

Reading: John 3:1-17

I may have shared this before, but nearly 15 years ago God spoke to me through today's reading - in a way that has completely transformed the course of my life. In autumn 2011 I was in my first term at university, struggling with depression. And one night, when in a real state of despair, I looked at my bookshelf, and there amongst all of my thick Politics textbooks was a Bible, which my mum had snuck into my luggage when she dropped me off.

I opened it to a "random" page, and just "happened" to turn straight to today's reading: Nicodemus coming to Jesus, John chapter 3. And at the end of our reading are the two verses that changed my life:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

I did believe there was a God out there, as an 18 year old first year university student. Just not **this** God. The God I believed in back then was a distant, uncaring God, keeping a close eye on our actions and just itching to judge us for when we messed up. Whereas the God revealed through Jesus in this passage is a God who **loves** His world with a **self-sacrificial, self-giving** love; who, far from being distant and uncaring, came down Himself into our world, and "**not to condemn, but to save.**"

I had an encounter with **this** God through this passage, and it changed my life. It changed it so radically that, for me, it was almost like starting over again – or, as Jesus puts it, being "born again."

This is what I want to share about with us this morning: what it means to be "born again" disciples of Jesus. And anchoring it with this quote, from the American spiritual teacher Dallas Willard:

*"The greatest issue facing the world today, with all its challenges, is **whether those who call themselves 'Christians' will become 'disciples'.**"*

To be a 'disciple', or if you like 'apprentice,' of Jesus, has three aspects to it, which can be summarised as: (1) up; (2) in; (3) out. Up – our relationship with Jesus. In – our relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ in His Church. Out – our relationship with the wider world. I'm going to briefly unpack each of these in-turn, because it is my firm belief that, as Dallas Willard suggests, the world will be transformed if we do so.

(1) Firstly, "up." Our relationship with God. There's a reason that this comes first, because it is the most important. The very first thing that Jesus says to Nicodemus is *"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."* The starting point is, like me in that fairly grotty university halls of residence nearly 15 years ago, having a realisation of who the God who made all things is, and what He is truly like.

As we know, this is not a one-time only thing though. It is something that, I at least, need to remind myself daily, to be honest multiple times a day. I have a fairly simple prayer to help with this, which I pray using "breathing prayer" – slowing down, praying on the inward breath and outward breath.

It is from 1 John chapter 3, verse 1: "What love that we are called children of God." I pray the first part "what love that we are" on the inward breath; and "called children of God" as I breathe out. And I may do that 3 or 4 times, breathing in and out and praying those words in my head as I do so. I find the focusing on my breathing a good way of slowing myself down, and then repeating these words as a reminder that I am a beloved child of God.

I'd encourage all of us to find a little simple prayer like these, just to pause and pray as a reminder throughout the day of who we are – beloved children of God - and who He is – a loving Father. I often find boiling the kettle for my next cup of tea – PG Tips, of course – a time when I now pray.

Coming to church is also, obviously, an incredibly important time of renewing our relationship with God, and reminding ourselves of who He is. Think about those incredible words we say every Sunday when we prepare for Communion:

It is right to praise you, Father, Lord of all creation; in your love you made us for yourself. When we turned away you did not reject us, but came to meet us in your Son. You embraced us as your children and welcomed us to sit and eat with you.

And then the deeply personal nature of that love: "The body of Christ, broken for **you**. The blood of Christ, shed for **you**."

(2) And that leads nicely into the second point: "in." Our relationship with our brothers and sisters in Christ here in His Church, which flows out of our relationship with God.

When thinking of an analogy for this, God kept giving me the idea of ripple effects. It is interesting that in John's Gospel, the Holy Spirit is often linked with water. In verse 5 today, Jesus says: *"no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit."* Jesus seems to repeatedly use water, as well as the wind, as an image for the work of the Holy Spirit.

And so if we were to go down the road to Hatton Locks, and – after stopping off for a bacon sandwich, which is of course the highlight of any trip down there – throw a large rock into the water there, we'd see a huge plop where the rock goes in, and then ripples across the water. The strongest ripples would be closest to where the rock entered.

And, for me anyway, I found this a helpful image of the impact of God in my life, of being "born again." God transformed my world drastically, a bit like the rock entering the previously still canal waters - and then the ripple effects of this are felt in a number of different places, with the strongest ones being those closest.

And so with this in mind, underneath my jumper here is not just a clerical shirt with a dog collar, but also this t-shirt. Because the largest ripple effects of God changing my life should be felt by my immediate family, who are of course also part of my church family.

Later in John's Gospel, in His final teaching to His disciples at the Last Supper, Jesus says: *"By this will the world know that you are my disciples: that you love one another, as I have loved you."* Our love for one another is powerful: it changes our lives, and the ripples lead to those who are not part of the Church to stop and notice.

We had a profound experience of this yesterday, at the open meeting to discuss the future of St. Luke's Lowsonford. It was such a lift to be joined and supported by members of our church family from here and Haseley, and really transformed the atmosphere – both during the meeting itself, but also during the times chatting together before and after. It is such a difficult and emotive thing to be discussing, but the love that all of our churches who were there have for each other – from Haseley to Hatton to Rowington to Lowsonford - was tangible. Thank you. And thank you to everyone who was praying yesterday, it really did have an impact.

(3) And finally, "out." When we are transformed as disciples of Jesus, are "born again," it doesn't just impact those closest to us - the ripples are felt across God's world. And so I have one final "outfit change" to make with this in mind. I'll be honest, I probably could have worn anything from my wardrobe for this, but the opportunity to stand in the pulpit in my Chester shirt was too good to miss.

Though there is a serious point here. Because the impact of my relationship with Jesus doesn't stop when I get to that door - the ripples are felt, I hope, wherever I go. Even at Chester football club matches...

I love how Mother Teresa puts it, in a quote I picked up from Miriam at Breakfast Church a couple of weeks ago: *"I alone cannot change the world, but I can cast a stone across the waters to create many ripples."*

It is my firm belief that this is how the world is changed. Not through great Powers throwing their might around, but through ordinary people like you and I meeting Jesus, following Him, loving one another in His Church, and loving our neighbours. All in the power of the Holy Spirit who abides within each and every one of us.

St. David, who we celebrate today, summed this all up beautifully in the last words of his final sermon: *"Be joyful, keep the faith, and do the little things."* And so I'd like to finish with a prayer, inspired by St. David:

*In the little things I do
be present Lord.*

*In the little things I speak
be present, Lord.*

*In the little moments I fill
be present Lord.*

*In my working and my going
be present Lord.*

Amen.