

Blowin' in the Wind

12 March 2017

Revd Jenny Wilkens

Genesis 12:1-4

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

John 3:1-17



http://www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz/sermons_pid_22.html

As I write this keeping an eye on reports of what they've called the Tasman Tempest, I've been reflecting on how we Cantabrians have a somewhat ambivalent relationship with the wind. I remember from my days here as a student that it always helped to know what the wind was doing before you set off on your bike, so you could work out head winds and tail winds to your advantage! Whether it's the hot norwester or a 'bracing' southerly or the easterly which so recently whipped up the fires on our Port Hills with such tragic consequences, there is always something to say about the wind! But our consternation is extreme if there isn't any, and – heaven forbid – the airport is fog-bound! But then the wind returns and blows away the clouds, leaving such a fabulous Canterbury big sky. The same wind that drives us crazy on a bad day is exhilarating and energising on a good day, especially if that involves a walk on the beach.

'The wind blows where it chooses, you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes' (John 3:8).

No wonder poor Nicodemus is confused. I feel Nicodemus gets a bit of a bad press, yes, he comes to Jesus by night in secret, but John does not paint Nicodemus as like some other Pharisees in his Gospel who are opposed to Jesus. Rather, Nicodemus is curious about Jesus, trying to work him out and fit him into his preconceived categories, cautious but perhaps understandably so, he has a lot to lose, as a leader and a teacher of his people.

Perhaps he is anticipating a cosy civilised little exchange of views among fellow rabbis, a sort of academic common room discussion in a quiet corner. He certainly acknowledges Jesus as a Rabbi and seems to compliment him from the start: we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no-one could do signs like you do apart from the presence of God (John 3:2).

Good move, Nicodemus, if a little patronising, but unfortunately it's a false start as John has told us that Jesus is none too impressed with those who show interest in him just because they're fascinated by signs and miracles (John 2:23-25). Jesus is looking for something a bit deeper than just a superficial attraction to the latest celebrity in town.

And so Jesus cuts to the chase with Nicodemus, goes right to the heart of it – nothing less than a whole rebirth will do, a complete makeover: “No-one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above” or “born again”.

We can get a bit hung up or dismissive of that phrase ‘born again’ I think, I can still recall my flatmate making a cake in the middle of the night after we’d watched Bjorn Borg win Wimbledon for the 5th time, with ‘Bjorn again’ written in icing on the top of it!

Perhaps it’s more helpful to use the translation our NRSV Bible version uses, ‘born from above’. It certainly would have helped Nicodemus, who seems to be a bit of a literalist, getting into stories about labour and birth, when actually Jesus is using a metaphor: you need to be born from above, born of water and born of the Spirit of God, a spiritual rebirth which launches you into new life, still dripping from the waters of baptism.

Ok, got that, but then why does Jesus change tack again and start talking about the wind? ‘The wind blows where it chooses’. John is here indulging in some punning or word play, as the word *pneuma* in Greek can mean wind *or* Spirit, just as the Hebrew equivalent word Ruach can mean Spirit *or* wind *or* breath. So here Jesus is playing for all he’s worth on these different images of the Spirit of God as wind or breath, the Spirit gives life and energy, it is the impetus to push us into new directions, new departures. And it is the same for those who have been born of the Spirit: they too are given spiritual new life and energy by the Spirit, and they too are pushed out into new directions, new departures.

This is obviously all a bit too much for Nicodemus to handle and he falls silent, perhaps at this stage just too cautious, to let the yearning of his heart which has drawn him to Jesus lead on into action, to response, to radical commitment.

But Jesus goes on to show Nicodemus that he is not asking anything of him that he will not ask of himself. Just as we heard last week that **the Spirit** drove Jesus out into the wilderness at the beginning of his ministry (Mt 4:1), so the Son of Man will feel called by the Spirit to follow the way of the cross to Jerusalem: ‘so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life’.

‘Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness’ – John here uses the comparison of that rather strange little story in Numbers 21, where Moses lifts up a bronze serpent on a pole to avert a plague of serpents and so brings healing to all those who look upon it.

So, in the mystery of the love between Father, Son and Holy Spirit that spills over into the world, God has sent his Son into the world, where one day he will be lifted up on a cross, that all those who look to him in faith might be saved and healed through him.

This is the saving faith, Paul assures us, the trust that enabled Abram and Sarai to set out on a new journey, even at the tender age of 75 – just notice that, if you were thinking of settling down! They were able to leave home, family, country, trusting in God’s promise of a new family, new home, new names Abraham and Sarah, a new identity, new blessing which would enable them in turn to *be* a blessing, to bring God’s blessing to all the nations of the world.

But what about Nicodemus? I don’t want to leave him languishing in the middle of the night, confused, drawn to Jesus but stuck in indecision, in the borderlands of faith. He reminds me of an albatross chick, poised on the edge of the cliff but not yet willing to let the wind catch him up, take him, hold him, let him soar... Well, it seems that Nicodemus does continue on his journey of following Jesus in the wings, weighing things up, for in John 7 we read that when the temple police were discussing with the Pharisees about arresting Jesus, Nicodemus puts a word in for him: “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing, does it?” (John 7:51). And then finally after Jesus’ death, Nicodemus along with Joseph of Arimathea is there, bringing spices to wrap with Jesus’ body and placing his body in the tomb in the garden (John 19:39-41).

At the last, it seems that at the time when it was probably most dangerous to admit to being a follower of Jesus, Nicodemus *is* willing to risk his life and declare his allegiance openly to the one he has come to follow as a disciple. At the end he is there to minister to the one who did not condemn him but rather encouraged him on a journey of faith of his own, from night to dawning light.

What about us? John’s gospel is full of these wonderful character portrayals, stories of Jesus’ encounters with individuals and it is always salutary to consider: what is there of Nicodemus in me? Where am I like Nicodemus, perhaps on a journey of questioning, searching, yearning myself? Perhaps afraid of my faith being made known, fearful of opposition or critique? Perhaps wondering where the Spirit is wanting to blow me in a new direction, on a new journey, a new adventure of faith? Perhaps scared about that? Or perhaps longing for that holy newness?

Lent is a holy gift of time to take spiritual stock, to simplify and declutter our lives so that we might hear more clearly the voice of God’s Spirit, God’s wind, whether it be a breeze or a tempest, or perhaps the breathing of God deep inside us when we at last become still. And then might come the challenge, as it did for Abraham and Sarah and Nicodemus, to take a step of faith, a step into new life, a step into new blessing that we might be a blessing to others.

And as we come to Jesus afresh this Lent with all our questions, yearnings and longings, Jesus might well say to us as to Nicodemus, “The answer, my friend, is blowin’ in the wind, the answer is blowin’ in the wind”.