

Lent 2
12/3/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Numbers 21:4-9
Psalm 121
John 3:1-17

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Robert Gribben

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life'. John 3:14-15.

Num. 21: 4-9; Ps 121; John 3: 1-17 For Mark the Evangelist, Melbourne, Lent 2(A)



The encounter of Nicodemus with Jesus would be painful if it were not so beautifully constructed. Out of the shadows ('by night'), quite suddenly, 'a leader of the Jews' has stepped on to John's stage, himself a teacher, and in the tradition of Israel, has some questions to discuss with his man whose name is now known in Jerusalem. '*Rabbi*', he says, '*we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no-one can do these signs you do, apart from the presence of God*'. This is a good start, and thus prepared, he asks his first question: 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?'

Things get worse from here on in, because at each of his three questions, Nicodemus fails to understand the answers Jesus gives him. Wise in the Law of Israel though he is, he is also bound by it. He cannot unlock Jesus' double meaning in declaring that those who enter the kingdom of heaven must be born both 'again', and 'from above', the *two* sides of the Greek word *anōthen*.¹ He tries to understand being born again, but is constrained by what he knows of human birth, and he does not see how that flesh-and-blood birth process can help one to achieve a new *spiritual* status. Since Jesus goes on, in John's narrative, doubling the double meaning: the New Birth is of both water and the Spirit - it seems a little unfair that at the end Jesus asks his questioner, 'Are you a teacher in Israel, and yet do not understand these things?'

We have known for a long time, or should, that John's Gospel has fanned the flames of anti-semitism. He wrote at a time when the church was emerging from the synagogue, actually and theologically, and was needing to defend itself. We should not assume that because he is a Jew, Nicodemus is blind; nevertheless, he does not understand. And he has come to Jesus, and John's constant theme is that Jesus is the one who reveals God to the all world.

Continuing his double definitions, that we must be born both 'again' and 'from above', of water and the Spirit, Jesus twice more reaches for a metaphor.

¹ This is the most Greek (Hellenistic) of the Gospels, and John is exercising his own linguistic skills to preach the Gospel. Did Jesus pun in Aramaic? Did the pun come from the Aramaic?

First, he invokes the **wind**, mysterious, changeable, unpredictable, of unknown origin yet of observable power. This Spirit breathes life into us who are born in water, creation and Creator working together, in birth and new birth.

Now, John has a readership, and thus Jesus has an audience. That first readership, those hearers, knew more, or should have, than Nicodemus. That audience, probably John's congregation, are already within the kingdom through such a process - by the waters of baptism, through the Spirit, both. This was part of their experience as church.

The second image is from a story his hearers will have known well: the **serpents** in the wilderness.

This is a most curious story in a most curious book, the Book of Numbers. It describes Moses and Aaron are leading their grumbling flock through the desert, serially upsetting every tribe near whose land the wanderers came. Here's the shock: the LORD reacts to their recalcitrance by sending poisonous serpents among His people - or at least the Israelites took the snakes to have such a meaning - and many who were bitten died. So they repented and were given a sign: Moses, I note, whose feelings about snakes I share, did not do as the LORD commanded: instead of a live one, he put a nice safe bronze serpent on a stake and held it up for the healing of all who gazed at it. It worked.

This is the strange incident John uses *as a sign of the Gospel*. The 'lifting up' has another double meaning: physically, as Moses did with the bronze serpent, and physically, as the Son of Man was on the Cross.

I want you to note this **physicality**, this materiality of God in all we have been considering in that most spiritual of Gospels (they say), John's. Actual water, and Holy Spirit, together, to bring people under Christ's gentle rule; lifting up a serpent, even a symbolic one, as a parallel to that only-too-real lifting up of the body of Jesus on the Roman executioner's cross-beam - with the promise of eternal life is given to those who *lift up* the dying Son of Man. It is important to notice that the next verse in the famous John 3:16: 'For God so loved the world that...' That is the context of that sign-act, the key to how we interpret the death of Jesus.

How do *we* 'lift up the Son of Man', Christ crucified? Our Reformed ancestors apparently allowed us a single interpretation: do it by preaching. That is being challenged by recent scholarship. I am not suggesting it be given up. A generation later, our forebears did it also by singing - e.g. Isaac Watts (*When I survey the wondrous cross*), though I notice that Watt's striking third verse still makes few hymnbooks:

His dying crimson, like a robe,
Spreads o'er His body on the tree;
Then I am dead to all the globe,
And all the globe is dead to me.

