

# Honouring Our Faith

John 3:1-17

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent

7<sup>th</sup> March 2010

Rev. Dr. Robert Ozmont of First United Methodist Church in Atlanta tells how he dragged himself out of bed late one night to answer the phone. He did not know the lady who was calling but recognised that she was in great mental distress and tried to help her as best he could. During the conversation, Dr. Ozmont enquired if she was a member of a local church. "Oh, yes," she replied, "I am a member of Calvary Presbyterian." A church Dr. Ozmont recognised as being not far from his own. "Why didn't you call your own minister about this problem?" he responded. "Well, I considered that," she said, "but, you know, my pastor works very, very hard and I didn't want to bother him in the middle of the night. So I thought I'd call you instead."<sup>1</sup>

We read in the New Testament today about another person who did not want to trouble his own religious leader in the middle of the night. But for a different reason. His name was Nicodemus, a Pharisee, one of a small group of Jews dedicated to the keeping of the law right down to the last jot and tittle. The keeping of such outward observances, his sect believed, was the only way to please God and gain entrance to his kingdom.<sup>2</sup>

But, keep the law as strictly as he did, Nicodemus just could not find that fulfilment for which he longed. Says one writer, "Depression stalked him like a hungry lion. He had everything that was supposed to make life complete: money, political power, family and the approval of his religious group. Yet, there was still a vast, gnawing emptiness within him."<sup>3</sup> Suddenly, late one night, things came to a head. He realised he was facing a spiritual crisis. But he didn't go to his own rabbi at that late hour, sensing maybe that his particular spiritual problems were beyond the resources of someone of his own faith. So he sought out the much-acclaimed Man from Nazareth to ask his help.<sup>4</sup>

Now, it would seem that Nicodemus sought out Jesus in the middle of the night because he needed the cloak of darkness to avoid being seen openly by his fellow Pharisees in the company of the Galilean

teacher and healer. The risk involved was tremendous, so great was the loathing of Jesus by this Jewish faction. It would have been something akin to Finance Minister, Jim Flaherty, openly talking to Liberal critic, John McCallum, on Parliament Hill and asking for advice on how to prepare last week's budget. Or, like Maple Leafs head coach, Ron Wilson, calling Ottawa Senators' Cory Clouston after their last game for some advice on how to play the Flyers in tonight's game. Just as such contemporary consultations would be fraught with all kinds of political and reputational danger, likewise, in the first century, the very idea of Nicodemus meeting with Jesus to get spiritual guidance would have been a very risky move for someone so high up in the Jewish hierarchy.

Now, I am not quite sure what kind of help or advice Nicodemus expected from Jesus but I think it's fair to say he got more than he bargained for. Much to his surprise, Jesus challenged him to adopt a very radical course of action. "I tell you the truth," said the Man from Nazareth, "no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."<sup>5</sup> If you want to be one of God's people and enjoy his presence, you have to go through a process of rebirth.

Can you see the quizzical look on Nicodemus' face? He couldn't understand what Jesus was talking about. Or where he was coming from. It was a classic case of crossed lines of communication. They were just on totally different wavelengths.

Much like that story of the tour guide in St. Peter's in Rome who was trying to give a group of Americans some idea of the immense size of the cathedral and used a sports analogy. "This place is so huge," she said, "that not even a big-hitter like Mark McGwire or Barry Bonds could hit a home-run from one end to the other." There was silence as the group considered this analogy, their eyes slowly sweeping from one end of the building to the other, wondering at the vast area of the basilica. Then a woman at the back of the group piped up with a question, "You mean to say they actually play baseball in this church?"

Just like this, Nicodemus was operating with a completely different mindset from Jesus. He was thinking physical. Jesus was thinking spiritual. “How can a grown man be born again?” asked Nicodemus, “He certainly cannot enter his mother’s womb and be born a second time.”<sup>6</sup> The Pharisee was obviously struggling to come to grips with a concept that was so completely alien to him.

But Jesus persisted quietly and gently helping him to understand that, though everyone has a first natural, physical birth, there is a second birth that comes from the Holy Spirit. When it happens, God enters into the person’s life and replaces the old ways of evil and selfishness with new ways of goodness and love. It’s just like being born again with new values, new purposes and a totally new outlook on life.

What about us today? Do we have to be born again? Evangelicals tell us you can’t be a true Christian unless you have a Damascus-Road type experience. Ultra conservative cleric, Jerry Falwell was once reported as saying that if you’re not a born-again Christian then you are a failure as a human being. But is being born-again really an essential part of authentic Christianity?

During Tiger Woods press statement a few weeks back, he said how he regretted having moved away from the values and ideals of his Buddhist faith and promised that he was going to make a new start with his religion. One journalist was overheard commenting to another under his breath, “Well, I have never heard never of a born-again Buddhist! A born-again Christian, yes, but not a born-again Buddhist.”

This reporter was right. Being born-again is a spiritual experience more connected with Christianity than any other religion. And, yes, I think it is an integral part of authentic Christianity. To be a Christian a person must be born-again. But not in terms of the narrow and limited evangelical concept which demands an instantaneous, emotional experience. An experience that is so spectacular and memorable that that person can forever after name the day and time of its occurrence.

That’s not to deny, of course, this is the way conversion happens for many people. Of course, it does. But it is not the only way and it is wrong to suggest that all legitimate born-again experiences must conform to this pattern. Most Christians have

never really been aware of being born-again because it is something that has happened so imperceptibly over a long period of time, beginning in childhood, under the influence of Sunday School – and, most of all, of a Christian home – and continuing by increments through their adult religious experiences. Yet, they too can very properly claim to be born-again in the deepest and best sense possible.

*Living Faith*, our contemporary Presbyterian statement of belief, sums it up concisely when it says, “God brings us to faith in many ways. We may have trusted in God from childhood: or our faith may have come later in life. Faith may have come suddenly or only after a struggle to believe. Whatever the spiritual journey we have travelled, God honours our faith, great or small.”<sup>7</sup>

This is important for us to know at those times in our lives when we wonder if we really are true disciples because we have not been born-again in the evangelical sense. This is important for us to know when we feel we are second-class Christians because we have not undergone some Emmaus-road type conversion experience. This is important to know especially on Communion Sundays when we come to the Lord’s Table feeling we are unworthy to take the Bread and the Wine because we have not led the perfect Christian life or practised the faith of a saint.

In times like these, let’s not entertain any doubts about whether God loves or cares for us.

But let us simply remember that he accepts us just as we are and shares his Body and Blood with us because “Whatever the spiritual journey we have travelled, God honours our faith, great or small.”

© George A. Turner  
St. Paul’s Presbyterian Church  
Peterborough, Ontario

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. W. Bouknight, “A Vital Night Call”, Christian Globe Network, 2002

<sup>2</sup> John 3:1-17

<sup>3</sup> Bouknight, Op. Cit.

<sup>4</sup> John 3:2

<sup>5</sup> John 3:3

<sup>6</sup> John 3:4

<sup>7</sup> *Living Faith*, The Presbyterian Church in Canada, Woodlake Books, 1987