



St George's Church Great Bromley

Parish of The Bromleys

*A sermon to be preached at St George's, Great Bromley
on Trinity Sunday, 4th June 2023
by The Revd Canon Stephen Carter*

In John 3:3 Jesus said, "Except a man be born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

It was an afternoon in late May. A young clergyman had been going through months of spiritual struggle. It's not that he had lost his faith, but it had all become rather dry and mechanical. He took himself to Evensong at St Paul's Cathedral. The appointed psalm seemed to express his mood. "Out of the deep have I called unto thee O Lord, Lord hear my voice. Let thine ears consider well, the voice of my complaint".

Following Evensong, he went to a meeting room in Aldersgate Street in the City, where the speaker was expounding Martin Luther's preface on the Epistle to the Romans. He described in his journal the effect this had on him. "About a quarter before nine, whilst he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: and an assurance was given me, that he had

taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death”.

The conversion of John Wesley was on 24th May, 1738. Perhaps to call it a conversion is a misnomer. It was more of a spiritual awakening for someone who already believed. Wesley’s profound spiritual experience changed his life. Until his death over 50 years later, Wesley travelled the length and breadth of the country, often preaching in the open air, in the countryside and in the slums of the poorest towns and cities. In a remarkable explosion of spiritual energy, his ministry brought thousands to a living faith in Christ.

Jesus said to Nicodemus, “Except a man be born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” and there are many Christians, who like John Wesley, have had a dramatic experience of spiritual reawakening or conversion. They can point, as Wesley could, to an exact day and time when they experienced this spiritual rebirth. Such people are truly blessed and I would want to take their experience very seriously. But when we read the New Testament, there doesn’t seem to be a two-tier path to faith in Christ. There is a sense in which every Christian is a ‘born again Christian’ however they have come to faith.

We have all known Christians, who because they have had a dramatic conversion, regard themselves as somehow in the spiritual Premier League, whilst the rest of us, if we are Christians at all, are struggling on in the 4th division!

For all of us, the path to faith will have involved a different journey. There are those who like Wesley, or St Paul before him, have experienced a dramatic conversion, in which their whole world is turned upside down. With this often seems to come a new confidence and a certainty in their faith. For others of us, our journey to faith has been more gradual and uneventful. Some of us may not be able to

recall a time when we didn't believe. We have had no mind-blowing experiences, but rather a gradual, almost imperceptible awakening of faith that has taken place perhaps over many years. Perhaps in this long journey we have known our times of doubt and questioning.

When Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, Jesus tells him he can only enter the kingdom of God by being born again. One of the wonderful things about John's Gospel, is that he chooses his words very carefully. In the Greek, we often find he selects a word that can have more than one meaning. Unless a man is 'gennethe anothen', he cannot enter the kingdom of God. You can translate this "unless a man is born again...." But you can also translate it, "unless a man is born from above, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" The idea here is that alongside our physical birth into the world of the material, there is, for those with faith, a spiritual birth which is "from above."

Whether our faith has come suddenly and dramatically, or has been a slow and gradual process – perhaps even at times a struggle, St Paul's words are still true for all of us: "if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation." That process of being born from above began when we sensed that first stirring of faith in our hearts.

But that process continues, perhaps for a whole life time, and perhaps with peaks and troughs. But the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Blessed Trinity, never gives up on us – inspiring us, moulding us, renewing us. As John Wesley's brother Charles expressed it in one of his greatest hymns: "Changed from glory into glory, Till in heaven we take our place; Till we cast our crowns before thee, Lost in wonder love and praise".