**New Life**

**Sermon for Sunday 5th March 2023**

**Preacher: Rt Rev Hamish Galloway**

**Text: John 3:1-17**

**Introduction**

New Life is a big theme of the service today! We celebrate the gift of new life with the baptism of wee Gia. And our text talks about the new life that comes with a relationship with Jesus Christ. One is born by water, the other is born by the Spirit.

Jesus calls this second experience being ‘born again’. That phrase has become a bit loaded because it has been captured by some evangelical and pentecostal Christians as the badge of belonging to real Christianity. And so they speak brashly about being ‘born again’ as the distinguishing criteria of their Christian faith. And they enquire with a semi-judgmental tone, “have you been born again?”

I think the truth about what Jesus said about being ‘born again’ is much broader than this. I think he is referring to an experience of God’s Holy Spirit that is transforming and life-changing. And it comes in many different forms and shapes, in different ways for different people. The common factor is a sense of encounter with God through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Lets take a look at this, firstly through the experience of Nicodemus and then apply that to our lives.

1. **Nicodemus**

There is a lot to like about Nicodemus from a spiritual perspective:

1. While he was a respected and learned Pharisee and leader of the Jews, he was also open to learning more. He was humble and open to more.
2. He was wise and discerning – while some of his Pharisee colleagues accus Jesus of getting his powers from the devil, Nicodemus was sufficiently tuned in to God to know that Jesus was a teacher who had come from God and that what he was doing had the fingerprints of God all over it!
3. He was active about his wonderings about Jesus. He activated an investigation.
4. He was courageous enough to go against the stream when he sensed the stream of Pharisaic opinion was wrong. Coming under the cover of night was a sign that what he was doing in coming to Jesus with genuine interest and questions was dangerous!

Humble and open to learn more about God, wise and discerning God at work, courageous and brave explorer of truth! I like his attitude!

1. **Jesus**

Jesus comes straight to the point! He doesn’t wait for a question, he sees the spiritual longing and need of Nicodemus – like so may Pharisees of his time he had great head knowledge of God and religion but not the transforming experience of God’s Spirit touching his heart and transforming his life. Jesus is drawing on texts lie Ezekiel 26: 26-27:

*I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you.*

Religion that is rules based can be stone cold deadly! Spirituality that flows out of a relationship with God’s Spirit is transforming and liberating!

So Ezekiel and Jesus are telling about a kind of spiritual heart surgery – removing the heart of stone and replacing it with a spirit-filled heart of flesh.

As a teenager I had a teacher and rugby coach who we all knew was a Christian, but we feared him. He was cold, strict and definitely one to be obeyed. But then….he had a deep and profound experience of the Holy Spirit and it transformed him! Even his face changed markedly from tense and cold to relaxed and warm, his eyes from steely to sparkling! He left teaching a became a lovely Anglican Vicar whose ministry changed many lives. It was like he was born again!

For me, something similar happened on a 7-day retreat at Teschemakers near Oamaru in 1988. I went there tired from ministry life and thought to myself that I would just sleep for 7 days. But God had other ideas. The wind of the Spirit flows in unpredictable ways and this time God captured me in an intensely deep Spiritual experience. It revolved around God’s unconditional love – I knew this concept with my head, but on this retreat God impressed it on my heart! It changed me and I left that place after 7 days born again.

1. **Us**

Wee Gia was born of water and today as a 1 year old baptised with water. It is a sign that God reaches out to her with love that is unconditional! But part of our prayer is that in due course Gia will experience that deep in her heart!

You see research would say key factors in young people staying in church beyond their early teenage years are (1) faith lived out at home, (2) a child-friendly church service, (3) age appropriate groups like Sunday School and youth group - but none of those count if they do not have a personal relationship with God borne of a Spiritual experience of the reality of God.

So, may we, like Nicodemus, be open to the ‘more’ God has for us, humble enough to acknowledge we have more to learn and courageous enough to investigate Spiritual encounters with God. May our church be alive to experiencing God, not just a place of ritualistic religion! May we continue to do things like retreats that leave room for God to touch and transform our hearts! And may our children come to know that God is alive and seeking a loving encounter with them in this church community.