The Puritan tradition has often painted the cross of Christ in such terms. Among the Passion hymns in *Together in Song*, you will find a few modern composers who have tried to portray the cross meaningfully, but it definitely not a popular idea. There is plenty of evidence that modern church people shy away from the crucifixion, despite brutal death being portrayed daily in the media. In the face of all that the other apostle, Paul, has written, have we ceased to preach and sing Christ crucified?

Perhaps we have simply domesticated it. In terms of a cross worn as jewellery, there seems to be an inverse relationship between its size and the faith held by the wearer (I exclude bishops!). In terms of personal devotion, when the late George Yule decided

that Protestants may make the sign of the cross on their bodies in prayer, it was typical of him that he always made a huge one.

What of architectural forms? In the 1960s, my father got into deep trouble at Wesley Church, Shepparton, when he accepted the undertaker's gift of two small wooden plaques with a carved cross on them to cover the holes made when the pulpit rail was removed. The crosses were less than 5 cm long. You would have thought Armageddon had come. By the end of that decade, we were erecting quasi-real crosses, old and rugged, or plain and smooth, and hanging them centre-stage. No-one would comment now. We justify them on the grounds that the Gospel is about the Risen Christ. That is exactly half true. He was first crucified - and that is what we are avoiding. If a worship leader dared to display a crucifix, say, on Good Friday, many of us still would take offence.

This touches us all deeply because of what we have been taught about Christianity as our forebears received it. In so many other ways, we have changed, at least in terms of things visible and tangible in worship over the last century. I have come to accept that the human family seems to be divided into those whose religion is expressed in plain forms, and those who respond to enrichment in ritual, art and music. But our Uniting Church is something of a mixture, uniting two former traditions and drawing on a new century and especially on its ecumenical and liturgical movements.

In a posthumous book soon to be published,² the Sydney Uniting Church theologian, Graham Hughes, has challenged the idea that faithful Protestants were *restricted* by the Reformers to perceiving God only through their ears. Even that plain Baptist John Bunyan insisted that there was equally what he called the '**Eye-Gate**'. Dr Hughes argues that the exclusive emphasis on the word has lost a fundamental Christian belief: *that in Christ, the eternal One became incarnate*, took our flesh and died in it, as we will. He points out that the two Gospel sacraments which Jesus bid us do, both involve material elements - water, bread and wine - and an invocation of the Spirit (which we have reclaimed). He calls for a reform in the very ways we celebrate the sacraments.

Spirituality involves physicality. As C.S. Lewis wrote somewhere, 'God loves matter: He invented it'. In their passion to reform the church whose worship was cluttered with things that obscured the Gospel, the Reformers - in varying degrees - purged worship of its materiality. I believe that for our contemporary needs in worship and mission, we precisely need to recover it. The modern secular **seekers** after what they call 'spirituality' have missed what Christians know: it also involves the body, in fact, it involves everything we are. It involves human beings in their fullness. Humanity fully alive, as the ancient Fathers said.

So there are **two challenges** for the Uniting Church. One is again to claim our role as a true Reformed Church, that is, **reformed** yet always needing to be reformed. We seem to be quite good at *change* in the Uniting Church, but that is not the same thing as *reform* - and the principle of reform is 'according to the Scriptures'.³ The other comes from our much-vaunted claim to be **ecumenical**. The buzz word is '**receptive ecumenism**' - a willingness to ask what gifts we recognize in other churches, which our tradition has rejected or ignored, which, by receiving, would contribute to our wholeness. Which gifts are we actually willing to receive - from Orthodox, Roman

² Its title is *Reformed Sacramentality*, and the publisher is The Liturgical Press (Collegeville, MN). It was edited by Steffen Lösel and includes an interview at the end of Graham's life by William Emilsen.

³ As the *Basis of Union* defines it at paragraph 1.

Catholic, historic Protestant (16th C), Radical Protestant (Baptist, Mennonite, Quaker) and the new churches, pentecostal and evangelical?

Nicodemus had to learn that logic and speech have their limitations. He had to engage his imagination to comprehend Jesus' Good News. We need to address more than the *minds* of our contemporaries if we are to be true to the apostolic faith. When the seekers come to church (which they will do mostly because someone invited them), let them find a whole Gospel set before them by whole people in the face of a fragmented, wounded and disillusioned world. Let them feel and touch and see the triune God who is Creator and Redeemer. Let them apprehend the truth of the Crucified One, in whose lifting up we see the Man who gave up his life 'so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life'.
