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Born from Above (John 3: 1-17)

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For the next four weeks in this season of Lent, the readings set by the lectionary are drawn from the gospel of John – which means they’re typically long and involved. We start tonight with the visit of Nicodemus to Jesus, and in weeks to come, we’ll have the woman at the well (John 4), Jesus healing the man born blind (John 9) and Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead (John 11). These readings from John are bookended by passages from the gospel of Matthew – last week we had Jesus tempted in the wilderness and at the end of Lent, on Palm Sunday, we’ll have his version of the entry into Jerusalem.

A couple of weeks ago I was pondering this forthcoming scriptural diet, feeling a little daunted and wondering what we might usefully make of it. And what struck me was that one way we could think of this collation of readings is as a kind of distillation of the arc of redemption. They seem to offer touchstones for what’s involved in the journey of redemption and how we might expect that journey to affect us.

Last week, we explored our first touchstone. The story was of Jesus being tempted by the devil straight after his baptism, at the very outset of his public ministry. It’s as if our tradition imagines that there’s some temptation, some perennial human tendency that must be refused if the redemptive journey is ever really to get underway. What is it – this temptation? It’s our default habit of trying to possess our lives, our meaning, our identity apart from God. It’s our tendency to get attached to false sources of security and sufficiency. These false sources can take various forms – power, money, the need to succeed are obvious ones. But more subtly, they can include attachment to any story we tell about ourselves, any pattern of thought or behaviour that gives us the *illusion* of security but which actually separates us from ourselves and others.

Maybe I get a lot of mileage from a story about myself as a victim, for example, perennially put upon or taken advantage of – and I don't know who I'd be without that identity. Maybe I'm attached to a sense of myself as unlucky or disappointed or small; maybe I have a habit of taking offense or picking a fight whenever I feel vulnerable. The temptation story reminds us that if you're in any way committed to the spiritual path, then you cannot even begin until you've started to confront your ego-ic reactions and your self-protective strategies, and given them up. This is the necessary starting point of the redemptive journey, the passage that leads to real connection and wholeness.

This week, in the story of Nicodemus, we're introduced to a second touchstone. Which is Jesus' insistence that the deepening journey relies essentially on the action of God. We can and must say 'no' to what's untrue, false, illusory and futile; we must dispose ourselves and make ourselves available. But there's a part of this action, this movement of redemption, that is necessarily God's and beyond our control: we must be 'born from above', Jesus says, 'born of the Spirit' and the Spirit blows where it chooses.

This way of putting things confuses Nicodemus. How can anyone be born after having grown old, he asks; how can anyone be born 'again'? Jesus only intensifies his utterance without answering the question. 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water (which signifies our repentance) and Spirit (which signifies God's gift) ... Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above"'. Nicodemus is then chastised for being a 'teacher of Israel' who does not understand these things.

So what is Jesus talking about? As I conceive it, the whole point of our faith is not that we become morally good, socialized rule followers, obedient performers of ritual action. It's that something is quickened in us – the deepest of our human capacities awakened, realised. It's that we're released, transformed, healed at the level of consciousness itself and so more able to love as God loves, to be as God is. In different ways, all the gospels testify that in encounter with

Jesus this is what happened. People received something – call it grace, call it forgiveness, call it the Spirit, release from bondage, a new energy for living. This gift was something they did not earn and could not manufacture. Yet it changed everything – the way they saw themselves, the way they related to others, their freedom to be, their effectiveness and power. This, according to the gospels, is redemption, salvation, newness of life. It's what's on offer if we will let go the false sources of our lives, and allow ourselves to be sourced in God's life – if we're born 'from above'.

Well, as a possibility, as a promise, it sounds liberating and greatly to be desired. But what if the effect of this talk of being 'born from above', 'born again', is painful? What if instead of being inspired and renewed by it, we just feel defeated and left out? That was my experience for many years. Not only when people asked if I'd been born again (which I never felt I had) but more generally, because I felt as though I was somehow missing an essential ingredient, an essential experience in the life of faith. I was a plodder, a good girl, a try-hard – but the Spirit never blew my way – or so it seemed. What was I doing wrong? Why was I missing out? And maybe this is an experience some of you share. Theologian James Alison has spoken of how this kind of language of 'being born again' or 'born from above', can result in people feeling as though 'someone is using a phrase, a way of talking, to make you feel inferior, to suggest ... that you aren't really "in" on the centre of the Christian faith'. (KJ, pp.3-4).

I can't think this is what Jesus intends. Nor that it's about God playing favourites – as if when Spirit blows where she wills, some are just going to miss out and remain forever in the doldrums. It is the nature of God to give God's self, to pour out love. There's nothing arbitrary, capricious or 'stop-start' in this endless overflow of divine life. But if that's true, what does it mean if we're not feeling it? Should we just assume that we're all born again, whether we know it or not? Well, I think that's not quite it either.

There's an image I've used before, which I find profoundly helpful in this connection. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein once described the experience of redemption as of 'no longer supporting yourself on this earth but suspending yourself from heaven'. For me, this image of suspension evokes something of the felt sense of faith, of what it means to be 'born from above', born again. Suspension is an experience of being no longer purely self-supporting, but given over and held. When this happens, we 'feel' it ... and it shows in our lives. Wittgenstein says, 'It is true that someone who is suspended looks like someone who is standing but the interplay of forces within [her] is nevertheless a quite different one & hence [she] is able to do quite different things than one who stands' (CV39e).¹ In the state of 'suspension', being 'born from above', we can still feel anxious, fearful, tired – we can feel inadequate or doubt ourselves, be overwhelmed by the big issues. And yet, **something** is irrevocably different – we've got access to a different energy, and the more we remember to be open to it, to release our anxiety and self-concern, the more this energy flows through us and changes the quality of everything we do and are.

Which brings us back to the question of receptivity. How do we receive this gift? How do we receive this life of the Spirit? At heart, it's about trust: which is what the word 'believe' means in John – as in 'whosoever believes in him will have eternal life'. Trust is about daring to open ourselves wholly, to let ourselves truly go so as to discover God trustworthy. For some of us this isn't easy. I remember yearning to be able to entrust myself at this deep level and yet finding myself still hanging on. And, at this point, I think the only thing we can do is be present to our stuckness, our 'unbelief', our felt sense of withholding – not judging or condemning ourselves, but being with how it is and our helplessness, being with it prayerfully, expectantly.

¹ [taken from Mikel Burley, *Contemplating Religious Forms of Life: Wittgenstein and D.Z. Phillips* (London: Continuum, 2012), p.57].

In the wilderness, when the Israelites were bitten by serpents, God instructed Moses to lift up a bronze serpent on a pole. When they looked on the source of their poisoning they would be mysteriously healed. So it is at times with us – if we attend our wound, our resistance, our stuckness – somehow this itself becomes the way, the point at which God breaks through – sometimes suddenly and dramatically, sometimes slowly, gently, over many years. *‘For God did not send the Son in order to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him’.*

So as we continue our Lenten journey – exploring the touchstones of our redemption – I invite you this week to let yourself be present to your characteristic tendencies to self-protection and preservation, and to Jesus’ invitation to let yourself be sourced anew in God, to be born and reborn from above. The gift is being given – let us dare to receive it.