

Trinity Sunday

John 3.1-15

In the course of my work I meet all sorts of people with all sorts of ideas about what makes you a Christian.

For many people in our society today, being a Christian is all about being good (“leading a Christian life”).

But of course, leading a moral, upright life, isn’t what makes you a Christian. After all, there are many “good” Muslims or Buddhists, or even Atheists.

Other views I come across are that its baptism, or confirmation or church attendance or belief in God that make you a Christian.

Now, whilst all of these things might be important, Jesus in our Gospel reading this morning makes it clear that none of these are sufficient.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee and leader of the Jews has seen something in Jesus, notably his miracles, and he has come under cover of night to find out more.

And Jesus says to Nicodemus, “Except (unless) a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

After a little further discussion, Jesus says again, “except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

Yes, Jesus is clear: unless a person is “born again” or undergoes a birth “of the Spirit” he cannot enter God’s kingdom; he does not belong to God; he is not a Christian.

Now this phrase “born again” is a phrase not without its baggage.

Like me, you may have heard people ask “Are you a born again Christian?” as if there were normal Christians and then special “born again” ones!

And I think this assertion of Jesus that each and every person must be born again if he or she is to be part of his kingdom can be particularly difficult for those of us who have always grown up in church; and indeed always believed in God, tried to follow Jesus, said our prayers.

Well we might ask, “what’s this being born again all about? I was born and grew up a Christian! I don’t need to be born again!”

So, what does Jesus mean when he says, “Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God”?

Well, as St Paul says in Romans 5.18 “the result of one trespass (Adams Fall) was condemnation for all”

And as article IX of the XXXIX articles affirms “original sin...is the fault and corruption of the nature of every man”

So it is true that every human being is sinful – by nature, and therefore, in the words of article IX “every person born into this world...deserveth God’s wrath and damnation.”

Because of the Fall, human birth might produce a physically living human being, but not a being, by nature, fit for God’s kingdom.

To be fit for God’s kingdom, Jesus says, a second birth is necessary – a spiritual birth.

So, how might such a spiritual birth take place?

Firstly, it takes place through belief in Christ who died for us.

Secondly, it takes place under the agency of the Holy Spirit.

Let’s look at these briefly in turn:

Belief in Christ who died:

“As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

When Israel was in the desert en-route from Egypt to the Promised Land, they sinned by grumbling against God and God punished them by sending venomous snakes to bite and kill them.

The people repented and God told Moses to place a bronze snake on a pole, and if anyone looked on the snake after being bitten, God would heal them. (Numbers 21)

Similarly, Jesus was to be lifted up on a cross, so that whoever looked on him and believed in him, might not die, but be healed.

It is then, belief in Jesus, in his death on the cross for our sins,
A belief that results in faith and trust and commitment to him,
That saves us.

Secondly, spiritual birth takes place under the agency of the Holy Spirit:

“That which is born of the flesh is flesh” says Jesus, “but that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.”

We looked last week, on Pentecost Sunday, at some of the things the Spirit does, and we spoke about the fact that the Holy Spirit adopts people as children of God.

It is not within us, as people, to come to a saving belief in Jesus.

We need the Holy Spirit to draw us.

And we need the Holy Spirit, then, to make us God’s children.

The way people are born again varies.

For me it was as a child, quietly kneeling beside my bed, saying sorry to God for my sins and turning from them, asking Jesus into my heart, and promising to follow him all my days.

I’d always grown up believing in God and Jesus, always said my prayers, been to Sunday School from a young age.

But I came to a point where I knew that what I had always believed because it was what I had been taught, I needed to take on board for my myself.

For other people, their new birth may be much more sudden and dramatic; involving a complete turn around.

I love the story from the Alpha course videos of a drug addict who was given a bible, used Matthew, Mark and Luke for rolling up joints, before he finally read John and became a Christian. He’s now an Anglican priest.

For other people, who have always grown up in a Christian home and church, it may be that you can’t pinpoint a time when you were born again.

You just know that you believe in Jesus, you’ve repented of your sins and you are following Jesus with all your heart and soul and mind and strength.

And that’s fine.

How we are born spiritually, how we are born again, is really of very little importance.

What’s crucial is that know we have been.

If anyone here today is uncertain whether they’ve been born spiritually, I would urge you to make sure.

A simple prayer stating your belief in Jesus, asking for the forgiveness of your sins and turning from them, asking Jesus into your life and committing yourself to him, is all it takes, if sincerely offered.

For those of us who have been born again in the way Jesus speaks of, then let me mention two implications:

Firstly, the need to go on and grow as a Christian.

The birth of a baby doesn't often come as a great surprise.

Generally parents have a few months to get used to the idea that a baby is on the way and to get ready for the arrival of the pattering of tiny feet.

But as every parent knows, the birth of a baby is just the beginning.

Babies grow.

And babies need to be taught and trained: There's the potty training, the teaching of colours, to read and write, to ride a bike and operate a bank account and to drive a car.

These things can be hard for any child (and parent) – the first time my dad let me drive his car I drove it into a curb and burst the tire!

But they are an adventure, and necessary to attaining mature adulthood.

And so it is for us as Christians.

We need to learn and grow; to learn what our God is really like, to learn what makes him happy and what his purposes for us are. We need to learn how to grow more like Jesus.

And if God really is God, there is always more that we can learn of him.

If we are still not yet perfect, there is always more ways we can learn and grow to be more like Jesus.

And if approached in the right way, it can be a great adventure.

The second implication is that we have a responsibility to share the good news of Jesus dying for us and the good news of the possibility of spiritual birth with others.

As people who carry the Spirit of God inside us, we must be open to his prompting to share the Good News with the people he wants to bring to spiritual birth.