

They met at night, because a faithful Jewish man worked in the day and studied the Law at night. Pharisees were lay people, not priests – lay people like elders, deacons, trustees, moderators of committees, Godly lay people. The night is also the time when a person's defenses are lowered, when the sharp edges of things are softened by shadows and the mind seeks to understand the darkened world. Are we more, or less, open to the wonder of it all in the gloom of evening, in the twilight of our years, when life is less certain, less bright? *Jesus said, "This is God's own truth; unless you are re-born, you cannot even catch a glimpse of the Kingdom of God."*

To be born again is to be re-born. To be born again is to be born from above. Nicodemus looked and acted every inch the holy person of God. He was a devout practitioner of the law, but he didn't get it. "How can you be born again when you are old?" Then Nicodemus extends the metaphor of Jesus - born again, reborn - to its logical, almost crude conclusion. "Can you once more enter your mother's womb?" Of course not. We know the answer is of course not. It is beyond impossible – it is ludicrous.

Don't say that to Jesus, old Nicodemus. Don't tell Jesus that He doesn't know what He is talking about when He speaks of the Spirit. He won't have it. He knows. He knows as only one who is of the Spirit can know. Nicodemus, you and I can't know. Not until, that is, we are reborn, born again, born from above. *Jesus said, "This is God's own truth; unless you are re-born of water and the Spirit, you cannot even catch a glimpse of the Kingdom of God."*

Nicodemus knew a thing or two about water from Scripture. There were elaborate rules regarding bathing in the law for women and men, and for Gentile converts, to restore a ritual purity before the Lord. We know of the Essene community from the Dead Sea Scrolls found in 1946/47 on the northern shore of the Dead Sea. This community of religious zealots built a complex series of pools in which they bathed frequently to be pure and ready as they awaited the arrival of God's Messiah.

Nicodemus knew something about the Spirit, the breath of God, the breath of life breathed into Adam and Eve at creation. Jesus said the Spirit is like the wind moving through the olive trees and the fig trees, the wind that came and went according to its own mystery, the wind you could not see until something was moved so that you never really saw the wind itself, only the signs of the wind's moving presence, even though you could feel the wind upon your face. *Jesus said, "This is God's own truth; unless you believe that I have ascended to heaven and descended to earth, like the angels moving up and down the ladder in Jacob's dream, bringing Holy God into the realm of dirt and disease and*

death ... until you see me lifted on a cross and seeing me on that cross know that because I die you have life, you cannot even begin to catch a glimpse of the Kingdom of God."

Pentecost. The gift of the Spirit is here. The Spirit is as prevalent as the gusty wind whipping through the trees last night, moving, alive, coming and going as the Spirit wills, Her life is marked by the lives that are moved, that come alive, by folks like us who in the buying and selling, the coming and going of every day exhibit a trust in Jesus. Not everyone does.

Sadly, there are too many who love the darkness, and the deep darkness resides in the heart where no human or scientific light can reach - only the light of heaven. To be born again is to know that this light - the light of heaven - the light of Christ - has banished the deep, deep darkness within you forever. This light of heaven - this light of Christ - banishes not only the inner darkness, but the outer darkness of creation, for the interior darkness is the same outer darkness that Scripture calls 'sin.'

A source of inspiration for this sermon is a piece of writing by Malcolm Muggeridge (1903 - 1990). Some of you may know of him. An English writer, journalist and in later life an outspoken defender of orthodox Christian faith, he came to the faith later in life. As a journalist for the Manchester Guardian, he and his wife lived in Moscow from 1932/33. He is credited as the first journalist to report accurately on the Joseph Stalin's induced famine in Ukraine, a tactic known in history as the holodomor - the terror famine. Ukrainian grain was shipped out, 3.9 million Ukrainian men, women, children are believed to have starved to death. Ukrainian culture was destroyed; the spoken language forbidden. Famine as a weapon of genocide is a familiar Soviet tactic of war, which we see playing out in real time.

Muggeridge later met Mother Teresa when working as a journalist in Calcutta. He would write of the impact of this meeting as he reviewed his spiritual life:

One reason for my hesitating so long before becoming a Catholic was my disappointment at some of the human elements I saw in the Catholic Church. In spite of the following letter from Mother Teresa I held back, and a number of years went by before I could make up my mind:

"You are to me like Nicodemus . . . 'unless you become a little child . . .' I am sure you will understand beautifully everything if you would only become a little child in God's hands . . . The small difficulty you have regarding the Church is finite. Overcome the finite with the infinite . . ." . . .¹

¹ <http://www.thewords.com/articles/mugquest.htm>

Let me paraphrase from his essay entitled "Impending Resurrection".

As I approach my own end, which cannot now be long delayed, I find Jesus' outrageous claim to be, himself, the resurrection and the life, ever more captivating and meaningful. Quite often, waking up in the night as the old do, and feeling myself to be half out of my body, so that it is a mere chance whether I go back into it to live through another day, or fully disengage and make off; hovering thus between life and death, seeing our dear earth with its scents and sounds and colors, as I have known and loved them, more, perhaps, ~~as Bernanos said,~~ than I have dared to admit; recalling the golden hours of human love and human work, at the same time vouchsafed a glimpse of what lies ahead, Eternity rising in the distance, a great expanse of ineffable light - So placed, I hear Jesus' words ring triumphantly through the universe, spanning my two existences, the one in Time drawing to a close and the one in Eternity at its glorious beginning. So at last I may understand, and understanding, believe. Are caterpillars told of their impending resurrection? How in dying they will be transformed from poor earth-crawlers into creatures of the air, with exquisitely painted wings? If told, do they believe? Is it conceivable to them that so constricted an existence as theirs should burgeon into so gay and lightsome a one as a butterfly's? I imagine the wise old caterpillars shaking their heads - no, it can't be; it's a fantasy, self-deception, a dream. Similarly, our wise ones. Yet in the limbo between living and dying, as the night clock ticks remorselessly on, and the black sky implacably shows not one single streak or scratch of gray, I hear those words; I am the resurrection and the life, and feel myself to be carried along on a great tide of joy and peace,²

Sometimes to be born from above is an act of surrender, a choice to believe. Amen.

² Malcolm Muggeridge, "Impending Resurrection," from *Jesus: The Man Who Lives*, by Malcolm Muggeridge, copyright © 1975 by Malcolm Muggeridge. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers Inc. quoted in a Buderhof email, "Daily Dig."