

Closing Prayer

Almighty God,
by the prayer and discipline of Lent
may we enter into the mystery of Christ's sufferings,
and by following in his Way
come to share in his glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Common Worship · Additional Collects · Lent 2

Lectionary-based Catechesis • Year A

The Second Sunday of Lent

Principal Service readings

Genesis 12.1-4a	Abram obeys God's call to leave his country, and is promised blessing
Psalms 121	The guardian of Israel
Romans 4.1-5,13-17	Faith reckoned as righteousness
John 3.1-17	Water and the Spirit; God's Son sent to save the world

Opening Prayer

Lord Jesus Christ,
speak to our hearts in the stillness,
keep us steadfast in the foundation that cannot be shaken,
lift up our eyes to behold the vision of your glory;
and perfect our faith, now and always. Amen.

Society of Saint Francis

Gospel Reading

Jesus and Nicodemus

¹There was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ²He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' ³Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' ⁴Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' ⁵Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' ⁹Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' ¹⁰Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the

wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶For 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. ¹⁷Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.’

John 3.1-17 NRSV¹

Comments and Questions

The scene is set as being at night – there is a sense of secrecy. Nicodemus addresses Jesus and describes what he understands of him. To start with, Nicodemus seems strangely unaware of spiritual life, despite being a leader of the strictest religious party in the country. Nicodemus, we are told came to Jesus ‘by night’, because he didn’t want to be noticed asking Jesus questions. Nicodemus is impressed by the signs Jesus performs: ‘no one could perform the signs that you do if God were not with him’ (John 3.2), he says. Jesus responds to this.

It is not a question of having the right ancestry, or of joining the right party, or of carrying out rituals and practices. It is not about impressing people with signs: there is something invisible that is important. Jesus says it is necessary to be ‘born again’ or ‘born from above’, using the Greek word *anōthen*. This word can have both meanings: ‘again’ and ‘from above’, and John probably intends both meanings.² Jesus himself has come from above with God (John 1.1), and wants his followers to be with him there (John 17.24). However, both Jews and Greeks used the idea of rebirth to mean starting a new life, as we might say something like ‘turning over a new leaf’, or ‘starting over’. Nicodemus misunderstands, which gives Jesus scope for further explanation.

Nicodemus persists in his unspiritual view of the world, trying to imagine how it might be possible to be born again. ‘Can anyone enter into the mother’s womb a second time?’ he asks (John 3.4). Jesus talks about being born of water and the spirit – something we think about when we baptize people. We don’t just use water to wash or make wet, we use it to convey something spiritual, not just a spiritual message but

a spiritual reality. Water is transparent, almost invisible. The Spirit is truly invisible, and yet, we know it can have powerful effects.

Of course, we use the things of this earth, and words about them, to try to convey spiritual things. For example, when we talk about the ‘light of faith’ or the ‘light of Christ’ we are not talking about physical light but about spiritual light a sense of inner illumination and guidance. We have hardly any ‘spiritual’ vocabulary separate from earthly vocabulary. So, if you do not have spiritual awareness you cannot make the leap into speaking about spiritual things. Actually, spiritual life is more real and more vivid than physical life.

Quotations

1

You guys are all into that born again thing, which is great. We do need to be born again, since Jesus said that to a guy named Nicodemus. But if you tell me I have to be born again to enter the kingdom of God, I can tell you that you have to sell everything you have and give it to the poor, because Jesus said that to one guy too...[And he paused in the awkward silence.] But I guess that’s why God invented highlighters, so we can highlight the parts we like and ignore the rest.

The irresistible revolution: living as an ordinary radical / Shane Claiborne. 2016

2

No one will make a good end to the life into which he is born unless he is born again before he ends it.

Augustine of Hippo, 354–430

Related topics

For further study:

Baptism; new birth; symbol: water.

1 *New Revised Standard Version Bible* is copyright © 1989 Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

2 *John : the people’s Bible commentary* / Richard A. Burridge. – 2nd ed. – Abingdon : Bible Reading Fellowship, 2008. – 978-1-84101-570-5. – p.56.