

## God gave his only Son

It's not entirely inappropriate to talk about new birth, especially at this time of year, when spring has come to us in quite a dramatic fashion.

John's gospel is very much attuned to the idea of new birth. After all, right at the beginning of the gospel, there is mention that "all receive the Word are given power to become children of God, who are born not of the will of man, or the will of the flesh, but of the will of God." And then, right at the end of the gospel, we hear that Mary Magdalene, at the direction of Jesus, is to tell his disciples that "he is ascending to his Father (i.e. Jesus' Father) and their Father, to his God and their God." In other words, what began as having disciples, has moved into friends—at one point in the gospel, Jesus says, "I do not call you servants; I call you friends". But right at the end of the gospel, the message is that he is going to "his Father and their Father, to his God and their God." So, there is the sense that they are to be children of God, in the pattern and power of Jesus himself.

Now, some individuals feel that our passage, which begins in John chapter 3, v.14, really gives Nicodemus his answer. Now, Nicodemus came to Jesus by night, and remarked to Jesus that, certainly Jesus must be from God, because no one could do the works that he did, except that he came from God. Jesus' reply to that was, "You must be born anew or born again." Nicodemus is mystified by this. And some people, as I have said, believe that the beginning, really, of the answer to Nicodemus comes with our passage, where it mentions, "Whereas Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." So, in essence, that statement is indicating to Nicodemus where this new birth comes from, and where people can expect to find such new birth. It's through faith in the one who is lifted up on our behalf.

Now, this passage—also—from John's gospel, speaks of the people turning away from the light, rather than coming to the light, so that their deeds may be seen. Those who come to the light, according to this passage—"those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may clearly be seen that their deeds have been done in God." It's as though, here, we have a representation of the new birth—people coming to the light, and their actions and their attitudes reflective of that new life, new birth, that God brings about in human life, and has its origin in God's love.

And, in fact, the central and most memorable part of this passage is John 3:16—"For 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." The goal of this new birth—which begins with faith in the crucified and risen and ascended One, and manifests itself by the power of the Spirit, in various good deeds—is the eternal life which God wishes for all those who put their faith in the Son. In fact, right at the end of John 3, there is the statement that "the Father loves the Son, and has given everything into his hands". Well, that same love is what God wishes to share with us, through faith in Christ—eternal life.

So, if we could back up a bit now, and have a look, with a little more detail, at these various ideas—the idea that birth into eternal life has to take place in such a difficult way, as through the crucified and risen and ascended One, Jesus Christ, may seem difficult for us to imagine or accept. But, even in the previous passages of John's gospel, we hear about Jesus turning water into wine, and then Jesus in the temple, and casting out money-changers. Here is

the new reality, the new being, the new birth, showing itself; and it's something that can come into conflict with what is already set in place, and doesn't want anything to disturb that—not even this new birth.

When the apostle Paul visited Ephesus, I believe it was—we have a [passage today] from the letter to the Ephesians—when Paul visited Ephesus, he was turfed out of town, eventually, because he challenged—or his message challenged—the worship of the great god or goddess, Artemis, a sort of mother god of the whole earth. So his message of the new birth through faith in Christ conflicted with what was already in place.

And sometimes, in order for us to receive this new birth, and live in it, means to depart from patterns of behaviour which amount to idolatry on our part, holding on to things, which keep us, really, from relationship with God.

Now, this passage, as I have said, also speaks of those doing what is true coming to the light, so that their deeds may be clearly seen that they come from God, or they are “done in God”. Somebody periodically tells me the joke that someone compliments a farmer on his work in the field. And the compliment is that God and you have done a great job in bringing all of this to harvest. And the farmer replies, “Well, wouldn't you like to have seen it when just God did it.” And the result, of course, is just weeds.

But, really, the glory of God is seen as we are involved, as we are active, we are motivated, by the Spirit of this new life, to accomplish what God has for us to do. In fact, one of the early church fathers, Ireneaus, said that the “glory of God is the human being fully alive”.

When we look at John's gospel, we see some examples of this “being fully alive”. For example, there was a man who was born blind, John 9. Well, he received new birth, beginning again. And that beginning-again involved sight, on his part. But it also involved a manner of relating to others which was pretty active, on his part. He was ready to encounter and discuss matters with the leaders of the Jews, who wanted to “get” Jesus, because he had apparently healed this man on the Sabbath. So this man, fully alive, this man gifted by the Spirit, showed himself in a willingness to enter into dialogue even with those who might not be too receptive to this message of new birth.

We could think also of the Samaritan woman. And she also communicated to her community this reality—that she had met the Messiah, who told her everything she had ever done. So here again, new birth appears to be active and in play.

And, when new birth is active and is present in our lives, then, indeed, our deeds show up in how we live our lives, by the power of the Spirit.

And, indeed, we can see, not only individually, as Christians who have been given new birth, through faith in Christ. We see also that this—individually, and as a community of faith—can express signs of the eternal life which God wishes us by the power of the same Spirit.

I have mentioned Kierkegaard several times. Kierkegaard has this one “edifying discourse”, as he calls it, on the “Unchangeable Nature of God”. And that [concept] comes from the book of James. Kierkegaard talks about this. But the unchangeable nature of God is not like that of a pew, for example, of the floor, or the steps that come into the church. The unchangeable nature of God is God's love, God's grace, coming to meet us in Christ.

And it's an unchangeable quality which brings change to our own lives, because, ultimately, the goal of this unchangeable love of God, is to change us, is to transform us, into the children of God, who inherit eternal life, which God has for us in Christ.

New birth, then, is certainly part of this season of spring. But new birth is something that God achieves through [our] faith in Jesus Christ, who was crucified, but is risen and is ascended. That new life shows itself, also, in these gifts of the Spirit, in order that we are active in God's service. But all that points, ultimately, to the final goal of God's love, which is the eternal which he wishes to share with us, through his Son, the eternal one, Jesus Christ our Lord.

And so, may we respond to God's intent for new life, new birth, through Jesus Christ our Lord, and live in the Spirit, in the hope of the eternal life he has for us in company with his Son.