

BORN FROM ABOVE!

Lenten Ecumenical Service

St Alban's Anglican Church Epping

7th March 2017

John 3:1-7



What does Bob Dylan, Johnny Cash, Mariah Carey, Jane Fonda, Mel Gibson, James Dobson, Jimmy Carter and Margaret Court all have in common? They are “born again”!

The term, “born again” is important, particularly in evangelical circles. “Born again” points to a powerful experience, often referred to as “conversion”, where a conscious decision to follow Christ is accompanied with the assurance that one’s life is renewed and empowered by means of what is termed a spiritual “rebirth.”

In my tradition, as a Uniting Church minister, the testimony of John Wesley comes to light. If you have ever visited the Museum of London you may have noticed a bronze memorial outside the entrance known as the “Aldersgate Flame”. This marks the spot where Wesley’s conversion or “born again” experience took place. Inscribed on the memorial is an extract from Wesley’s diary dated 24.5.1738. It reads:

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“In the evening I went very unwillingly to a Society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s Preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone for salvation. And an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.”

This encounter spawned a movement of renewal across Britain, particularly among the burgeoning urban working class. Today Wesley’s impact is experienced across the entire world.



To be “born again” - I remember, as a young teenager, attending a little interdenominational Sunday School on the Central Coast. My teacher was a saintly lady who was a Baptist. With a passion every Sunday to win her class of reluctant pimply-faced boys for Christ, her mantra was “ye must be born again.....ye must be born again”. I think we got it every week!

And you know, I have never forgotten this. While my teacher’s theology might have been pretty basic - and indeed repetitive - her love for God and her deep desire for us boys to know Christ was infectious. I am sure those rudimentary Sunday School lessons rubbed-off on me. They were formative days.

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We encounter this term “born again” in John’s Gospel. Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin approaches Jesus by night. Nicodemus is curious, he is inquisitive. He wants to know more.

Jesus responds. Nicodemus, if you want to part of the action, if you really desire to know God, then you need to be “born again”.

But there is a lack of clarity here. The NIV translates Jesus’ words as “born again”. Meanwhile the NRSV says “born from above”. The original Greek literally translates “to go up” and this suggests “born from above” is a better translation.

Moreover, Jesus’ reference to being “born” is more effectively translated as “begotten”. Biblical references here are in the passive and this means it’s not a case of having to actually be born again. Rather, it’s a matter of recognizing that God has given birth to us in new way.

Here God “father’s us. God brings us into being. I believe Jesus is actually saying our true origins, our real inheritance, is not given birth by or, indeed, born out of, this world. It’s gifted to us by God!

So to be “born from above” is not dependent or conditional on what we do. Rather, what Jesus presents to Nicodemus is a new way of seeing the world. Jesus offers a new way of being in the world. Here we understand one’s identity in a radically new way, for we are sons and daughters of God!



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I don't know about you, but this is pretty amazing. Whether you understand being "born from above" in terms of what takes place during the sacrament of baptism or whether your experience of being "born from above" is more akin to a focus on an overt conversion experience, the nuts and bolts of what Jesus says is that each one of us - you and me - are children born of God.

Each one of us have our true identity grounded in the mystery we call God. Each one of us has been created for the most marvelous purpose and that purpose is to live in relationship with the loving Creator.

As sons and daughters of God, we encounter a different kind world. We encounter world that is to be comprehended from God's point of view. We engage in a world that is to be seen from God's perspective.

And that means personal assumptions, local prejudices, community expectations and national fears need to go out the window.

Moreover, I believe, as sons and daughters of God, we are to focus on those things that bring us together. We are to concentrate on those things we hold in common. And in doing so, we are to sideline the differences, we are to put on hold those things that define one Christian community over and against the other. We are to rise above trivial suspicions and petty controversies.

When our focus is on those things "above", we too, are transformed. We too, are co-partners. We too, are co-inheritors of God's kingdom. And, importantly, we too, are strengthened in our common witness as God's people.



Let me share a story.

A baby eagle fell from its nest. Landing in a chicken yard, the baby eagle soon began imitate those around him. It wasn't long before he began to believe he was a chicken. The eagle scratched around the yard keeping his head down as he scavenged for worms and grubs. He competed for the corn that was tossed into the yard each morning and he kept company with the other chickens as they hovered closely in the shelter of the coop at night.

And all the time, glorious, swift, graceful birds flew the skies above.

One day the baby eagle looked up. "What's that?" he asked one of the chickens. "Oh, that's an eagle, but don't worry, you will never be able to fly like that." So, the baby eagle put his head down again and went back to scratching the ground.

One day the farmer came by. Looking in the yard he recognized the baby eagle. "Hey, you're not a chicken, you're an eagle. Come on, put your head up, stand tall and stretch your wings".

The baby eagle was a little perturbed "What, he thought.....I'm an eagle". So he let the famer pick him up. The farmer gently raised the baby eagle high in the air and, as the baby eagle looked skyward, it took a giant leap and began to fly!

The baby eagle soared high. It became one of the most graceful, elegant birds in the sky!



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Brothers and sisters in Christ, in our journey together during this Lenten time, Jesus proclaims we are all “born from above”, we are all sons and daughters of God, we are all heirs of the kingdom. We are all inheritors of God’s most amazing grace.

Let us, therefore, literally “go up”. Let us raise our eyes skyward and soar like eagles. Let us be lifted up by Christ in the common faith we share to become that which God truly calls us to be.

Amen.



John Barr