

Sermon 31 May 2015 'What we see'
Romans 8:12-17 John 3:1-17 Trinity Sunday

Prayer: Almighty and ever-present God, you have gifted us with our senses so that we might experience life with you and your world. Enable us to learn how you use our senses, both spiritual and physical to come and call us to know, love and live for you. Help us see the ways of your call, and grant us wisdom to respond with understanding and courage to do your will. Amen.

When you look at something what do you see? Here is a photo with a focus on a pair of wine glasses and a red salt cellar. But is that all there is to them? I am sure you are all wondering if there is more to this picture? There is – of course but for now I want to ask you to remember our reading from John.

It was the story of a Pharisee, a leading religious ruler in Jesus time who came to Jesus in the night (hiding in the dark) and sort of said to Jesus: 'I can see what's in front of me – you do all these healings and miracles as only someone from God can – and all these signs are exactly ^{*1} what the law of Moses and our learning say understanding explain – but?' *and I don't think it is too hard to say that we can 'hear' the 'but' as – but I wonder if there is more? Echoing from Nico's mind.*

Jesus's reply is almost: '**Of course** there's more.. *but* you have to be looking the right way to see it. **Now** Jesus *didn't exactly say that*, what he said to Nicodemus – was: that you have to be born again/ from above, born of water and word to see it. Nico's reply is to stay with what is visible – what is in front of him, all his learning and preconceived ideas about exactly what and how Jesus should be doing and saying about God. *But* Jesus pushes him further, and suggests to ^{*1} Nicodemus an even more awesome possibility, that the Spirit can come and blow through our preconceived notions and tightly wound ideas to open us to the possibility of new life. cv

The word Jesus speaks is that Nicodemus must be born "*anōthen*" it's a Greek word that can mean either "from above" or "anew." We might want to do battle with the word and decide that we prefer one meaning over another, *but* what would happen if we admitted that the word means **both** those things?^{*2} One suggestion on this passage, is that we should explore the invitation to Nicodemus as speaking about both a time of birth ("anew") and the place from which the new birth will come ("from above"). The birth, generated by the Spirit, is a God-initiated transformation.

It's funny how we see things – right? I am so often confronted with the 'fear' – that if we 'become' a Christian / when we accept Jesus / spirit / God – we will be instantly **changed into** some kind of do-gooder that has a borderline offensive personality... It is very sad that Christians have given this picture to the world because in the story of Nico today we have the picture of a very learned, gracious and powerful person who slowly opens himself to the 'new' possibilities of the Spirit at work within transforming us into life bearing people – as Jesus was.

As a type of believer, ^{*1}Nicodemus is a powerful figure in the Gospel of John. Although he first comes to Jesus at night, presumably out of fear, but also as a symbol in John of his lack of understanding; he returns two more times in increasing daylight, **and** understanding. He is the one who defends Jesus at his trial (7:50-51) and as the one who would prepare Jesus' body for burial (19:39).

In the end, his is a story of a person whose faith gradually dawned on him. Far from being the instantaneous conversion (as many who claim a "born again" experience as a singular event, might say) he took a while growing his faith and to eventually was the one who would not abandon Jesus near the end of his life. While individual instances of conversion are powerful, what we have in Nicodemus is a person whose life was spent in coming to 'faith'.

^{*1} Mark Suriano reK Matthews, ^{*2} Henry G. Brinton (*New Proclamation Year B 2009*), ^{*3} W Loader, ^{*4} Katelyn Beaty Christianity Today May 20 2015,

^{*5} J Petty,

Therefore in our own lives and in the lives of those around us the same Spirit may also take its time, gradually bringing us from fear to faith and from timid acceptance to bold witness in ways that are right for us. In the end Nico was able to "believe in the right way," and was given the gift of transcending what he thought he knew to **being the one** known so closely by God that he was redefined in the process.

He moved from relying on the things of sight – miracles / healings / signs as the reason to believe and came to faith in the one offering them. Faith is not about believing 'things' of sight to be of God but trust in **the one offering**. Faith is about relationship – living in a relationship of coming to know and being known and as a natural outcome of that process we change because we know it is right.

Faith is trusting the gift –giver of life, our Creator gives when we are born again when we become children, belonging in the family of God. Faith is trusting Jesus and living his ways which we can, because of his gift of the Holy Spirit for us. It is a lifelong process learning to trust the terms of our living to God who **trusted us enough** to give us his most precious; *and no it was not a ring – or a 'thing'* it was his beloved Son. And it's a lifelong process, trusting the gift of the Son - His Spirit!

In Johns Gospel we heard how the most precious gift God gave in love was His Son – who in turn gave His Spirit so that we could live as family. Paul writing to the church people in Rome says that what counts in our daily life is **what we do, with** who we are. Are we going to live God's ways – trusting Jesus and his Spirit in faith or not?

A couple of weeks ago I shared how our word for 'faith' comes from the Greek word to 'trust' and that the scripture we had for our reflection was built on ^{*5} trusting faith being the opposite of sin. Nothing to do with being 'good' / or being virtuous as the way to avoid sinning. Everything to do with trusting that we belong in God's family and living like Jesus – His Son did.

Romans 8 verse 15 is key in exploring the texts. 8:15 'For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of son-ship. And by him we cry, "'Abba," Father.'" These words remind us that Paul was writing to slaves. They were owned with no freedom, no future hope, nothing to give their children, just as they had been denied any inheritance themselves, they had no permanency of belonging – no space or place or person, until they came to Jesus and began the process of trusting his claim, his promise, his gift of belonging forever with equal inheritance as first born sons all that God has to give.

You and I know what it is with things that we can see before us, and we know what it is to inherit. Remember this, there is more to share about them. The greenish wine glasses and red salt cellar are Venetian; they were gifts to my mother from my father's family and are over 150 years old, one day someone in our family will inherit. They certainly are 'things' and must have some monetary value, but the real significance lies in who they belonged to: Great Grand Aunt Vera – (who is over 100 years old and still going strong!). The relationship is the 'invisible' part of this inheritance – the 'more'.

And I think today Jesus is saying to us yes there are 'things' you can see: healings, miracles, signs but – but there is more, and not only is it a gift from God through me and my Spirit but it's for life now and ever. No one can take it off you or reject you or ban you, – as a full member of the family of God, you inherit it all, *and* it's not a 'thing' but it's membership in the relationship of Father- Son - Spirit.

I was reminded this week that ^{*4} Christianity is the first major religious tradition to emphasise its growth through verbal proclamation and acts of mercy and healing; not simply growing by blood-family 'additions' or biological means! We are born from above – again and as God's children become family with full membership and full inheritance – and it's nothing we can 'see', it just is. Amen

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