

Must I be born again?

I believe in the power of conversation. Just to start – with a hello – my name is – hello – how are you today? What's the opening line of a conversation? There are some people I have been in conversation with for many years – off and on – and sometimes a person will finally answer a question asked more than 10 years ago. What an absolute pleasure to listen to Sherrill today and Asif last week -and more to come the rest of Lent.

The gospel is full of conversations. Mostly conversations between Jesus and all sorts of people; there's the flirtatious conversation he has with the woman at the well. There's the rather irritated conversation he has with his mother when they were both at a wedding. There's the conversation he has with his friend Peter that turns more into a shouting match, and then there's this conversation we heard today from John's gospel – between two teachers – teachers of religion. Teachers of the law.

Perhaps much later, Nicodemus would remember this conversation as he risked his reputation, maybe even his life, to tend to the body of Jesus after it was taken down from the Cross. Something happened to Nicodemus in this conversation that meant when Jesus died, he couldn't leave him alone.

Who is Nicodemus who visits Jesus by night? He's learned, scholarly, a teacher of the law. This conversation wouldn't pass what's known as the Bechdel test – a test for films – named after the cartoonist Alison Bechdel which challenges movie makers to make sure there are some conversations in their film that are between two female characters and they are not talking about a man. On International Women's Day today, it's worth noting how many films, plays, church events, religious texts fail this test. Including this gospel. But let's take a look at this conversation on its

own terms. Nicodemus is sure of himself. He knows things. He is a leader, protected by his scholarship and learning. Maybe he's one of those people who assumes he's chairing the meeting, or is just used to being the most powerful person in the room. Nicodemus knows protocol, is used to being one of the most important people in most rooms he's in - and on this occasion, he knows how to approach Jesus – with respect – 'Rabbi' he says – 'Teacher'.

In his gospel, John often uses light and darkness as motifs and symbols so by telling us Nicodemus comes *by night*, he may be saying that Nicodemus is in the dark despite all his knowledge, or it may be that Nicodemus wants to come to Jesus by night so that people won't see him.

Whatever the reason, once he's there, the man of knowledge and influence is led into a different kind of knowing. His questions are answered by questions. Jesus is asked questions in the prose of a scholar, but he answers them in the poetry of a saviour.

And for us listening in, Jesus teaches us in this conversation to listen – really listen....

Most of us don't do that. Like Nicodemus, in most conversations we might have day to day, we're not really listening but working out what we're going to say next. We might also be working out how to impress the person in front of us or let them know how much we know.

But Jesus really listens not just to Nicodemus's words but to his heart. Why has he come? What does he need? What does he desire? How might he be healed? He listens underneath the question, hears the yearning for more, and hears the desire to know more deeply what Jesus means.

And so they discuss something that Nicodemus has heard Jesus say. That we must be 'born again' of water and the spirit. It's ridiculous says Nicodemus – it's impractical - not possible – he even goes so far as to ridicule the idea – are you actually saying that a person can climb back into the womb and get born all over again – it's patently nonsense.

And to be honest, for many Christians who've spent any time in a church, the phrase 'born again' carries such burdens of pressure, a particular church tradition too that an expectation of being born again carries difficult memories for many of you – I know.

But let's try and release it from all that baggage. What can it mean to be 'born again'? You'll have heard me mention before the startling idea by the Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt that we humans mis-describe ourselves really. We call ourselves Mortals – that is, people defined by the end of our life – our death.

What effect would it have on the way we live if we called ourselves not Mortals, defined by our death, but *Natals* – defined by our birth? Our beginning is where our energy is and where our purpose comes from.

What would it be like to live our lives not so much focussed on fear of our death, but riding the energy of our birth? If we are natal, then we live, reminding ourselves that we are propelled into the future, curious, adventurous, wide-eyed. We suspect that our future is greater than our past and our best days are yet to come.

Can you recognise yourself as a natal? Do you recognise the desire mentioned in this Scripture to be 'born again'? Please try hard to take that phrase away from all the religious jargon and baggage that we've attached to it.

Being 'born....*again*'. Don't you want to, sometimes, unravel the bad decisions and dubious choices, go back, do it again? If I knew what I know now....

We do - don't we? sometimes? want to leave behind old hurts, habits we have formed that now seem to form us as adults.

Being born again will mean, like a baby, our skin becoming thin again? We will know afresh our dependence not our autonomy. We will cry freely and scream without getting a sore throat.

As grown ups, we often want certainty – we want to know things – we want to be sure of where we are, what we're doing, what tomorrow will bring; the fixed parameters of our life. We say things about ourselves sometimes to reassure ourselves and to let others know that things are in place and we are as we are.

But our prayer could be, our conversation with Jesus could be, more open; not so much "accept me as I am" – but more "show me *who I am*". Show me my life. Help me remember that it is your life I am living – and that it is from you I come and to you I must return.

Jesus reaches out through this conversation to help us know God in a different way, like Nicodemus, in order to deepen our trust in the uncertainty and delight of being born again when we open ourselves to God, not approach God to be reassured of how much we know.

We can, even in this liturgy, in these prayers, in this community, rehearse our courage – rehearse our deepening trust in God. So that when we come to Christ – as in this service – with open hands – to be fed, to know ourselves accepted, we will hear a truth and know a love that will even now set us free.

Maya Angelou 'Touched by an Angel'

We, unaccustomed to courage
exiles from delight
live coiled in shells of loneliness
until love leaves its high holy temple
and comes into our sight
to liberate us into life.

Love arrives
and in its train come ecstasies
old memories of pleasure
ancient histories of pain.
Yet if we are bold,
love strikes away the chains of fear
from our souls.

We are weaned from our timidity
In the flush of love's light
we dare be brave
And suddenly we see

that love costs all we are
and will ever be.
Yet it is only love
which sets us free.