

Lent 2
8/3/2020

Mark the Evangelist

Genesis 12:1-4a
Psalm 121
Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
John 3:1-17

The Poetry of Birth

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr Peter Blackwood

Our daughter came home from school one day to announce that her science teacher had taught her that the gestation period for humans is 32 weeks. Her mother, who had trained as a midwife and had confirmed the generally accepted period of 40 weeks through 3 pregnancies told our daughter the teacher must have got it wrong. When my opinion was sought, I said I thought it felt more like about 9 months but what would I know. The next day our daughter returned to announce that her science teacher still insisted that the gestation period for humans was 32 weeks and not 40 as her midwife mother and veteran of 3 pregnancies imagined. The next day our daughter took her mother's midwifery book with her finger firmly planted on the number 40 vis a vis the weeks of normal human gestation. How was he going to get out of this one? Her teacher remained adamant. He declared that her mother's midwifery book was old and out of date.

Mind like a steel trap - that man - a bit like Nicodemus who went to see Jesus in John chapter 3. Their conversation was about birth too. Nicodemus could cope with the idea of being born. What stretched his mind beyond credulity's limit was the idea of being born from above. This was to present a concept so new that it would not fit into any ideas he had carried up to that point. He was being asked to cope with an impossible world image.

A thousand sermons have been preached about Nicodemus with explanations of what being born again might mean – about why he might have come by night and so forth. All I want to say today is that Nicodemus came to Jesus and Jesus challenged him to think in radically new and impossible ways about how life under God works. In matters of faith it will be OK to think in black and white for a while, OK to live in a cause and effect understanding for a time, but at some point it will cause you trouble.

The story of Nicodemus presents the ever present problem for the church — how to tell its ever new and always impossible story of salvation to a world that cannot think in metaphors and stories and effects sometimes coming before causes and ever so many shades of grey, for whom poetry is language that cannot convey truth.

Finally Comes the Poet, Brueggemann's book on preaching, divides the world of spoken and written language into two – poetry and prose. The title of his introduction, 'Poetry in a Prose-Flattened World,' forewarns the reader of the content of what is coming and something of the feelings the writer has about prose. His feelings of irritation with prose lie in the conviction that prose predominates as the language that attempts to convey the truth. It attempts to answer every question, talk every issue to a standstill. The world that confines itself to the language of prose is affected by its desire to nail every point down, leave no question unanswered. It promotes in our world a

technical way of thinking. When we take this language into conveying the truth of the gospel we find that it ‘has been flattened, trivialized, and rendered inane.’¹ Mysteries become problems to be solved, miracles have rational explanations to be discovered. Prose is the language of the Enlightenment, a movement that still penetrates deep into our Post Modern culture. The church’s preaching is to address the world that is dominated by engineers, inventors and scientists and the language of prose will not be satisfactory in that address. Brueggemann quotes Walt Whitman:

After the seas are all cross’d (as they seem already cross’d,)
After the great captains and engineers have accomplish’d their work,
After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,
Finally shall come the poet worthy that name,
The true son of God shall come singing his songs.²

The preacher and the prophet come singing these songs. These are the songs that take their hearers beyond thought to emotions, beyond what is, to a vision of what might be. The poet’s speech does not replace prose. Human endeavour will have its go first, but it will necessarily come to a wall that must be addressed by another language.

Putting into words the miracle of coming to faith, and, even more miraculous, continuing and growing in faith is pretty near impossible. Especially so in a world that relies more and more on scientific exactitude. Norman Young, one of our most esteemed theologians, and Jim Brown, a scientist who, coincidentally, developed advances in the science of human reproduction. Both devout Christians. They would argue, the theologian insisting that there are aspects of knowing about God that remain a mystery, and the scientist insisting there must eventually be answers to all the questions, even the ones about God. Jim wanted scientific language to explain what only poetic language could reveal.

We rely on the language of metaphor or symbol and simile, of talking about rebirth when we do not refer to the events of a natal delivery room, when we light a candle, not because there is a power failure but because we want to say that we can see what cannot be seen with eyes, or we are seen and known and loved by the one who cannot be seen or fully known.

Jesus spoke to Nicodemus about being born when he had already been born many years since, and he spoke to him about not dying when it was perfectly clear that his body would one day decay in the ground. At one level the language of faith is nonsense —

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

— you see? It’s nonsense, but it is life giving and God loving nonsense, the kind of language that makes golden sense in the Kingdom of God.

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), p. 1.

² Walt Whitman, “Passage to India,” 5:101-5 *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Mentor Books, the New American Library, 1954), p. 324 cited in Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet*, p. 6.