

20 March 2011 Ray Slade

John 3 Born Again.

Our Gospel today contains maybe the most famous one liner in scripture, one we repeat practically every week. **John 3 v 16.**

For 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.

It's a kind of summary or **mission statement**, of the **mission of God**.

Incidentally, God gets a bad press these days. There's a good living to be made from aggressive atheism. Not that this is new. The idea of denying God's very existence didn't start with Richard Dawkins as some might think. The Psalmist wrote **'the fool has said in his heart – there is no God'**.

Last week in my paper the great and the good in the church declared for all their Lent reading for 2011. Nicky Gumble is reading something by Ratzinger!

One, I can't recall who, is reading this little book 'Why There Almost Certainly is a God - Doubting Dawkins' by Keith Ward. Let me read part of his amusing introduction.

So we start with God, God who loves, God who cares.

And God gave, gave his Son.

The aim of this mission is to give eternal life to those who believe.

In the following verse this is fleshed out a bit.

For God did not send his Son into the world to **condemn** the world, but to **save** the world through him.

The Son does not judge or condemn. That's happened already. He is there for the purpose of **saving people from the wrath and condemnation** coming their way, as a result of innate and deliberate sinfulness, falling short of the standards God requires.

Through him we can be forgiven, restored. All we have to do is **believe**.

Why no reference to the cross, the 'touchstone of faith'. Victoria Embankment **fidei coticula crux**. No the process in detail, cross, resurrection, is not spelled out, but it is clearly there in the previous verse.

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.

This bit of background is important. It comes from the book of Numbers and relates to the 40 year period when the Children of Israel moaned and groaned their way through Sinai.

They traveled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea,^[c] to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” Then the LORD sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. ⁷ The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the LORD and against you. Pray that the LORD will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people. The LORD said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.” So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

The people looked to the snake on the pole, and were healed. (A serpent on a pole is a symbol of healing)

An illustration of how we look to Christ the son of man, the Son of God lifted on the cross to be healed, to avoid condemnation, to be able to participate in the kingdom. To enjoy genuine, living, eternal **HOPE**.

However there is a vital question in all of this. What precisely does **believe** actually mean? It is a word used in many different ways. Believe that Jesus once lived? Believe he is Son of God? **No it is far more than that.**

We might say ‘I believe in glucosamine’, ‘I believe in eating healthily’. I understand that Mr Capello has declared that ‘he believes in John Terry’.

Believe in this case must mean far more than that. Happily Jesus gives the definition required. V3 and v7

Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. **And You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You^[c] must be born again’**”

So believe is about being ‘born again’.

This is a very powerful, very demanding phrase. It is often misused and derided as an Americanism, especially of the ‘fundamentalist right’.

So what is the heart of being ‘born again’?

Some pointers.

- **A new start.** A 180 turn around, a U turn. A completely relaunched life with different aims, different priorities. Total commitment to a new way of living, of being. Old ways swept aside to be replaced by a totally new outlook.
- A rebirth that will be followed by **a period of growth**. As a baby needs milk, then more solid food, so will the new believer start simply getting to know and understand scripture and will then get deeper into God studying his word, alone and with others, praying alone and with others. In the early stages it is especially important that support is there.

It is a worry that some folk just play with all this, go along with liturgy, worship, church attendance but fail to make the decisive step Jesus demands.

You should not be surprised at my saying, You must be born again.

This is not the same as confirmation. But in all integrity it should precede confirmation.

Are you genuinely, fully born again?

You are maybe hearing about this for the first time – as I did 51 years ago and from that moment started on my Christian journey, a path that led in some surprising directions but on which, despite many failings and shortcomings, being ‘born again’ has controlled the route.

Or you may have been church going for years but it’s not gone beyond a kind of formalism or habit.

The great John Wesley was one such. He had been a vicar for some years when, in Aldersgate on May 24, 1738 he was converted, born again. In his journal he wrote:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while the leader was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.

It’s now on a plaque in London. Wesley of course went on to be the founder of Methodism which today has 70M members

There is here a challenge to us all. Those who are ‘born again’ and those who aren’t.

To those who are then maybe this Lent you might renew your commitment to the restart, the U turn, the new life you once started.

To those who are not then please think carefully about this absolute core of the authentic Gospel.

Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again”.

Talk after.

Take a copy of ‘Why Jesus?’