

Birth, New Birth and the Culture of God

A sermon on John 3:1-17 & Genesis 12: 1-4a by Nathan Nettleton, 5 March 2023

© LaughingBird.net

Message

Being born of water and Spirit involves becoming as vulnerable and dependent on God as a newborn baby.

Sermon

Most of you will have picked up by now that the season of Lent has something to do with preparing people for baptism and church membership. The first few generations of Christians weren't much into lengthy preparations for baptism. If a person made a decision to commit their lives to Jesus and his people, they were often taken immediately to the nearest available water and baptised then and there. In a culture and a time where becoming a Christian put you at risk of being fed to the lions, it was reasonable to assume that if somebody said they wanted to follow Jesus, they were not taking it lightly.

But a couple of centuries later that all changed. The Roman emperor, Constantine, announced that Christianity was now the official religion of the empire, and suddenly it was not only permissible to identify yourself with the Church, it was politically and socially advantageous. If you were one of Constantine's soldiers or public servants, you were more likely to get promoted if you were known to be a Christian.

Suddenly the Churches were being inundated with requests for baptism, and suddenly it was a whole lot harder to work out whether people were really wanting to commit themselves to the counter-cultural life of following Jesus in company with his people, or just wanting to position themselves more advantageously in the world's pecking order. So an already growing practice became all the more necessary, and that was to require a lengthy period of education and spiritual formation before baptism, in an effort to ensure that people knew what it meant and were fair dinkum in their commitment to living it out.

That process, known as the catechumenate, often lasted for a year or more, but it culminated in a particularly intense final forty days – analogous to the forty days we heard about last week that Jesus spent in the desert being put to the test to see what he was really made of. This forty days of intense fasting, self-examination, and prayer before the celebration of baptism in the Easter Vigil came to be observed as the season of Lent, and to be seen as a chance for all of us to go back to the catechumenate, if you like, and to ask ourselves again whether we have got what it takes to be the people of God, the followers of Jesus.

On each of the Sundays that break up this forty days, we are confronted with challenging messages from the Bible about what it means to be a follower of Jesus. For some of us, the challenge of tonight's readings may be the most discomfiting of all. In our reading from the gospel according to John, we heard Jesus using the metaphor of birth to describe our emergence into the life of the culture of God. And while I suspect that your memory of being born is as hazy as mine, you can probably still agree that at the time, you had very little control over what was going on and no idea what lay ahead of you.

Jesus's use of this birth metaphor can be easily misheard, because we are rather too familiar with it. The phrase "born again" which comes from this passage alone, has become a widespread slogan for the evangelical movement, and its overuse, and dare I say misuse, has

meant that even if we haven't been totally put off it, we tend to think we know what it means. This is a bit ironic, because in the context in which Jesus uses it, the question of whether we can even begin to know what it means is actually one of the key questions at stake.

In the story, we hear that Nicodemus comes to speak to Jesus on the quiet. Nicodemus is a member of the devoutly religious and highly respected Pharisee party. And in those days, if anyone could be trusted to know what the Bible had to say about anything, it was the Pharisees. Nicodemus's opening line, when he meets Jesus is, "Rabbi, we know ... blah, blah, blah." "We Pharisees, we know..." And although what he is claiming to know is quite positive and affirming of Jesus, his certainty that they already know who he is and what he is on about has already got Jesus challenging him. Jesus doesn't quite say, "You don't know nothing," but he might as well have.

And already that should be a warning to some of us evangelical Christians who have been prone to using his "born again" saying as a kind of slogan that always seems to presuppose that we know what it is about and who is and isn't truly born again. When we think we know what it is all about, Jesus is likely to pull the rug out from underneath us.

Part of the rug-pulling here is that the phrase "born again" is only half a translation of what Jesus is reported to have said, and that hearing it only as "born again" is actually the mistake Nicodemus makes. There is a word play here which can't be translated into English. The word that Jesus uses can have two different meanings. Jesus could be saying that we must be either "born again" or "born from above". Nicodemus gets it wrong because he only picks up on the image of being born again, and misses the imaginative possibilities which open up if Jesus was being deliberately ambiguous and actually meant both.

And surely that is what Jesus is calling us to imagine. Not just being born all over again like the first time, but being born from a different source. And as Jesus continues to speak, he foreshadows his own death by speaking of being "lifted up" on the cross in order to be a source of life, and so we have the "from above" possibility interpreted for us. It is from the crucified Jesus, lifted up above on the cross, that we are to be born again if we are to be born into the culture of God. And the language used, "being born of water and Spirit" is clearly language which would have called to mind the image of baptism for the early Christian community to whom this was written.

Now we could spend a lot of fruitful time exploring what it means to draw our life from the Christ who is lifted up to die, and how that is portrayed in baptism, but I want to stick with this question of what it means to speak of this as an experience of birth. Even though we are born from a different source, Jesus still points to the image of being born as a key to understanding what must happen to us. So, what might that be telling us?

Jesus points out some aspects of what it might mean when he speaks of the wind blowing where it will, beyond our control and our comprehension, and says that it is the same with those who are born of the Spirit. Birth is like that: beyond our control and beyond our comprehension.

