8 March 2020: Choral Eucharist
The Second Sunday of Lent
Genesis 12:1–4a, Romans 4:1–5, 13–17, John 3:1–17
The Revd John Witheridge, Chaplain to the Queen, Honorary Cathedral Chaplain
‘Nicodemus’

“How can someone be born when they are old?”, asked Nicodemus. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

I

Today’s Gospel is a very curious story. A man named Nicodemus comes to see Jesus in the dead of night. He is, we’re told, an important Pharisee. He’s a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish supreme court. Given Jesus’ customary condemnation of Pharisees as hypocrites and perjurers, such an encounter, and the conversation that follows, are a surprise. By the way, only John in his Gospel mentions Nicodemus, and he does so on three occasions. First, this nocturnal encounter with Jesus. Second, when Nicodemus advises his brother Pharisees to give Jesus a hearing before they reach a judgement. And third, after the crucifixion, when Nicodemus brings precious balm to anoint Jesus, and helps Joseph of Arimathea (another Pharisee) to lay the body in the tomb.

Nicodemus addresses Jesus with respect. ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent from God, for no one could perform the signs (the miracles) you are doing if God were not with him.’ So far, so good. But Jesus’ reply seems disconnected, and to have come from nowhere. ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.’ This, not surprisingly, throws Nicodemus. ‘How can someone be born when they are old?’, he asks. Surely they cannot enter their mother’s womb a second time! ‘Very truly, I tell you,’ Jesus persists, ‘no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but Spirit gives birth to spirit.’

Well, what is Jesus saying here to Nicodemus, and to us? If you read the text carefully you’ll see, I think, that there is after all a link between Nicodemus’ compliment that no one could perform Jesus’ miracles unless God were with him; and Jesus’ reply, ‘Truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.’ Jesus
understands that, though Nicodemus can see God at work in his miracles of healing, what he cannot see is the all-important truth that these miracles are signs of the kingdom of God. In other words, signs that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, who has come into the world to establish God’s kingdom, God’s saving rule on earth. You’ll remember that when in prison John the Baptist asked whether Jesus is the one who is to come, Jesus answered, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news preached to them.”

Being able to recognise that Jesus is the Christ; and to see in his works, the coming of God’s kingdom, requires grace, and the gift of the Holy Spirit. That’s what Jesus means by the metaphor of being ‘born again’. There is, of course, a first birth of nature, the birth of the flesh; but there is also a second birth, if and when the Spirit of God gives us eyes to see the truth of the Gospel of Jesus the Messiah, and the coming of his kingdom. ‘Very truly I tell you,’ says Jesus to Nicodemus, ‘no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.’ ‘No one’, writes St Paul, ‘can say “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.’

II

What I think is plain in this tale of Jesus and the Pharisee is that Christian faith requires a radical change in our lives, a new direction - a conversion, if you like, a being ‘born again’, as it’s sometimes called. A step has to be taken; what is outside us has to come inside; the Holy Spirit has to inspire us - if what we may read in the Bible, or see in the faithful, or experience in worship, is to become for us a convincing truth, and a living reality.

For some people that conversion is dramatic. They can name the very time and place when and where it occurred, and when (they might say) the scales fell from their eyes. The apostle Paul’s conversion was like that. On his way to Damascus, he sees a light from heaven, and hears a voice, saying, ‘I am Jesus whom you are persecuting’. And so, ‘at once, as once at a crash’ (as the poet Hopkins puts it), Paul is faced with the undeniable, inescapable truth that Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the Messiah, the Son of God.

There are many other famous examples of dramatic conversions like this. Martin Luther’s is one, or the Christ Church brothers, John and Charles Wesley. Luther, a zealous monk, could not escape a deep sense of guilt. It was his reading of Paul’s letter to the Church in Rome that brought sudden enlightenment and conversion. ‘I felt that I was altogether
born again, and had entered paradise through open gates.’ John Wesley’s story is much the same. He too felt himself unforgiven and unloved, until, on 24 May 1738, he also heard the words of Paul to the Romans. ‘I felt my heart strangely warmed; I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation.’

III

So where does that leave us? Where does that leave Christians like me, and I suspect like most of you, who’ve never had an experience anything like St Paul’s or Luther’s or Wesley’s? Are we missing out? Is our faith deficient? Are we not true Christians?

I think the most important point to make here is that God treats each one of us uniquely. He knows us better than we know ourselves. It isn’t a matter of one size fits all. God will move, inspire, and convert us in ways that are right for us.

For some people there will be a moment when suddenly they see clearly the truth of Christ, or feel powerfully his love or mercy. For others there’s a pilgrimage, and often a long one, in which (like Bunyan’s hero, Christian) all sorts of different people and events will prompt and nudge us. It may be an incident that helps to make us see things anew. Or it may be a sermon or a book; it may be a prayer answered, or not answered. It may be an extraordinary coincidence; or a sense of Christ’s closeness and comfort when we, or those we love, are in pain or distress. For some, it may be a Christian life observed; or a picture, or a poem, or a piece of music. For others, the turning-point will be an assurance of forgiveness.

But what is certain is that faith in Christ, if it’s to be real and whole and true, and not just something habitual and formal, needs to tilt from something external to ourselves, to something acknowledged and internalised, something assented and committed to. This Nicodemus struggled to understand. It sounded to him from what Jesus was saying that he’d have to enter his mother’s womb to be born again. But Jesus is clear. ‘No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.’ Amen