

## Be Born Again (John 3: 1-17)

It's your worst nightmare: some crazed, holier-than-thou preacher yelling at you that you must be "born-again or you will *never* enter the Kingdom of Heaven". Those very words "born again" have even become pejorative, synonymous with "happy-clappy" and "bible-bashing". Being "born again" puts you in the "Evo God Squad".

Unfortunately, the metaphor of "being born again" has been usurped by some of those who would see themselves as being a cut above the average Christian. But I want to claim it back for all who have faith in the Risen Lord and share in this Holy Eucharist.

Nicodemus was a good man, a holy man, a learned man, and he was a devout Jew. In today's Gospel, St John introduces him as coming out of the night, out of spiritual darkness, to speak to Jesus, but not quite getting the message. After this episode we next hear of Nicodemus as the sole Pharisee who pleaded for Jesus to the other Pharisees and Chief Priests that Jewish law does not judge and condemn a man without first hearing what he has done. Finally Nicodemus was the man who, again by night, took Jesus's body down from the Cross, where it had been raised up like Moses's life-saving staff with the bronze snake entwined around – a symbol still used by Orthodox bishops instead of a crosier. It was Nicodemus who held the dead body of our Lord, and tenderly anointed it with precious myrrh and spices, and buried him according to Jewish rites. He listened, he watched, he held and he finally he loved the Lord.

My father is a good man, a generous and learned man, and, like Nicodemus, a God-fearing Jew. He came to England in 1933 out of the darkness of Nazism as it cast a terrifying shadow over Germany. He was sent to a boarding prep school, and ultimately spent his war years at Harrow School, sharing a study with a chap who became a priest, and who, as chance would have it, occasionally worships at Radley Village Church.

Unlike Nicodemus, my father was not a devout Jew: he never learned Hebrew; he only went to synagogue for weddings and funerals; he liked bacon; he ate meat cooked in cream. But, he always went to Chapel at school, just as you do, because he had to; he got married in Church because that was the “right thing”; he always came to Chapel when he and my mother visited me at public school before taking me out to lunch. He always came with the rest of the family to Church on Christmas Day and Easter Day, and to his children and grandchildren’s Christenings. He even said the Lord’s Prayer; but he was never a Christian.

However, like Nicodemus my father thought Jesus was a great spiritual teacher, perhaps the greatest Prophet ever. My father believed the Spirit of God spoke through Jesus. But my father would never come forward to take Communion, or even to kneel for a blessing. Like Nicodemus, in the Gospel reading, the penny never really dropped.

That was up until five years ago when my father was seventy-four. On Easter Day 2000, our family went to All Saints’ Church in Mudeford. The vicar invited all denominations to take Communion. My father mischievously says that he must have misheard and thought the vicar had said “members of all religions”. My father got up with us from the pew, and, just as you will in a moment, approached the Altar. He knelt and received the Body of Christ in his hands and drank the precious Blood, and he was “born again”.

As we left the Church he told the Vicar what had happened, and asked to be baptised. My father became a Christian, not a bible-bashing, happy-clappy, holier-than-thou hand-waving Christian; but a born-again Christian.

Like Nicodemus, my father’s spiritual journey was long, lonely and in darkness, but he came into the light when he held in his hands the Body of Christ.