

“Born again, again”, a sermon based on John 3:1-17 preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on the second Sunday of Lent, 8 March, 2020.

He'd reached the point in his life where he was respected. There was about him a maturity, born of experience. He had made many mistakes and each mistake had taught him something because he had wanted to learn from them. He was now old for the time, grey haired, more measured in his speech, more deliberate in his words, more careful in his actions. He didn't need to make a fuss to get attention because he lived in a culture and at a time when elders were listened to. Although he was experienced, he was open to learning. He had a delightful but cautious curiosity.

And he treated people with a certain dignity, even those others dismissed, those on the margins, the unconventional. He was still surprised at how people turned to him for wisdom and he was surprised at their questions. He didn't think he had any great wisdom, but he had lived through a bit and had seen tough times. He faced challenges he had faced before and there were times he said to himself – well I have faced harder challenges, so I can attend to this one. And he was conscious of the responsibility he had because people listened to him. He needed to be careful that he did not go beyond his knowledge or beyond the scope of his experience. Just because he knew some things, didn't mean he knew everything. He was conscious that his knowledge may not have been entirely up-to-date. And he needed to be careful that the firm opinions he had formed over the years didn't detract from focusing on what was essential.

People had begun to speak to him about this new prophet, Yeshua. He wasn't closed off to new knowledge and new experiences, but he had learned to be cautious. And he didn't want to be seen talking to Yeshua in a way that might lead others to suggest that he endorsed the prophet or supported what the prophet said and did. His authority was so hard earned that he didn't want to squander it on an untested immature and dubious prophet. So wanting to learn and needing to be careful, he arranged to meet the prophet at night. That way others were unlikely to see him. He went genuinely curious.

It was a strange sight - an old man, seasoned elder, respected leader, going to see a 30 something marginal prophet. "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." the prophet said.

The old man was mystified "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" Perhaps the old man was wondering wistfully if there could still be any newness to come in his life when experience had given him so many habits and opinions and convictions and caution. He felt often that he only learned when he looked back. The playwright Arthur Miller's autobiography *Timebends* includes these words: " I would be twenty before I learned how to be fifteen, thirty before I knew what it meant to be twenty, and now at seventy-two I have to stop myself from thinking like a man of fifty who has plenty of time ahead. It was in my twenties that I felt old, that was when time was like an abrasive wheel grinding me down. But it was not so much death I feared as insignificance." p69 Miller felt old when young, but now as an older man his feelings of having plenty of time can't be trusted. He wasn't sure he was able to start again.

"How can anyone be born after having grown old?" Maybe there was another question in that question - Why would a mature, respected, experienced leader want to go back to being young, child-like, a baby? Especially when he had learned so much and finally figured out a whole lot of stuff. Maturity is not a process of gradual improvement. Especially spiritual maturity. From time to time, we need to be born again, born from above again, reborn of the spirit. To have our imaginations reshaped and our understandings reworked.

Not in a self-improvement way, for that would be to trivialise the spiritual life. Everett Falconer – "the most superficial thing that can be attempted in the name of religion is to call on someone to turn over a new leaf, to be better, to be different."

How can we avoid being trapped in conclusions we have reached too soon, in certainties that really are not as certain as we imagined, in practices that seem at odds with evolving truth.

To grow up we need to be born again, again. And in the Christian faith, we need to meet again as if for the first time this thirty something Palestinian, Yeshua. To be born again is to have what we think we know taken away from us. The old man might have thought he knew how God works, that it was but an extension of what he had already experienced. But Jesus said to him, the wind, the spirit, blows where it chooses. You do not know where it comes from or where it goes – the Spirit is not just an add on to what you already know. In fact, Nicodemus, you do not know. To be born again, to be a child in need is to have our precious and hard-earned knowledge of how we think this world and God works taken away from us. In its place, to be given only one thing – the Spirit of God. What one writer calls the wild child of the Trinity.

We aren't sure what happened to the old man. The civil right activist, Valerie Kaur, noted that his all happened at night and she said "Perhaps this darkness is not the darkness of a tomb – but the darkness of a womb." Was the old man born again to God the birthing mother, whose body gives us life, whose spirit is our breath, and who delivers us to the world for love.

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