

The Revd Jonathan Aitken Sermon for Sunday March 8 2020
St Matthew's Westminster, 20 Great Peter Street
John 3: 1-16

THE REVD JONATHAN AITKEN SERMON

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ST MATTHEW'S WESTMINSTER

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An amusing theologian (they do occasionally exist!) once said of St John's Gospel that it was like a pool "in which a child may paddle and an elephant may swim".

In today's Gospel reading Nicodemus, who was an important figure in the leadership of Jewish politics, swims completely out of his depth.

Perhaps we should have some sympathy for Nicodemus for his failure to understand what Jesus was trying to teach him about the Holy Spirit.

Just harken again to this sentence:

"The 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 of everyone who is born of the spirit".

At first hearing this is so cryptic but it might have been said by Mystic Meg rather than by Our Lord.

And the confusion is deepened further by translation difficulties. The key word in the passage the Greek Term *anōthen* is translated in the King James Bible as "born again"; in our reading today from NRSV as "born from above" and in other versions as "born anew".

The nuances matter, at least in Spirit filled churches, where born again Christians become exuberant to the point of flag waving or swooning in the aisles over Holy Spirit visitations.

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Here the Catholic tradition we are rather more restrained, but still we pray

"In the power of the Spirit"

Or "Come Holy Spirit"

Or we sing:

"Come Holy Ghost or souls inspire

And lighten with celestial fire"

So however high or low up the candle we are we all need to understand the centrality of the Holy Spirit to our faith.

This can be challenging for the third person of the Trinity ISA spiritual concept that is harder to comprehend than the more personal

God the father

Or

God the son

I remember this problem being colourfully illustrated when over 40 years ago, as a very young MP, I made a weekend visit to Northern Ireland.

I was taken to a country church so faithful to BCP that its congregation regularly said the Athanasian Creed. When we were reciting that part of the AC which mentions:

The Father incomprehensible

The Son incomprehensible

The Holy Ghost incomprehensible

A rustic figure grumbled in a tone far louder than *sotto voce*

"If you ask me the whole bally thing's incomprehensible".

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Returning to our Gospel Reading it was clearly incomprehensible to Nicodemus. He had never heard of being born again with the Holy Spirit.

This was not surprising because the Holy Spirit makes hardly any appearances throughout the Old Testament.

When the Holy Spirit is mentioned, it is exclusively confined to Kings, Prophets and one or two other great men such as Bezalel the builder of the Temple of Jerusalem.

So, for thousands of years the Holy Spirit does not seem to have touched the lives of ordinary people.

Until, all of a sudden, at the time of the coming of Christ, the Holy Spirit makes multiple appearances starting in the hill country of Judea.

According to the birth narrative chapters in St Luke's Gospel the Holy Spirit makes himself known to the Virgin Mary, to Elizabeth, the Mother of John the Baptist, to Zechariah, Simeon, Anna and others.

And now at this early stage in John's Gospel Chapter 3, Jesus gives his first ever teaching on the Holy Spirit.

Later on in his ministry Jesus describes the Holy Spirit as our guide, our advocate, our comforter who he will leave behind after his ascension to empower us to change our lives.

But to Nicodemus, Jesus's teaching is far more mysterious.

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Nevertheless, that baffling Mystic Meg passage I quoted earlier can be grasped by understanding that Jesus is using the wind as an analogy for the Spirit of the God.

We cannot see, or control or fully understand wind.

But we can comprehend both visually and aurally how it bends the branches of a tree

So it is with God's spirit

Invisible, mysterious, and beyond our control

Yet discernible by its effects.

* * *

What are the effects of the Holy Spirit?

Sometimes they are real physical effects.

Some 22 years ago, with some reluctance, I did an Alpha Course.

The high point of it was something called "The Holy Spirit Weekend". This involved going down to the not particularly enticing venue of the Chatsworth Hotel in Worthing where we were told the Holy Spirit would be called down on us Alpha Course participants in the hotel basement.

The unlikelihood of this happening was increased by the fact that the summoner of the Holy Spirit was a rather colourless solicitor.

He read out various passages from the Bible, including the Nicodemus story in a voice so monotone that he could have been telling another solicitor about the small print of a contract for dull ditch water.

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He then asked us all to put out our hands and say:
"Come Holy Spirit".

I could not have been more sceptical or more embarrassed, but out of politeness I reluctantly complied with the request.

