

Reflection Sunday 28th June 2020

Isaiah 6.1 – 8

John 3. 1 – 17

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When we moved to Gullane and Aberlady just over 5 years ago we took stewardship of a large and potentially beautiful garden. While I had always enjoyed other people's gardens. I had never really had the time or opportunity to do much myself. Suddenly, Gardener's World became my favourite TV programme and Monty and Nigel my heroes. With encouragement and support from many others I set to and got my hands dirty --- loving every minute of it. Our spaniel even took on the role of the now much missed Nigel – as she followed me patiently around, listening [or not] as I rambled on about the job in hand.

Five years on I love gardening with a passion, and I know that it is part of who I am --- the best therapy you can get – and rewarding beyond all description. I have also learned a lot --- not least that the theory is all very interesting – and reading the books is a great way to get through winter months ---but – as in so many things in life --- gardening theory is one thing – but there is no substitute for good solid practical experience – the highs and lows of trial and error.

The wonderful story of Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus is a story that is a lot to do with the necessity of practical experience. Coming through the shadows of the night to the one whom John presents as the Light of the World --- Nicodemus reveals very quickly that he is lost in the darkness. As a leading Pharisee and therefore an acknowledged expert in law and doctrine Nicodemus comes with his own agenda. He recognises wisdom and godliness in this itinerant Rabbi from Nazareth and he wants to engage with him. Something is drawing Nicodemus – irresistibly – to Jesus. But Nicodemus' whole identity is wrapped up in his professional religious career and so, he comes looking for intellectual debate between equals, for discussion about the finer points of law and doctrine, for academic stimulation and perhaps enlightenment, all contained within the protocols of behaviour which tradition dictated.

Nicodemus is wholly sincere in all that and yet he is wholly misguided. Jesus stops Nicodemus in his tracks. With one sentence he sweeps the rug from beneath Nicodemus' feet. ***“Very truly I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above.”*** In other

words: ***“Nicodemus if you really want to talk about God and the things that God considers important --- then you need to start again.” “The first thing you need is rebirth from the Spirit ---- then – and only then – will you be talking about God with knowledge – the knowledge born of experience.”*** Flustered and no doubt not a little put out Nicodemus soon withdraws --- disappearing quietly from the narrative back into the darkness.

The decline in numbers attending morning worship on an average Sunday in the UK --- even before Covid 19 -- means that those of us who do ---comprise less than 1% of the population. The decline has been going on for a long time of course and has been the subject of much breast-beating and heart-searching. Within that statistic and the reality which lies behind it is a voice which is sweeping away the rug from beneath our feet, a voice which is saying loud and clear to us, as did Jesus to Nicodemus --- ***“There is something wrong with your agenda.” “You need to start again – with a rebirth from the Spirit of God.”***

Nicodemus found that a hard word to hear but that did not stop our Lord delivering it.

Nicodemus went on to prove himself to be a sincere – a decent and an honourable man as he risked his reputation to help ensure that Jesus received a proper burial. That decency was there on the night he came to Jesus --- Nicodemus was sincere in his quest. Yet decency and sincerity were not enough if he was truly to know God and to work for God’s kingdom. He had to be prepared to give up his own agenda for God’s agenda. Such is the demand facing every congregation in the land in these days. And the consequences of Covid 19 have thankfully given it renewed priority.

What is God’s hope for the Church? And – even more so --- how can we find the courage and humility to pursue that hope --- God’s agenda – and not our own?

In this season of the Church year, following immediately upon Pentecost and Trinity Sundays we remember and celebrate the experienced revelation that God is Three in One – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Famously, the doctrine of the Trinity is a doctrine recognised by any sensible person as extremely complex. But that doctrine began as an attempt simply to describe the experience of God which came in and through Jesus. Sadly, though this simple

attempt degenerated as it became the victim of intellectual arrogance and of ecclesiastical power struggles.

If it ever was a true priority to teach the Church's historical and doctrinal theory of the Trinity in Sunday worship, it is surely much less a priority today. What is important ---is the experience which lies behind the doctrine. The experience of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. What is important is living out that experience as witness to the majesty of God. God as Trinity makes plain God's passionate desire to be known. God's passionate desire to communicate with us and to be in relationship with you and me. The world does not need theory wrapped up in doctrine and theology, the world needs people who have the experience of living Kingdom lives, and who can help others to grow into all the beauty and potential which is theirs.

The dream of Isaiah – the vision which he had of God and of the seraphs flying around tells us a great deal. God in this vision of Isaiah is immense and remote --- the hem of his robe filling the Temple. God is to be feared – his power awesome and capable at any moment of destruction. So terrifying is God that the seraphs use one set of wings to cover their eyes lest they inadvertently look upon his glory. Another set covers their feet which are deemed too base to be seen by God – ---- leaving the final set whereby they fly hither and thither as they sing their repetition proclaiming the holiness of God. And even that seems tinged with fear.

The Seraphs dare only to declare God's holiness ---- fearful that if they do not – or that they say the wrong thing ---then they might incur the divine judgement. As a consequence, they become like flying automatons blundering around as they chant relentlessly. This is the theoretical, doctrinal understanding of God and of godliness which Isaiah has before his call. In that understanding Isaiah is filled with terror that having dared to see the hem of God's garment he will be destroyed.

But his experience is different, for he finds instead that God offers cleansing and then commission. God wants to be in relationship with Isaiah and through him to call Israel back to relationship. God wants Isaiah to be more than a blundering automaton.

One of my favourite bits of the Gospel is where Jesus direct Peter to a shoal of fish which fills the boats. Realising that this Jesus is a man of God, Peter exclaims “***Go away from me Lord for I am a sinful man!***” The reply of God in Christ is “***Come with me and I will make you a fisher of men!***” It is an invitation to relationship – it is a commissioning into the purposes of God. It is a gift of grace -- the gift of grace which God gives to Peter; to Isaiah and to you and to me.

And this is the agenda of God. It always was – it is now --- and it ever shall be the agenda of God. That we should live in relationship with him and so discover and reveal how-to live-in relationship with one another.

As we contemplate the future, building upon all the good things that have been and are being done in parishes across the land, we do so at a time when the Church is marginalised in society and mostly deemed an irrelevance. The Church will only occupy a place at the centre of the life of this community and of our nation if it listens for and follows God’s agenda. With that agenda at its heart the Church will model the true community which is the Kingdom of God.

Like creating and maintaining a beautiful garden – living in relationship with God and one another in God requires hard work and constant dedication. It requires Spirit filled lives blossoming with love, joy, peace; patience, kindness, goodness; faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. It needs the strong to help the weak; the old to help the young; the experienced to help the new.

And – in God’s wonderful grace -- it also needs the exact reverse of that. For in God’s Kingdom strength is found in weakness; the last are first and the old wineskins are constantly renewed to hold the new wine. Let us all pray -- and pray --- and pray again that the Spirit will strengthen us and lead us – that we will together get our hands dirty in the soil of God’s kingdom to the glory of God and the salvation of all.

And now -- to the Holy Spirit that sanctifies us, with the Father that made and created us, and the Son that redeemed us, be given all honour and glory, world without end. **Amen**