That's true even for the parents. I remember at Acacia's birth, one of the most striking aspects of my experience was that of the impossibility of taking control. Neither I nor Margie could exercise much control over what was happening. We could complicate things and create

problems if we resisted what was going on or tried to take control of it, but the only positive things we could do were to try to get in tune with what was going on and cooperate as best we could. Now if that's what it is like for the parents, how much more so must it be for the baby being born. We parents could at least read up and go to classes before hand to know as much as was knowable about what was going to happen. But for the baby, it is a total mystery.

If you remember the story we heard about Abraham in our first reading, you'll realise that we can't take the sting out of this challenge by assuming that the unpredictability only relates to some kind of "spiritual" consequences. You know, whether God will want you to get up earlier in the mornings to pray, or something like that. This "second birth" doesn't come much more life-changing than it did for Abraham, and as Paul makes clear, Abraham is one of the the key figures whose footsteps we are following in if we take this life of faith seriously. God called to Abraham and said, "Get up and leave your country, your relatives and the family of your parents, and move to the land that I will show you." Abraham is not even told what land it will be or what it's like. It's just, "Get up and make tracks and you'll find out what it all means as it unfolds. Just trust me." It is almost like the baby's experience of being pushed out of the womb, ready or not.

Now it may be the case with the new birth that Jesus calls us to, like with God's call to Abraham, that we have some control in the sense that we can refuse to respond to the call and resist the new life that beckons us, but apart from that, it is as beyond our control and comprehension as was our birth from our mother's womb. The very act of responding to the call of Christ and accepting the gift he offers involves a surrender, a relinquishing of all control over our destiny. We can know no more of what life in God will mean than a newborn baby knows of what life in the big wide world will mean before being pushed uncomprehendingly into it. But life in the wide open spaces of God's love is as much our destiny as arriving in the arms of loving parents.

There are plenty of people around who seem intent on repackaging the gospel as some kind of self-improvement or personal growth program. They make it sound as though the culture of God is something we grow into and bring about by a process of self-transformation and social engineering. But Jesus doesn't present it as something we can bring about or grow into. It is something that is born, and that we are born into. We can resist it and abort it, or surrender to it and be born into it, but we can't make it happen. And when it happens, we are not likely to even understand much of what happened to us, let alone be able to codify it into a four-step technique to manufacture or measure the salvation of anyone else.

I recognise that what I am saying here could be construed as an argument in support of infant baptism. And while that's not what I'm intending to do, I recognise that one of the reasons for it is that the impulse or desire of new parents to utilise some sort of religious ritual to mark and celebrate the birth of a child is almost universal. Even parents who have no religious faith often feel suddenly moved to seek some sort of meaning-making rite.

One of the reasons for this is that a birth is such a mysterious and awe-inspiring event. Whether the birth experience is smooth and trouble-free or complicated and traumatic, there is something deeply primal and sacred about this uncontrollable birthing of a new life. It confronts us with the deep mysteries that lie beyond our capacity to manage and organise and understand. And it is at these moments when we stand and gaze wonderingly beyond the horizon of our own limits that we catch a glimpse of just what Jesus was on about and how

closely bound up are these sacred moments; the birth of a baby, the birth of a new follower of Jesus, the birth of the culture of God.

All of them place us in total dependence on the grace of God, all of them spring from the restless, insatiable, generative love of God, and all of them are signs and fruits of God's desire to love and be loved and to bring to birth the age of justice and grace and joy.

One of the reasons that we don't baptise babies, even though we recognise the symbolic connection between baptism and birth, is that it would easily delude us into thinking we can predict and take control of the pathway ahead of the child – into thinking that if we pray hard enough or work hard enough or love hard enough or even perform the right rituals, we can ensure that the child will grasp her destiny of a life lived in Christ. That would be to lose sight of our own limits and fall into Nicodemus's mistake of thinking we can know and we can explain and we can control.

Instead we are called to relinquish our pretensions and surrender ourselves to the birth pangs of the new world that is being born of water and Spirit to the glory of God.

For most of us here, it is some years since we took the plunge and were born from the baptismal pool, entrusting our lives to the unknown future of God. Looking back now, most of us would probably say that if we could have seen some of what it was going to mean, we probably would have been even more uncertain and hesitant than we were. But most of us will also gladly renew our baptismal promises in the Easter Vigil because the journey has been more than worth it. Perhaps it is just as well we weren't warned about some of those consequences that might have put us off. Because as uncertain as this journey may be, the One into whose hands we have entrusted our lives is one who will stop at nothing, not even a tortured death, to ensure our safe birth and ultimate wellbeing.

So as you weigh up, this Lent, whether you will join us in recommitting yourself to a life led by the wind of God's Spirit, or to committing yourself to it for the first time, understand that no one can tell you all that it will mean or where it will take you. It is simply a matter of putting your trust in Jesus; of entrusting your life into the hands of one who will take you who knows where, but who is utterly committed to your best interests and has proved faithful to generations of Spirit-led people before you.