

The Wind Blows Where It Will

A sermon preached at St Stephen's Uniting Church, Macquarie Street Sydney on Sunday 31st May 2015 by Ross Smith. Readings for Trinity Sunday were Isaiah 6:1-8, Psalm 29, Romans 8:12-17, John 3:1-17.

When I was a teenager in a country town in South Australia, I was told by my minister after a Sunday morning service, "Oh Ross, I have put your name on the next quarterly preaching plan. If you have any questions. I know you will feel free to come and talk with me about them."

I believe I may have the feeling Isaiah had when he said 6:4 "The foundations were shaken." This led to a response when, like Isaiah 6:8, I was led to say "Here am I. Send me!" Isaiah goes on to say some heard his prophetic words but did not understand, and some heard and did understand.

After one of my youthful sermons a teenage girl said to me, "Did you preach that sermon at me? Every word struck home." After another early sermon one of my fellow youth group members said, "What was that all about? I didn't get a thing out of it." I said, "Well, look, the Spirit blows where it will." Sometimes there is a connection, sometimes not.

Our texts for today are about the Spirit. We know that this Sunday is a celebration of the Trinity. But it also in the season of the Spirit, called Pentecost, and runs though to the Advent Season in late November/early December. Half the Christian Year focusses on the Spirit.

Who can deny that today, in our world and in our nation and in our various religions, cultures and faiths and in our congregation too, we need to have people of Spirit?

But how do people of Spirit come to be? What creates such people? How does it come about? Where do we start looking to find that all-creative word, act or occasion which gives birth to people who have a vision and a passion for the increase of the love of God and neighbour? This statement of the purpose of the People of God comes from H Richard Niebuhr, who wrote much about Christ and Culture.

This is the question posed also in our gospel text for today, when that "man of the night" named Nicodemus approached Jesus. He did so as one might approach one who was thought to be a strong possibility of being the longed-for Messiah. (We note, in passing, that Nicodemus is mentioned another two times in John's gospel (7:50 where he demands that Pharisees should not condemn a person without first "hearing him to find out what he is doing," and later in 19:39ff he took part in the preparation of the body of Jesus for burial and the burial itself in the garden tomb.)

Nicodemus wanted to know how does Jesus work these signs? You couldn't work these signs unless God were with you? How do you get that Spirit that produces new people and new lives? How do I get a new life?

Jesus says, in effect, "Nicodemus, I have three things to say to you. Point 1: You have to be born from above to see the kingdom. Point 2: You have got to get the Spirit, Point 3. The Wind blows where it will."

That was Jesus. Ask him a simple, straightforward question like "What do I have to do to get what you have?" and he answers with parables, talk of birth, Spirit, wind. Go back to creation.

Surprising images: Birth, Wind. John's gospel refers us back to the Creation story of Genesis: "In the beginning was the Word." Genesis pictures the Spirit of God hovering over the waters. Spirit, breath, and wind go together. Word requires breath, needs Spirit, and creates worlds from nothing.

You want to get into the kingdom, Nicodemus? Simple "Just be born from above." (Greek word "Anothen).

Well how can you do that? Obviously, I can't get back into my mother's womb and be born a second time. Jesus says "I'm not saying that you can be born again in a purely physical sense. I'm saying you must be born from above. "From top to bottom." From head to toe. Completely. (Later, the same word is used for the tearing of the temple veil, "anthen" meaning from top to bottom).

As so often happens in John's gospel somebody hears, but doesn't hear. When Nicodemus heard Jesus say the first time "anthen" he thought he heard him say "born again." So Jesus says to him again, "Listen: "born **from above!**"

Often people today make the same mistake that Nicodemus made. They misinterpret it, saying "You must be born again." Like a second time, or something. When somebody says "I'm a born again person" we could perhaps interject "Yes, but are you born "from above"?" In other words, radically changed from self-focus to outward-focus?

But no. Jesus said "You must be born from above." Flesh is flesh. Spirit is Spirit. What God wants to do with you is a renovation involving an attic to basement overhaul. Top to bottom. Anthen.

Okay, I think I am getting it, But how? Well, you get it the same way you got to be born. What did you have to do to get born Nick?

"Well I was just floating along and then I just got pushed out."

"Right! Getting into my kingdom is a lot like that, getting a shove, a push out enough to shake the foundation of your life. Re-orientation of yourself from self-concern to loving God and neighbour.

But how?

Well, like Wind. The Spirit blows where it will. You don't know whence it comes or where it is going. You can't control it, predict it, harness it. Getting into creative action on behalf of others is a lot like that. Only more so. It's pneuma. It is Spirit. It is Wind. It is both.

So Jesus responds to Nicodemus in these interesting, mysterious, foundation-shaking words, "Birth, Spirit, Wind."

How does it happen? It happens, says Jesus, because that is what God is like. "God so loved the world that God gave..."

God is gracious. God gives of God's very self. Totally. To the death. For the sake of abundant life. God is the model for abundant life. By loving the creation, all of it, all of us.(I think John the preacher has taken over the text here, and in other places, to give his grounding of the total giving of the Spirit.)

Nicodemus keeps saying "I don't understand." And Jesus says "Now you're catching on!"

You must be born from above. The "you" is in the plural. It means "All of you." Everyone of you. In John there are a lot of double meanings.

It's not just a matter of a technique, where we work little by little to effect change in our attitude. Such as racism, materialism, xenophobia or a personal vice.

It's a whole change where we savour the wonder of creation, the wide variety of talents and gifts around us and where we see life as a gift, an opportunity to share its wonders and enjoyments and challenges. We experience pneuma, Spirit.

Sometimes there is a connection, sometimes not. Sometimes the foundations get shaken, the Word gets through, the gift, the grace is received.

That was Jesus' connection with Nicodemus. He offered some answers to Nicodemus' questions and Nicodemus didn't seem to "get it" at first. But then, maybe, later, it did connect, for we know he had more to do with Jesus, once defending Jesus before some critics and later in helping in laying Jesus' body in the garden tomb.

The Spirit blows where it will, and sometimes it shakes the foundations and brings new life and people who heard but did not understand come to understand and hear anew.

The Spirit is pictured as breathing and bringing life in the creation story of Genesis. John's gospel says "In the beginning" was not only the breath of God, but also "the word of life."

It is a delightful thing when a refreshing breeze ripples the congregation from the pulpit, an experience of grace. We savour the moment of connection, the breath, pneuma, the Spirit. When that ripple occurs between us and our neighbour we celebrate the Spirit. We celebrate the signs of the increase among people of the love of God and neighbour.

We breathe again. The Wind Blows Where It Will. "God so loved the people of this world that God gave God's only Son so that everyone who has faith in him will have eternal life..."

It's Nicodemus' moment. No longer in the dark. It's my moment. It's our moment. It's Life! It's connection. It's mysterious, it's amazing. It's grace. The wind blows where it will.