

**March 5 2023 – 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent – John 3: 1-17 – St. James, St. Marys**

*May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be always acceptable to You,  
O Lord, our Light and our Life. Amen.*

Before I retired, I promised myself that I would not get into the habit of watching daytime TV. Well, I have to confess...that promise didn't last long. I have two favourites that I watch whenever I can... Escape to the Country (I love seeing the beautiful countryside of my homeland) and Call the Midwife. Whoever writes the storylines for that show does an amazing job of addressing the challenges of life in the east end of London in the 1950s and 60s, and the wonder of witnessing new life, these little babies entering the world, never ceases to touch my heart.

The wonder of birth is at the heart of our gospel reading this morning, but not in the usual way we think of birth. Nicodemus has already been born once. He has been born physically for sure, but one can also say he has been born spiritually. He has been born into the traditions of the Pharisees and teachers of the Law. He has been born into their concerns for holiness and ritual purity which are part of their interpretation of their religious tradition. And, John tells us, he is regarded as a leader in his community. But it would seem that Nicodemus is seeking something more – maybe his current Pharisaical life and beliefs are strangling his spirit like a cord around his neck. And so, he seeks out Jesus, coming to visit him 'by night'. "Rabbi," he says to Jesus, "we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Sensing his curiosity, Jesus invites him to dive deeper into his faith. "If you want to see the kingdom of God," Jesus tells him, "then you need to be born from above." Now Jesus is speaking metaphorically, but, as so often happens in the Gospel of John, the people to whom he is speaking take his words literally.

Nicodemus is understandably puzzled. He protests, quite rightly, that a person cannot enter into the mother's womb a second time and be born. But, it is possible for a person to be reborn spiritually, or, as Jesus puts it, "born from above." John's Gospel frequently distinguishes between the "below" and the "above." The "above" is the realm of God working through Jesus to bring light, and to invite belief and the advent of eternal life in the present. The "below" is the realm of this world, with its darkness and resistance to belief in Jesus. New birth, then, is a transformation of unbelief into belief. It is a transformation of darkness into light. It is a transformation of restricted, judgmental life into abundant life. As such, spiritual new birth can be painful. Like physical birth it involves leaving behind the past and breaking into the present. Like physical birth, sometimes it takes longer than we would like, and at other times it comes upon us before we are ready. Spiritual new birth, while set in motion by God's Grace, takes labour on our part.

John Wesley, that great Anglican minister of the 18<sup>th</sup> century who founded the Methodist Church, described the New Birth like this:

*From hence it manifestly appears, what is the nature of the new birth. It is that great change which God works in the soul when he brings it into life; when he raises it from the death of sin to the life of righteousness. It is the change wrought in the whole soul by the almighty Spirit of God when it is "created anew in Christ Jesus"; when it is "renewed after the image of God, in righteousness and true holiness"; when the love of the world is changed into the love of God; pride into humility; passion into meekness; hatred, envy, malice, into a sincere, tender, disinterested love for all mankind. In a word, it is that change whereby the earthly, sensual, devilish mind is turned into the "mind which was in Christ Jesus." This is the nature of the new birth: "So is every one that is born of the Spirit."*

I have long thought that this season of Lent, in which we find ourselves, is all about renewal. I'm always glad I live in the northern hemisphere where Lent coincides with springtime, when we see everything around us burgeoning with new life: snowdrops pushing up from the cold earth, buds growing fatter on the branches, birds building their nests and raising their young. And it is that time of year when we can be renewed spiritually, maybe by following what the Ash Wednesday liturgy encourages us to do: by self-examination, penitence, prayer, fasting and almsgiving, and by reading and meditating on the word of God. Or maybe it might be by deciding to go for a walk every day, and making a point of seeking out God's presence in creation. Or reading a particular book that will draw us closer to God.

At its heart, Lent is about preparing for the celebration of the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ at Easter; it is about mindfully turning back to God to experience the wondrously new and abundant life God has in store for each and every one of us through the paschal mystery. To paraphrase Psalm 51, it is when we ask God to "Create in us a clean heart, and renew a right spirit within us."

Amen.