

Reflection for Lent 2 by Rev'd Peter Shaw

We have all faced situations where we have been making something and it hasn't gone right. Sometimes we can start all over again. Other times we have to do our best and make the most of it **and** this tends to happen when I try my hand at cooking – which is why I rarely attempt it!

A number of times in the Old Testament we are told that God has felt that way. In Genesis 6, for example, we read, "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain. So the Lord said, 'I will wipe mankind, whom I have created, from the face of the earth - men and animals, and the creatures that move along the ground, and the birds of the air - for I am grieved that I have made them.' But Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord" (vv.5-8). At the end of the Great Flood, the Lord promised that he would never again destroy all life in a flood like that.

This point is further developed in the story about Jeremiah at the Potter's house (Jer.18.1-12). The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah in the potter's house - "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel" (v.6b).

The Lord is like the potter with his will for our lives, seeking to bring about his character and his purposes through our personalities and lives. But unlike clay, our lives are the result of the interaction between God's will and our will.

The prophet is warning the house of Israel that, just as the potter controls the ultimate destiny of each lump of clay, so the Lord controls their ultimate destiny. If they choose the way of the Lord, that destiny will be good. If they refuse, they are heading for disaster and destruction. So the Lord is pleading with them, "Turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions" (v. 11b).

Later in Jeremiah (ch.31) we read a promise that the Lord will make a new covenant or agreement with his people - not like the old covenant that they broke again and again. In this new covenant, "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts..." (v. 33). Three times the prophet Ezekiel records the Lord's promise that they will receive a new heart.

In ch.11, we read, "They will return to [the land of Israel] and remove all its vile images and detestable idols. I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God" (vv. 18-20).

In ch.18, "Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offences you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel?... Repent and live!" (vv. 30b-32).

And in ch.36, "I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and follow my laws... you will be my people, and I will be your God" (vv.25-28).

Sounds a bit like a heart transplant, doesn't it? Well, spiritually, that is what it is!

No the Lord isn't going to get rid of us and make a fresh start as he did in Noah's time. But he does plan to make us new people.

Nicodemus

Today's reading is about Nicodemus. He was a man of high principles who sincerely sought to know and to do the will of God. He was a Pharisee, though that is no reason for supposing that he shared the hypocrisy that Jesus condemned in so many of his fellows. He was a member, too, of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish council.

He came to Jesus by night, seeking the truth. He didn't come to trick Jesus up, but to find something out. Something about Jesus had impressed him deeply. Perhaps Jesus' anger at the trading which prevented the Temple from being the place of worship and prayer it was meant to be - perhaps this struck a chord in Nicodemus heart. Perhaps Jesus had done what he, Nicodemus, had lacked the courage to do. Whatever the motivation, he came in all sincerity.

Did he have some deep question he wanted to ask this wonderful Teacher? We do not know, for the situation changes so quickly from being teacher and Teacher to being Nicodemus and the Physician of souls.

You Must be Born Again

Here before Jesus, is a man who, morally and intellectually, has achieved so much and has a deep knowledge of the Scriptures. Here is one who, at least as much as any other among his contemporaries, might be expected to have a place in God's Kingdom.

Yet Jesus says quite emphatically that unless he is "born again". he can neither see nor enter the Kingdom of God (Jn.3.3,5).

Nicodemus is puzzled, saying to Jesus 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?'(Jn. 3. 4)

This question is a little surprising because surely as a student of the Scriptures he should not be so stubbornly literalistic in response to what Jesus has said! He clearly did not tie in God's promise in Ezekiel to give the people a new heart and a new spirit (Ezek.36.25-27) with what Jesus had just said. Perhaps he should have realised what Jesus meant when He talked about being born again. Perhaps it also says something about the Scribes, the members of the Jewish hierarchy responsible for the interpretation of The Law, where they seem to completely miss the point about God's love for **ALL** His people, Jews and Gentiles alike.

No, it is not a second physical birth that Jesus is talking about. It is necessary to be born "of water and the Spirit" (Jn.3.5). The water, as we follow on to the next verse, is most naturally a reference to physical birth. It is not enough to be a human person - not even when you have attained the highest that your bodily and mental faculties enable you! To be a Nicodemus - devout, upright, hard-working, sincere, generous... - may make us a welcome addition to any community, but it doesn't qualify us for entry into God's Kingdom!

Jesus tells Nicodemus that he "must be born again." But it is important to realise that not all our effort nor all our trying can enable us to say, "Now I am qualified to be called 'born again of the Spirit'." Just how much of our own effort went into bringing about our physical birth? So too with spiritual birth. We do not and cannot work ourselves up to it. It is an inward transformation which God, by his Spirit, brings about in us so that we are new people, his people.

Look and Live

And just how does God do this? Jesus tells Nicodemus about the time when Moses had led them out of captivity in Egypt, how they complained bitterly and became impatient, and poisonous snakes came into the camp and bit the people so that many of them were dying? In response to a direction from the Lord, "Moses made a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Then when anyone had been bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived" (Num.21.9).

That snake represented to them the punishment that they well deserved and that was coming to them for their rebellion - and yet it also spoke of the mercy of a gracious God. To look at that bronze snake was to acknowledge both that they deserved the punishment and that they accepted God's forgiveness. God delivered them from death and restored them to health. They neither saved nor revived themselves - they simply accepted the healing God was offering.

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life" (Jn.3.14,15). Just how much Jesus might have said to Nicodemus about his coming cross we can but guess. We live after the event and can see and grasp meanings that may well have continued to baffle him.

Christ died for our sins, taking the punishment we deserved. Paul goes so far as to say that "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us..." (2 Cor.5.21) and that "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us" (Gal.3.13). So to "believe in him" is to acknowledge our own sinful guilt on which we see God's judgement passed on the cross. It is to accept the forgiveness and new life that God offers us in his Son.

Believe in Him

How do we qualify for a place in God's Kingdom? Well put simply - we don't! At least, not in the sense of being able to tick off our achievements! But - "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life" (Jn 3.16).

Some potters think their clay has a "mind of its own"! Not really, of course! We are different from clay in that we do have a mind of our own. That is why Jeremiah pleads with them, "Turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions." Key to all this is being alive to what God is telling us through the Holy Spirit, and the key to that, as with so many other things in our Faith, is **prayer with an open mind and heart.** (x2). Only God can give people a new heart, but we hear Ezekiel saying to the people, "Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit... Repent and live." We can't make ourselves "born again"! But we can turn from our sin and look to Jesus. We can choose to believe in him. Then God will do his work to make us new people from the inside.

Trust and pray!

Amen
