

BREATHING LIFE

⇒ I'm sure that Liam and Andra will have very clear memories of the day on which Mason was born. Many of us here will also have memories of the births of our own children or grandchildren or other children in our family that are particularly special to us. However, none of us will be able to remember the day of our own birth or anything about the event, and that's hardly surprising, but most of us will probably have discovered where we were born, on what day of the week and at what time. We may also know how heavy we were and whether we had much hair.

.....Very few of us these days are like *"the young boy who was studying Human Biology and was asked by his school teacher to write an essay on 'birth.' Before starting to write, he thought he would make a few enquiries so he asked his mother about his birth and was told that he'd arrived by special delivery. More questions revealed that his mother had been delivered by the stork and that his grandmother was discovered under a gooseberry bush! So the boy began his essay by declaring that there hadn't been a natural birth in his family for three generations!"*

.....Even though that boy didn't discover the truth about his birth, no one would have dreamt of asking whether he'd been born or not - that was evident for all to see. He was living and breathing. He had received the gift of life. But we do hear some people, possibly in certain Christian circles, talking about *'being born again.'* What does that mean? What did Jesus mean when he told Nicodemus in the story that we have just heard this morning that *'he must be born again?'* And what does that have to do with the Holy Spirit as we begin to think this week about what the Holy Spirit does?

⇒ All sorts of words and phrases are used to describe the way in which people become a Christian and decide to follow the teaching and example of Jesus. We hear people talk of accepting Christ, of giving their heart to the Lord and of being born again to name but a few. But do they all describe the same experience or is being born again something different? What did Jesus mean when he spoke in this way to Nicodemus?

.....Well, one thing's for sure, no two people become a Christian in exactly the same way. All those of you here this morning who are followers of Jesus would have a different story to tell I know. For some it's a very sudden event, for others it can be quite different. The Bible is full of many varying accounts of people meeting Christ, some sudden and clear cut, others a long and winding journey, but all these experiences of meeting Jesus and deciding to follow him are unique and valid. And in every case the Holy Spirit will have had a part to play for it's the Holy Spirit who opens our eyes to who Jesus really is and how much we need God in our lives.

⇒ So, what of this story of Jesus and Nicodemus? Twice, in response to his questions, Jesus told Nicodemus, *'No-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born again.'* As we hear that we might well ask, *'Why do we need to be born again?'* That question may have been in Nicodemus' mind when Jesus spoke to him. He was a Pharisee; someone one who'd dedicated his life to keeping the law and doing what God commanded. However misguided that may have been, there was no doubt about his level of commitment. But, despite believing that by doing all that,

he was pleasing God, he came looking for Jesus. He'd been impressed by the things Jesus did and he was curious.

.....So he came to Jesus at night, searching for answers to his questions. He didn't begin the conversation with a question, but Jesus' reply suggests that there was an implied question there about entering the Kingdom of God. He tells Nicodemus that it isn't signs and wonders which are important; it isn't how hard we may try to do what pleases God that's important but the change in a person. And it's this experience of conversion or transformation that's necessary if we're to experience life as God intended and only the Holy Spirit can bring that about in us. It's not something we can achieve on our own.

⇒ I guess that at least some of you, like me, learned all about weights and measures in pounds and ounces. Now, we go to the shops and we're confronted with grams and kilograms and whilst I have some understanding of what they mean, my brain still wants to work in pounds and ounces and I'm confused. So what a relief to discover that most supermarkets display a conversion table which tells me what I need to know! It tells me how many grams equate to what number of ounces and suddenly, the labels begin to make sense, what I see in front of me, and what I'd previously understood start to come together. In that conversion process, my eyes are opened and life begins to make sense. And in many ways that's exactly what happens when we allow the Holy Spirit to breathe new life into us – we see things differently and life begins to make sense – we are born again and we start to see the kingdom of God.

.....But salvation is more than a reformation of habits, it's a transformation of character and that isn't achieved by our own efforts in a moment of time. The conversion table helps me change ounces into grams whilst the table is in front of me, but without it I'm lost because my mind isn't yet completely transformed to think in metric measurements. Until that's the case I'm still restricted by my old way of thinking in pounds and ounces and I'm still in the dark. Unless we're being transformed, being born again, our life experience is restricted. The new life which the Holy Spirit can bring sheds light into our darkness and understanding to our confusion.

⇒ So, if being born again is necessary for us to experience life in all its fullness and see the kingdom of God, like Nicodemus, our second question will surely be *'how?'* *'How can anyone,'* Nicodemus said, *'enter again into his mother's womb and be born a second time when he is already an old man?'* He seems to have misunderstood Jesus and that may have arisen because the Greek word translated as *'anew'* has three different meanings. It can mean *'from the beginning,'* or *'again'* in the sense of the second time and *'from above'* and therefore from God. Nicodemus seems to have taken the word to literally have the second meaning, or maybe he was trying to trick Jesus with his answer to make him look stupid.

