

Nicodemus at night

John 3:1-8

There's a lot that's attractive about the idea of new birth. When we arrive in this world we are given an identity. Usually it will include a group of people, a family or village, to which we belong.

We don't get a lot of say in it! Perhaps I'd rather have spoken French or Hindi during my life but being born where I was meant that English is my mother-tongue. Whether I want it or not. Lots of things at birth are given.

Being born again is a radical idea.

I'm not surprised that Nicodemus struggled to comprehend what it might mean. But maybe being born again is the easy bit. Because if we are born again we need to learn again; to grow again; to fashion our identity afresh.

The most remarkable thing is that this new birth can allow the excluded to belong and the unloved to be cherished. When faith is the only thing that matters there can't be (or shouldn't be) any human characteristic that excludes someone from this family.

It always strikes me that one of the most spectacular innovations of the Christian faith is the idea that it offers re-birthed belonging. Through the broken waters of baptism we are a new creation. We have a new language to learn; new brothers and sisters to love; a home where we are welcome, and regular meals which help us to grow.

If Jesus models this for us then there's something else we need to consider.

Mostly, when we think of the newly born, we imagine snuggling and curling; a tiny life wrapped up and held. That's how it began for Jesus and begins for all of us. There are, of course, those nativity infants in cribs who look rather different. Perhaps it would be kind to call their creators the theologically ambitious - and we see a mini-man greeting the world with blessing, the face of a 30 year old on the body of a child.

However, thankfully, most of the time we see in this infant all the hallmarks of humanity. Crying, needing, leaking and seeking love. That's how it starts. But as the story develops, we see Jesus drawn out. Reaching out to people.

Catching Peter as he sinks into the waves.

Breaking bread and sharing it with friends.

Lastly, on the cross, the exact opposite of his infant state.

Here, stretched out and wounded, there is nowhere to hide; no one to gather him up or to offer comfort.

The invitation to be born again and belong again is wonderful and life-changing. Yet Lent also teaches us that it isn't risk-free or painless. From being held in Mary's arms to being held on the cross, we see that in new birth lies a privilege and a responsibility - and following our calling may leave us exposed and vulnerable.

Those of us who have the experience of being parents will know that however much we might want to hold-on to our children, to protect and minimise risk, we can't hold on forever. Nor should we.

I want to finish with a few lines of the poem by C Day-Lewis which remind some of the reality of growing up and the space we all need to find our path:

I have had worse partings, but none that so
Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly
Saying what God alone could perfectly show –
How selfhood begins with a walking away,
And love is proved in the letting go.

Walking Away by C Day-Lewis

It is eighteen years ago, almost to the day –
A sunny day with leaves just turning,
The touch-lines new-ruled – since I watched you play
Your first game of football, then, like a satellite
Wrenched from its orbit, go drifting away
Behind a scatter of boys. I can see
You walking away from me towards the school
With the pathos of a half-fledged thing set free
Into a wilderness, the gait of one
Who finds no path where the path should be.
That hesitant figure, eddying away
Like a winged seed loosened from its parent stem,
Has something I never quite grasp to convey
About nature's give-and-take – the small, the scorching
Ordeals which fire one's irresolute clay.
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Gnaws at my mind still. Perhaps it is roughly
Saying what God alone could perfectly show –
How selfhood begins with a walking away,
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