And then to my utter astonishment I think I did have what evangelicals call a full-on Holy Spirit experience.

I started shaking like the proverbial leaf.

I began shedding tears in public – something as a stiff upper lip Englishman I usually try hard not to do.

And above all, I felt totally yet lovingly overwhelmed – but by what?

It was such a positive experience arriving at such a negative time in my life that with the wisdom of hindsight I am now certain that I was catching a glimpse of what it feels like to be loved by God.

However, at the time, as soon as I had recovered my equilibrium from the shaking and tears I went into partial denial.

I wondered if the experience must have been some sort of conjuring trick. Or, perhaps the central heating in the hotel basement had been turned up so high that it had caused hallucinations.

Nevertheless, in my heart of hearts I knew that something had happened.

Perhaps the wind had blown and I had heard the sound of it but without knowing where it had come from or where it had gone.

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Let's move from the sounds of the wind in the Chatsworth Hotel in Worthing twenty-two years ago to the sounds of our increasingly important choral music here at St Matthew's, Westminster in 2020.

I believe that the Holy Spirit can enter our lives by many routes – for example, by God's word or by God's music.

Both can be agents of supernatural movement towards God's love.

Last Tuesday here at St Matthew's we had another amazing evensong. Over 40 people most whom had never been to this church before showed up. They were mainly young professional people with a love of singing. But they also ranged from teenagers to a Life Peer and to a former Lord Mayor of London and Knight of the Garter blessed with a fine bass voice.

Their singing of a traditional BCP evensong plus a marvellous rendering of Psalm 46 "Be still and know that I am God" was a joyful, uplifting spiritual experience.

When I gave the blessing at the end of the service my own feet were barely touching the ground.

I was truly feeling the power of God's love, and so I know were others, who also felt and heard the musical wind of the Spirit blowing - perhaps without knowing where it came from or where it was going.

There are of course many other manifestations of the Holy Spirit – who can come to us in our prayers, in silence, on a Lenten retreat or in all sorts of mystical murmurings and meditations.

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Like Nicodemus we don't always need to understand the movements, let alone the definitions of the Holy Spirit. But we can expect to be changed by such experience.

Nicodemus was clearly changed by his conversation with Jesus for he makes two more appearances in John's Gospel.

He speaks up for Jesus against the Temple Police and the leaders of the Pharisees – a courageous stand by a member of the Sanhedrin.

And finally, Nicodemus attends the burial of Jesus bringing valuable aloes and myrrh to anoint our Lord's body. Again an act of considerable courage in defiance of the authorities. He had become a faithful follower and believer in Jesus.

So Nicodemus had been changed all right – but by what part of our Gospel reading? A good question since he seems to have understood so little of it?

Well, we don't know, but the probability must be that Nicodemus like many a subsequent follower of Jesus was blown away by the final words of our reading – John 3: 16, a verse which anyone can understand.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have everlasting life”.

This is sometimes called “everyone's favourite Biblical verse”.

From St Augustine to Billy Graham, to Martin Luther who called it “the Gospel in miniature and to Pope John XXII”. This verse has stirred the hearts of God's people for more than two millennia. It is arguably the best loved Bible verse in the history of Christian faith. But there's one last mystery here which needs to be tackled.

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The mystery is: Who wrote or spoke these amazing words?

For those who have studied the Gospel closely, the verse on the face of it does look rather like an add on or an attachment to Jesus's dialogue with Nicodemus.

As so often in John's Gospel scholars argue about which words were actually spoken by Our Lord and which were written by the evangelist.

As there were no quotation marks in the original Greek manuscripts these arguments become all the more difficult. And nowhere is the difficulty greater than in John 3: 16.

So, as we ponder on "everyone's favourite verse" the question that still hangs over it is "whodunnit" or rather "who wrote it" or "who said it?"

The more time I spend looking at these sorts of scholarly theological controversies, the less I think most of them matter. So, let's solve this mystery in a simple way, recommended by Rowan Williams in a recent sermon.

I think we can all agree that John 3: 16 is one of the Gospels most powerful verses. So perhaps we could also agree that whether it is a direct quote from Jesus, or from the evangelist, it is the word of the Holy Spirit speaking to us here and now.

So may we, in this Lent, be empowered, led, comforted or guided towards
A deeper understanding of God's love for us
By the wind of the Holy Spirit
Blowing where it chooses, and in any way it chooses
For it is central to the mystery of our faith.

Amen