

Born Anew: Being Set Free

Evensong on Trinity Sunday

John 3/ Exodus 3

Mindful we are celebrating the Trinity today – I pray that I may speak in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I've been musing over a short poem by a new favourite poet of mine called Hafiz. Hafiz was a Sufi mystic – who lived and wrote in 14thC Persia. This rather witty translation captures well, I think, the always-contemporary message of the mystic.

Here's the poem:

First

The fish needs to say

Something ain't right about this camel ride -

And I'm feeling

So damn

Thirsty...

First the fish needs to say...

What am I doing here?

Who am I?

Why does this not feel right?

I have a strange feeling I'm meant to be somewhere else?

I'm thirsty!

We don't really know what Nicodemus' motivation was for coming to Jesus that night. Threatened by Jesus' influence, was he trying to win him over? Impressed by his miracles, was he trying to form a coalition? Or was he genuinely seeking something more? I like to think he was thirsty for truth, even if somewhat frightened of what his gang might think of this rendezvous. I like to think he was thirsty for something – even if he came to Jesus atop the dromedary of religious reason.

'I know you are a teacher from God... because you're doing some pretty amazing things,' says Nicodemus; flattering Jesus, perhaps – but in any case, signalling a very particular sort of conversation.

But Jesus didn't generally go for rational and logical discourse. Instead his responses tended to be cryptic, subversive, startling, inviting... he painted pictures, spoke in parables; challenged his listeners to come at life from a different angle.

'Listen Nicodemus', Jesus was more or less saying, 'you aren't going to get there on that camel... It would be like trying to get through the eye of a needle: You're not going to see God's Kingdom unless you are born anew.'

Nicodemus persists along the logical line. Perhaps almost chiding Jesus, he says - 'How can this be? Can a man return to his mother's womb?'

Jesus replies, 'Very truly' (hear 'I'm being serious...') 'You must be born of water and the spirit.' In effect, 'You're in the wrong place. You've got to make a dive for it: get into the waters of faith – get into the Spirit!'

Poor Nicodemus. By now he's feeling decidedly uncomfortable on that hump. 'How can this be?', he asks, slipping awkwardly and trying to stay on. And so, I think, do we. How? Indeed.

Jesus goes on to answer him in those famous lines so often used by Christians of a certain persuasion. 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that whoever believes in him would not perish but have eternal life.' This passage points to a sort of belief that is precisely NOT what has come to be

associated with the phrase – being ‘born again’; this is not about simply naming the name – being on the right side - joining the club.

This is about being willing to follow in The Way of Jesus – which, on the contrary, is about letting go of pharisaic notions of who is in and who is out; and believing in the one who is lifted up: taking all divisions and hatred and fear and judgement and transforming them in love: the serpent becomes the healer: the illness the cure: the shame of the outcast becomes the means by which all are invited into the Life of God.

When Jesus was lifted up, on the cross and ultimately in his ascension to the Father, then God’s Spirit was given - and even now blows where it will - across a hot and tired humanity; coming from a direction the reasonable mind could never imagine and going on to refresh all those who know they are thirsty. This is a real joint effort; Father, Son and Holy Spirit!: the great work of the Trinity.

And this is our work: to follow in this way...

The mystics throughout the centuries have reminded us of this way. They remind us that the way to God is ultimately not by knowing but unknowing; not by control but surrender; not by reason but by faith; not by law but the Spirit; not by drawing up lines of right and wrong but by bearing the contradictions and reconciling them in love. This is the way of the cross.

One of the great Christian mystics, St John of the Cross, understood how we are born anew by entering the womb of a dark night and emerging with new vision; so it is apt that this story, written by the mystic of the gospel writers, has Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night... Nicodemus! So righteous, so rational, so rich in his way, so drawn to Jesus, so frightened, and so like us. He comes to Jesus by night.

We too, often come closest to God in the night... through experiences of crisis, loss, inadequacy, disillusionment, and pain; In confusion and in doubt; in moments when profound love or suffering takes us outside our safe self; in the silence of wordless prayer. If we don’t choose it, we are, nevertheless, often thrown off the camel and find ourselves in deep waters. Don’t panic. We have gills! - well at least spiritually speaking...

The mystical tradition, contrary to popular opinion, is not about transcending to great heights or cut off states of consciousness. The mystics throughout the centuries, in Spain and in West Dulwich, experience something of the reality of our true home; the truth of our unity with God, with one another and with all of creation. Through prayer and grace, they are drawn into the mystery of God's presence deep within. They swim freely in God's love, our original blessing; no longer happy in the plodding, dry world of certainty.

The contemplative tradition is making a comeback. Weary of words, tired of the bumpy ride of self-effort and divided within ourselves we take our sandals off and approach the burning bush... There, the great I AM – God's undivided self; three and yet one: the essence of Love – longs to release the captive.

The job of prayer is to allow God's love to liberate us from within; to set us free from the slavery of our own limited view; from the fetters of ego and the tyranny of fear: to enjoy the freedom we were created for; the freedom to be more fully ourselves: to enjoy the sweet taste of milk and honey.

But it doesn't stop there, of course; because then, like Moses, we are sent to be a part of God's liberating work in the world.

But...

First the fish needs to say –something ain't right about this camel ride...

Holy Spirit,

Set us free.

Amen.