

A few years ago, in a former parish, I was preaching on this Gospel passage (John 3: 14 – 21), when I became aware of a couple in the congregation, visitors, who were clearly paying careful attention to what I was saying, for which, I have to say I am always very grateful. After the service they approached me and with glowing faces they said, ‘Oh it was so good to hear your sermon. Like you, we are both born again Christians!’ I am not sure what they had picked up from my words, but I had referred to the words of Jesus earlier in his dialogue with Nicodemus, when he said, ‘Truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again, also translated as born anew.’ I gave this couple some encouragement and a warm hug of fellowship, but with a little friendly caution about their terminology.

Because the term ‘born again Christian’ is rather like saying ‘round circle’ or ‘three-sided triangle.’ It is what we call a tautology. What those who like to describe themselves as ‘born again Christians’ are usually trying to express is that until a certain point in life their faith, such as it was, was inadequate, drab, routine, perhaps almost dead. Then one day or perhaps over a period of time, by the grace of God, they were awakened. They may or may not have had a mystical experience, but their faith was renewed and became real. God, and the worship of God, was no longer something that they fitted into their lives when it suited them but was now centre stage.

The real way to God, said Jesus, is to be born all over again in the Spirit of God. This involves turning one's life around, being changed, transformed, so that with God's Spirit in the heart people can truly become children of God and live the way God intends for them to live. All who have been baptized by water, who share in the eucharist, and have chosen sincerely and intentionally to follow Jesus Christ are, by definition, born again, born anew in the Spirit of God.

Nicodemus, and those he represented were stuck in an old way of religious thought and practice. The system and its leaders encouraged people to believe that they could get close to God by carefully following 'the rules,' from observing the sabbath to keeping the food, hygiene and purity rules and, as we considered last week, observing the commandments by being careful not to break them but without necessarily using them to do good. It is this kind of religious practice that probably prompted the Gospel writer to mention earlier in the chapter that Nicodemus came to Jesus *by night*. To Nicodemus and all who thought like him, it was always 'night.' They lived in spiritual darkness; they were blind to the light of God, a light which shone through Jesus in everything he said and did.

There is still so much darkness and blindness in the world, though nothing to do with physical night-time or visual impairment. When we live and work purely for our own gain and convenience, when we cause hurt to others, ignore, or

exclude them, when we have aggressive or prejudicial attitudes towards any particular person, group, race, nationality, religion, or whatever, then for us it is still night, our world is one of darkness. This is life lived in separation from God, a state that traditionally we call sin.

To follow Jesus Christ is to choose a better way; indeed, it is to choose life rather than death. Jesus was God's light shining in a darkened world. He continues to show God's way of life for us, ultimately the happiest way, the way that urges human beings to reflect God's love for the world of which our Gospel speaks, which means to love our fellow human beings and express that love indiscriminately through compassion, self-giving service, promoting reconciliation, peace, and justice. It is to embrace a life and lifestyle that is truly connected to God and to neighbour, living the great commandment.

The Christian mystics, those who have learned to see spiritual realities on a vaster scale than most of us, speak of each human being as being born with the light of God in them, the divine spark, as they sometimes call it. Mothering Sunday is an appropriate time to appreciate how we follow our parents in looks and in so many other characteristics and values and be thankful for them. As children also of God who is divine Father and Mother to us, we are all likenesses of God, however vague and imperfect now, but capable of growing in our divine identity. As our second reading today puts it, it is

through God's grace and nothing we have achieved ourselves that we come to holiness and the fullness of life in Christ. 'For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for the good works which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.' But as human beings, we must choose to receive this precious gift for our life.

As we reflect upon the divine way of life into which we have been baptized and called to follow, let us in our worship today and through this Lenten season of renewal, resolve to connect more deeply with the light of God that already burns within us, so that our lives glow with a light and warmth that not only enhances our Christian faith, identity, and discipleship, but has the power to draw the interest, the curiosity of others. Then by the grace of God, they too may choose to follow the same light, and come to the new day, the new birth and life, that God has made for all his children, so that together we can live and enjoy our full humanity in this life and look forward to the greater life and joy to come.