

SERMON: 8 March 2020 – Rev Alistair Cowper

" The Mystery of God's Amazing Grace"

(Romans 4:1-5, 13-17 and John 3:1-17)

No one can see the KOG unless they are born again.

Why has such an innocent sounding phrase as born again caused so much division in the church?

The phrase is rightly translated as born from above. But these two words have been argued about down through the centuries since Jesus said them.

So what can we say about this new birth from above?

1] It is a work of the Spirit.

2] It's a heavenly thing.

And,

3] like the wind, no one can tell where it comes from or where it is going.

To that extent, it is a mystery of grace.

The heavenly action of God's gracious Spirit does not depend on clever human understanding in order to be perceived.

If that were so, then Nicodemus, a learned Pharisee and member of the Jewish ruling council, would have been more enlightened when he came to Jesus in the dark of night.

As it was, he may have left in the same darkness in which he came. Although like the wind who knows what was going on in his mind and in his heart after that encounter with Jesus.

Indeed perhaps the Gospels suggest nicodemus didn't remain in that darkness. In John 7 we come across Nicodemus reminding his colleagues in the Sanhedrin that the Law required that a person be heard before being judged. To that extent he was standing up for Jesus in the face of false accusation and injustice. He spoke out when he could have remained silent and just gone along with the crowd.

And then in John 19, Nicodemus is there with Joseph of Arimathea, preparing the dead body of Jesus for burial.

Something surely was happening to Nicodemus.

Was it birth from above?

Sounds like it. Sounds like the Spirit was at work in him. Jesus' words and life must have got to him and he couldn't shake it off. Love was at work in him.

When writing his Gospel, John realised that God had sent his Son Jesus into the world not to condemn the world but to save the world through him.

He could see that God's motivation was love; that God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

And its a mystery of amazing grace because fullness of life does not depend on any good works we have done, or on any religious status we may have acquired.

No. Its all the undeserved favour. It's all the grace, of God.

Everyone who believes may have eternal life.

We don't always know whether someone is believing or not, do we. The Spirit is like the wind remember. We can't see it but we can usually see its effect, but not always.

I have no doubt that my eternal salvation is assured. However, that doesn't always ensure that I'm always living with faith filled eyes, always believing, always seeing the kingdom of God.

Some days its not so easy. Some times we miss the opportunity to enter into the kingdom of God here and now. Sometimes we get distracted and we need something or someone to remind us of who we are.

That's a big reason why it's important that we exist in a communion of saints, that we come together to strengthen one another in faith; that when one of us is down, there is another to pull us up again; that there might be a friend there with the words, let's pray about it shall we?

I think God works through the body that way.

From above is to begin to think in a whole new way; with a heavenly mind set; with a Christ centred world view; with hope; in faith and in love.

In order to understand and embrace the things of God we need to, like Nicodemus, have our minds expanded, enlarged, changed. That's what it means when Peter addresses the crowds at Pentecost and says you need to repent. It means to start to think differently and live differently.

It's like the teacher of the Law in Luke 10 who comes to Jesus and says what might I do to inherit eternal life and Jesus tells him a story that would have blown his mind.

A Samaritan coming to the aid of a Jew whilst the religious ones walked on by.

Enemies turning out to be the best neighbours.

Who'd have heard of such a thing?

It must have sounded like heresy to those who thought they knew better; to those who refused to let their minds see things differently.

Friends, Jesus has called us to begin to see things differently, to have our minds expanded, to see Christ come into all things, to see the kingdom of heaven coming, enlarging, consuming, in a work of new creation.

And the roots of all of this lie in the unfailing love of God. For God so loved the world

Our core is love. That is who we are and what we are called to be.

And love is luring us forward and drawing the whole world into one infinite fullness of love, which will not fail.

As always, the question will be, will we believe it? Will we be like Abraham, who believed what he couldn't yet see, as if he already could.

“Abraham believed God, so God declared him righteous” (Romans 4:3).

That's the basis of the new relationship between people and God. All we're asked to do is believe.

In the midst of a world where there seems so much to be fearful of

corona virus, climate change, financial collapse, terrorism and global warfare

we're called to have faith in “the God who brings the dead back to life and who brings into existence what didn't exist before” (Romans 4:17).

God can deal with all of these things. God can transform them completely. God's perfect love can drive out all fear.

Will we live today, knowing that, believing that, and doing all we can together, to help bring God's heavenly ways into our world which groans for things to be better and rejoices when renewal comes.

God raises the dead and calls into being things that were not.

That is the solid basis of our hope in this life and in the life to come.

And that is a reason for us to rejoice together and to be at peace with God, with ourselves and with one another.