)

Jn.3,1-17

Dear friends

Jesus is surprised at Nicodemus' difficulty to understand, or grasp, what he means by saying "*You must be born again*" as a condition for being able to see and enter the kingdom of God. This is not because Nicodemus doesn't understand what everybody else does. Being a teacher of Israel, the fact that he doesn't understand means that the view of God's renewal, the coming of his kingdom, in Israel is not such that it will easily be recognised. Jesus' surprise alerts Nicodemus to the fact that God's recipe of renewal will involve processes which will divide between those who will accept them and those to whom they will seem unacceptable.

Nicodemus' lack of understanding is not unique to him. We are all listening in on the conversation because the question is relevant to us all: What is God's recipe for renewal? How does God's kingdom operate? How does anyone go from "*no one can see/enter*" the kingdom of God to seeing it and entering it?

Jesus' answer is, "*you must be born again.*" Before we go further here, it is necessary to clear up, hopefully, two matters in relation to it which may occupy the mind and urge us to come back at what Jesus is saying in a way which precludes us from taking any further notice. One is that Jesus here makes no exception. It is not just Nicodemus who needs to be born again, but anyone who would have a living, saving faith in God. The ability to see and enter the kingdom of God, in other words the ability to be renewed and become part of God's coming world and live with hope, in righteousness and without fear, requires the process of *being born again*. If there is the question 'Can we not please have a version of faith and kingdom that is Christian without this need of being born again? More people would sign up for Christianity that way!', then the answer must be as clear as Jesus' words to Nicodemus – *no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again*. The reticence of the church to state this as clearly as Jesus did may be an acknowledgement that doing it wrong can lead to wrongful claims and cause some to sit in judgement over the consciences of others; but it can also, and is far more often the case, be driven by a desire to mask the truth that we need God to remake us ground-up and wholly.

The other matter has to do with renewal. If what Jesus says here is true, we are prevented from seeing renewal in the church and in our lives, if it is to be spiritual and true, as the outcome of our own planning and our own decision-making processes to which the Spirit of God is incidental. We must be careful not to make the Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit, a mere word which appears occasionally in announcements and prayers but to whom nothing corresponds in our own lives by way of being conscious that "*flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit*", that is, that the Holy Spirit begets spiritual life.

But now let us ask what Jesus' words 'You must be born again' mean. As Nicodemus asks: "*How can someone be born when they are old?*" (v.4) Jesus' answer is given in these words: "*Very truly I tell*

you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.” Here, then, is God’s recipe for renewal. The thing we need to notice here, is that while Nicodemus thinks that something is being asked of him, Jesus’ answer shows that this is not the case. It’s not about what Nicodemus must do but about what Nicodemus must have done to him and for him. The new birth is not the work of Nicodemus but the work of God for Nicodemus and in his life; it is from above, and it is *of water and the Spirit*.

But what does it mean, to be *“born of water and the Spirit”*? Water signifies baptism. And what does the water of baptism mean but cleansing from sin, a dying to who and what I am as one belonging to sin and separate from God, in order that I may rise as a new creation belonging to God as his child, knowing him and living in his ways. The reality of this is created through the death of the Son of God and his resurrection from the dead. Without this, baptism would be nothing more than a mere symbolic act that has no significance other than what we may attach to it culturally. But there in Christ’s death and resurrection is baptism proper. To it belongs the reality that then becomes effective in the church’s life through baptism *in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* and the gift of the Holy Spirit according to Jesus’ word.

The words *‘born of water and the Spirit’* point and refer to Jesus’ vicarious death on the cross for sinners where he carried out what he symbolically announced in his own baptism in the Jordan (*“it is proper for us to do this to fulfil all righteousness”* – Mt.3,15) and to his promise that the Father will send the Holy Spirit (Jn.14,26).

You see, Nicodemus does not yet realise the place of Jesus’ death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead in God’s plan of renewal: that it means our own death to sin, that it dismantles completely what we are because of our sinfulness in order to remake us in Christ’s image, ground up and growing all the way to the finished article – in Christ through the Holy Spirit. Nicodemus does not yet realise that such renewal is the work of the Holy Spirit in those who believe, that it is not our call to try and save what we are or have across from the old to the new, but that it is our call to seek the Spirit’s leading and enabling to grasp Christ as God’s agent of renewal, to know ourselves as sinners who by ourselves are perishing and know Christ as God’s love through whom we shall not perish but have eternal life, to know and hold fast to it in faith: That *“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”*

Dear friends, we cannot determine the direction of the wind, nor whether or not it blows. But we can be out there in the open and set our sails so they catch the wind when and where it blows. We cannot control the Spirit God or direct him according to our will and whims, much as we depend upon his work (and we do so completely!). But Jesus has made known the mind of God in regard to the coming of his kingdom, in regard to our renewal. And he has himself told us to put our sails where the wind shall blow: *“If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”*
(Lk.11,13) AMEN

(Prayer by R Maurus)

Come, Holy Spirit, our souls inspire, and lighten with celestial fire: You the anointing Spirit are, the gifts You impart are sevenfold. / Your blessed unction from above is comfort, life and fire of love: enable with perpetual light the dullness of our blinded sight. / Anoint and cheer our soiled face with the abundance of Your grace: keep far our foes, give peace at home – where You art guide no ill can come. / Teach us to know the Father, Son, and You, of both, to be but One; that, through the ages all

along, this, this may be our endless song: Praise to Your eternal merit, Father, Son and Holy Spirit!
Amen

- time of prayer / intercession – [we give thanks for God’s mercy and faithfulness, for the compassion and steadfast love he has for all that he has made, that all his judgments are just and righteous, that he is our refuge and the helper of all who call to him; we pray for those who have become ill, are fighting illness or are recovering from it, for those who care for the needs of others; for those in positions of leadership and authority: that they may rule wisely and seek peace, that they may guard the values by which a society can flourish, that they may lead with courage and wisdom, for a turning to the light that is God’s Word; for those who have lost loved ones, need comfort into their grieving and the loving presence of friends; we give thanks for all the help we have received and still experience, for grace and answered prayers; we pray for the despondent and the hopeless, for those who seek light, for the wisdom to comfort the suffering; we pray for our sister church in Northern India and for the body of Christ worldwide and here, for our church, the church’s leadership; we think of the situation in India, Nepal and other places, the suffering of the people there and elsewhere, the attempt of the authorities to regain control; we give thanks for the help that is being delivered; we pray for the situation in Israel, the rift between the Palestinians and the Jews; for perseverance in the determination to share our means with those who lack them; we pray for God’s blessing on the preaching and teaching of His word, for people to respond in repentance and faith, for freedom and liberty and courage to stand for what is good and true and honours His name;]

‘Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen

Now to him who loved us, gave us every pledge that love could give, freely shed his blood to save us, gave his life that we might live, be the kingdom, power and glory and thanksgiving evermore.

And the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit be among you and remain with you. AMEN