

Lent 2 – Wesley Uniting – 16th March 2014

Theme: Rejuvenating our Faith

Reading: John 3:1-17 'Jesus shares with Nicodemus'
Genesis 12: 1-4a 'The call and response of Abram'

Introduction

One of the joys of this season of Lent leading up to the Easter events is that this season has not been totally taken over by the commercialism of our society. Yes, we have the hot cross buns and the Easter eggs, with a variety of presentations of those products but we do not have the advertising hype of Christmas and the various Christmas parties. If you like, it is a more subdued time of the year which enables us to think more about our Christian faith.

With the emphasis on spiritual reflection and growth in our faith it is wonderful to be able to take time and think about these issues. Also with reflective services such as Ash Wednesday and Maundy Thursday, along with specific Bible studies, we have opportunity to think further about our faith. For me, even in the midst of the busyness of Parish life, it is a time where I enjoy pondering upon the set readings each week and finding refreshment, spiritually, in doing that. Today's readings are no exception. The faith of Abram, in responding to God's call is remarkable. However, I want us to particularly centre our thoughts on the Gospel from John 3:1-17.

Here we have a seeker, Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus asking questions, and Jesus turns his life upside down, initially with what is almost riddles and then with sound teaching.

Let us spend a few minutes with this passage.

John 3:1-17

If any character from the Bible can be regarded as representative of twenty-first century church members, may be even here at Wesley, it might be Nicodemus. He was a successful and self-confident man, playing a leadership role in his community. He is spiritually open and curious, yet rational. He approaches Jesus directly, but at night, indicating that he doesn't want 'all and sundry' to know about his time with Jesus. He is cautious at this point but obviously something about Jesus has caught his imagination and sparked interest. He knows that Jesus is a good teacher, he believes that Jesus has come from God by the signs (miracles) that he does. (vs 2). At this point Nicodemus was not prepared to declare his faith in Jesus – however there was distinct interest.

Within every congregation there are the Nicodemus' – those who are here but unsure about their faith in Jesus. Here because of a partner, here because there is an aspect of the Christian faith that has caught their imagination, here because they are seeking something more in life, here because somehow they have either been impelled to come or attracted by an aspect of worship. This can be a good place to be for a while in your searching, but Jesus seems to ignore Nicodemus' words and bluntly states to Nicodemus:

'I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he/she is born again'
(vs 3)

Naturally Nicodemus seems 'non-plussed' by this statement and responds by saying that it is impossible to re-enter your mother's womb. Jesus then goes on to talk about re-birth. Here is a pastoral invitation to Nicodemus to let God work in his life through the power of the Spirit. So often this is seen as a directive of Jesus – 'be born again'. However, this passage takes on a different tone if we see this as an invitation:

'You should not be surprised at my saying,
'You must be born again'. The wind blows wherever it pleases.
You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from and
where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit' (vss 7-8)

Jesus is both surprising and provocative at this point. It is seemingly irrational, it can't happen and Nicodemus gives voice to that: 'How can this be?'

Jesus pokes fun at Nicodemus – 'You are Israel's teacher and you do not understand these things?'

Jesus then goes on with to teach Nicodemus about what will happen to Jesus and the passage concludes with those two amazing verses:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."(16/17)

We do not know what happens to Nicodemus, faith wise out of this conversation, which is really sad. However we find Nicodemus reappearing in John's gospel at the burial of Jesus in John 19:38-42. We read there that Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for Jesus' body and 'he was accompanied by Nicodemus, who earlier had visited Jesus by night. Nicodemus has brought costly myrrh and aloes to preserve Jesus' body. Obviously Nicodemus had continued to be a supporter of Jesus and had learnt from this encounter with Jesus about re-birth, new life and a freedom found in Christ.

Reflections for us today

1. There is inherent in this passage the warning given to Nicodemus. Yes, you follow the law but do you have the freedom of forgiveness in your heart and a new found spiritual joy in your being. This re-birth is a newness of faith based on the joy of accepting and living with Christ as our Lord and Saviour. That is the call of Jesus for us this Lent.
2. One of my encouragements in ministry is to see this re-birth, this new understanding as people accept Christ. A crusty Warrant Officer in the Navy, who has family problems, suddenly finds the joy of Christ and is a new person – the family can barely believe the change and it flows through that whole home. The middle-aged woman in hospital, bitter with her life, down on her family, carrying a bunch of hurts, reads this passage in the Gideon's Bible by her hospital bed and accepts Christ. She is transformed, reborn, and again the family can scarcely believe she is the same woman. The seemingly impossible has happened. Not necessarily rational to our way of thinking, but who says God has to be rational?!!! Something else for us to think about!
3. We are reminded by Jesus to allow the Spirit to work. Sometimes we are too busy trying to make sure everything is just right, the operations manual is perfect and we fail to allow the freedom of God's Holy Spirit to be at work. The challenge of our faith. Was it rational for Abram to respond to God's call? - NO WAY – yet he did it. Why? Because God called him.
May we hear and respond to God's call upon our lives, our hearts and our minds.

In both readings for today we are reminded that the believing and the doing are inseparable. May we allow the Spirit to rejuvenate our faith this Lent and come to have a new understanding of the rebirth that Jesus teaches to Nicodemus.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, we have come here this morning seeking to better understand you in order to be more adept at following you. Graciously come to us with the rejuvenation of your Spirit in us so that we can follow your ways with joy, openness and love and with praise in our hearts to God. Amen.