

Shortly after I moved to London in the early 80's, I happened to fall into conversation with a girl of a similar age, who was an avid attender of Holy Trinity Brompton. Within a few breaths she had asked me whether I was born again. This was a question I simply didn't understand, as my church background had been fairly traditional, and although I had read my children's bible quite a lot, I had tended to focus more on the story-telling aspect than the theological one.

However, when I asked her what she meant, she was almost unable to articulate the question in any other way – for her, you were either born again or not born again, and if you didn't recognise the phrase – almost used as a password - then you probably weren't. Eventually I convinced her that I did know about repentance and I had committed my life to Jesus; it was just that my terminology was different to hers.

How eager we are to put people into pigeonholes! And how quick we can be to say that anyone who doesn't fit into our pigeonhole can't really have got it right. And yet, by doing this, we are surely missing the point.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and is generally thought to have been a wealthy man. He came to Jesus after dark partly because he wanted to have an uninterrupted conversation with him; the way in which he takes Jesus up about being born again indicates the rabbinical method of discussion in which phrases are taken back to their literal meaning as a basis for debate. It is quite possible that he understood more than is indicated in the gospel account. However, as a Pharisee he had his own set of pigeonholes, and he started off by saying 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God'. This was, if you like, an overture to finding out the truth about Jesus.

Jesus doesn't give him what he might call a straight answer. Instead, he moves the discussion onto a different plane by saying 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' The phrase 'born from above' can also be translated as 'born again' and it is this

second translation that Nicodemus takes up in his rather literal follow-up. It is almost as if he and Jesus are talking on two different levels, with Nicodemus unable to raise his understanding to Jesus's level.

Then Jesus goes on to say 'The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' It is worth noting that both in Hebrew and Greek, the same word is used for wind and Spirit – *Ruah* in Hebrew and *Pneuma* in Greek. For me this is a core part of the gospel – the indication that try as we might, we cannot influence where the Spirit might rest.

The movement known as Gnosticism was rising at the time that Jesus was ministering and part of its belief system was that knowledge of God could be attained by study and following certain rules of living. Jesus is identified by some Gnostics as an embodiment of the Supreme Being who became incarnate to bring *gnōsis* to the earth, while others adamantly denied that the supreme being came in the flesh, claiming Jesus to be merely a human who attained divinity through gnosis and taught his disciples to do the same. It may be that Nicodemus had some contact with this movement and was looking for some kind of special knowledge or password in order to enter the Kingdom of God; what is certain is that over the centuries there have been many leaders who have claimed to obtain 'special knowledge' of Christ by their practices, and these leaders have led their followers to believe that only the elect – i.e. their followers - can be saved. It is true that it is only the elect who can be saved, but it is God's elect: he selects and we cannot know for certain that someone is not elected. For ourselves we know – from Jesus's teaching – that we need to be born of the Spirit in order to be saved. Let's look at what that means for each of us.

Jesus said: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that who so believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life". God so loved the world – that, surely, means everyone, good and bad. His love is so immense that it extends even to those who we see as evil – dictators like

Hitler, Idi Amin and Kim Jong Un. It seems incredible that God could love the fighters from ISIS, but I see no exceptions to his love in this passage.

The distinction comes with the phrase 'who so believeth in him'. We are not talking here about a vague belief in an historical figure, but in Jesus as the Son of God and the Saviour of the world. Again, anyone can commit themselves to Jesus at any stage of their life and they will still be accepted; witness the thief on the cross, who said 'Remember me when you come into your kingdom' and Jesus immediately accepted him by saying: 'today you will be with me in paradise'.

Each of us, then, needs to make his or her own approach to God through Jesus Christ. There is no magic formula or password. Each of us knows deep down inside us what our sins are. It is only when we confess these openly to God and ask for his mercy and help in turning away from them, that we can be blessed with the Holy Spirit – born from above.

When we walk in the light of the Spirit, we are enabled to see things differently from those who have not yet come to Jesus. We are called to be like lilies of the field – unstressed about the behaviour of those around us. One friend of mine said that recently he had given up saying sorry for all his shortcomings, and had turned his apologies into thanksgiving; for example, instead of saying 'Sorry I'm late' he says 'Thank you for waiting for me'. Instead of 'Sorry about my mess' he says 'thank you for putting up with my way of life'. As a result he has noticed a change in the attitude of people around him.

It is very easy to spend time concerned with the minutiae of life, or with earthly things like the accumulation of wealth or power over other people. At the moment we are concerned with Brexit and Donald Trump, among other things. However, when we lift our eyes and thoughts to Jesus and step into his kingdom, we gain a different perspective. We can't do much about Donald Trump; what we can do is to carry Jesus's love out into the world and spread it by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Let us take a moment to contemplate what Jesus did for us:

For “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that who so believeth in him shall not perish but have everlasting life”.