.....Or is there more to his answer than any of that? Perhaps he'd been thinking how difficult it would be to change people like him who'd been doing what they thought was right for a long time and were set in their ways, and the only alternative he could imagine was a new beginning, which also seemed a physical impossibility? You can almost sense the longing in Nicodemus' voice as if he's saying, *'You talk*

about being born again, about this radical change that I need. I know I need it, but in my experience it's impossible. There's nothing I'd like more, but you may as well tell me to enter my mother's womb and be born all over again.' Nicodemus doesn't seem to be questioning the need for change, but the possibility.

⇒ Aren't we a little like that sometimes? We're very aware of how impossible it is to change our own attitudes and behaviour. We have, I'm sure, all tried and often failed to keep resolutions to eat less chocolate or be less critical or get up half an hour earlier or take more exercise or be more patient with the kids! Or, perhaps down through the years we've lost the original enthusiasm we had for our faith. We've become embroiled in church traditions and ways and we've stopped dreaming dreams about what God can do with us and through us. We say that we're too old, or too set in our ways, it's human nature and you can't change human nature - but God can! Receiving new life, being born again isn't just about turning over a new leaf or having a moral clean up, it's about God's life entering us, changing hatred to love, despair to hope and selfishness to giving.

.....It's important to recognise the part that the Holy Spirit plays in all of this and understand that it's not just a human achievement. Verse 8 of our reading emphasises that this miracle of new birth cannot be instigated by us. John writes *'The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.'* The wind, by its very nature, is unpredictable and invisible. We can't see it or touch it, yet we can see evidence of its activity in the waving branches of the trees and feel it at work as it blows our hair out of place. So God's work in the lives of individuals goes on invisibly and at unexpected times, but the evidence is the change in the person's life.

⇒ So, do we have any part to play in receiving this new life and being born again? Is this experience a once and for all event or an ongoing process? If the words of Joseph Alleine are correct in that conversion is not a repairing of the old building but the erection of a new structure then it has to be an ongoing process, making it relevant to those of us who would already speak of ourselves as followers of Jesus. A repair can take place in a short space of time but the erection of a new building is a much longer process. In the same way, the work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of those seeking to follow Christ is ongoing, helping us to see things in new ways, changing our attitudes and behaviour, so that we're continually being born again. But although this activity is initiated by God, we do have a part to play. If transformation is to take place then we must be willing for it to happen and believe that it can.

.....But we humans are quite good at resisting change. We may recognise our need to be born again, to be transformed and yet we resist it. We feel comfortable in our surroundings, and satisfied with the depth of our Christian experience, or even if we're not satisfied, we think that God wouldn't be able to do anything with us. But the first step that we need to take towards receiving new life is to ask God for forgiveness. It's the Holy Spirit that helps us to recognise God's love for us despite whatever may have happened in our life up to this point and God's willingness to give us a fresh start. We see that spoken of and symbolised in the baptism service that we have shared in this morning. That's what Jesus refers to when he speaks to

Nicodemus about being born of water and the spirit. We need to recognise our need to say sorry for the past and be made clean again as we receive God's forgiveness.

⇒ But Jesus speaks of being born of water and the spirit. Being born of water, being baptised as a sign of our seeking forgiveness is just an outward sign of what is happening on the inside of us. A baby in the womb has eyes and ears but sees and hears very little in its limited surroundings. Yet once it's born it's stimulated by its new surroundings and begins to see and hear new things, things that it would never have experienced had it stayed in the womb. So with us, if we're open to the possibility that God wants to make changes in us, if we're willing to be transformed and seek God's forgiveness, then the Holy Spirit will begin his work in us. When Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist the scripture records that the Spirit came upon him like a dove. It's not the physical act of baptism that changes us but it's what is going on inside of us that makes the difference. It may, at times, be a painful struggle, but the new experiences which can be ours will surely be worth the effort. God initiates the process, but we need to respond to his promptings in faith, believing that we can be changed with the help of the Holy Spirit.

⇒ Nicodemus had spent his life doing what he thought pleased God, but then found himself in the darkness seeking Jesus. We may have similar experiences where we suddenly find ourselves in the dark, not quite sure what God wants us to do next. That's the Holy Spirit, encouraging us to search, that's part of the process of being born again and receiving new life. Or maybe you find yourself becoming aware and critical of some failing in your life, that's the Holy Spirit encouraging you to change. That's part of the process of being born again and next week we'll think more deeply about the changes that happen in us when the Spirit continues to breathe this new life into us!

.....This rebirth, this experience of the fullness of life which God offers, is available to all of us, it is initiated by God himself out of his love for us, made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus and enabled to happen by the power of the Holy Spirit. John wrote, "For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but may have eternal life." And this new life, this opportunity to start again can be ours if we search for it, and then accept it by faith. Let us not resist, but assist, allowing God to continually bring us from the darkness into the light. Let us respond to the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives so that it becomes evident to all by the changes in our character, that we are being born again and allowing the Spirit to breathe new life into us!