

Reinventing Yourself

A Sermon at Union Chapel

(on the occasion of a baptism)

Trinity Sunday, 11 June 2006

Readings

John 3:1–17
Isaiah 6:1–8

“no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he has been born again.” “But how can someone be born when he is old?” John 3:4

Nicodemus, now. I remember thinking, when I was a teenager, and full of myself, that Nicodemus seemed to be unusually dim: I remember thinking that, surely, the metaphor of being born again was obvious enough, and that it didn't involve re-entry into one's mother's womb, and, consequently, that it was difficult to see what Nicodemus was on about. Surely, I thought, there's nothing special about this rebirth stuff.

And, of course, there is still an awful lot of talk about being born again. Maybe not in so many words: “born again” are words used by – dear me – *Christians*, and so not many other people use those exact words. But there are lots of alternatives: “reinventing yourself”, or “having a make-over”, or maybe a “detox”: the list is endless. And people will say that they've done it on every conceivable occasion: Madonna, for example (Madonna the singer, not the mother of our Lord) will say she's reinvented herself as often as she has a new hairstyle. And this is thought to be a good thing: lots of people even say about Madonna that, really, whatever some people might say about her singing, she's “awfully good at reinventing herself”.

But none of this is really very convincing. Think of Madonna, after all; even given all this unremitting reinvention, she's still recognisably Madonna (and, part of me wants to say, she still can't sing as well as our Fionnaigh, so what good has it done her)? Reinventing yourself, even though it's apparently very popular, never seems to be quite successful. And what would it involve: what would it mean to reinvent yourself? Reinventing your kitchen, for example, or your living room, you can understand that. But your kitchen is outside of you, and while you're doing the reinvention you can live on takeaways. But reinventing yourself: where do you *stand*, while you're doing it? Who's doing the reinvention: the old self, or the new self? Well, not the new self, because it's not there yet, but, if the old self does it, doesn't it impose its own tastes on the new self? As if you redecorated your living room, and found out, only too late, that you still had that ugly sofa in there, stubbornly impossible to remove.

It is, of course, entirely possible that Nicodemus knew exactly what he was talking about: that he knew precisely how difficult it was (and that maybe he had tried it in the past, or that he – being a “teacher of Israel”, and being, as he hints, “old” – had seen a lot of people talking glibly about rebirth, and that he knew that it wasn't as simple as it was made out to be). It is entirely possible that Nicodemus meant what he said about entering again into your mother's womb: not, of course, that he thought that you had to do it literally, but that what Jesus was doing was about as difficult as that. It is entirely possible that Nicodemus could see all of this, and that he simply was more honest than most of our modern gurus and reality TV producers and make-over artists are: that he simply saw how difficult it was and said so.

Into our world, this world of these repeated failed attempts at self-reinvention, God comes. He (she) comes in the obvious but nevertheless majestic ways: appearing to Isaiah in the temple, filling that entire large magnificent building with the overwhelming divine presence. This is, after all, what we expect of God. But, again, God comes in Jesus, in less obvious ways: appears as a man, and not a particularly glamorous man, but a man who, remarkably, talked of how to see the kingdom of God. And, again, God appears in the Spirit: the Spirit who blows where it wants, and which we hear the sound of but do not know where it is going. They are familiar stories, stories that, probably, all of us have heard once or twice, and that some of us have heard many times. But the unfamiliar thing – the thing that Jesus was hinting at, and that Nicodemus was trying hard to grasp – is what it says about God: that here God is reinventing him, or her, self. That God is ceasing to be solely a being who appears in overwhelming splendour, but a being who also comes to us, lives among us, in

a human life. Or a being who is like the wind, or like the breath of a poet, who is constantly making things new: reinventing not just him- or herself, but reinventing, recreating, the world, starting with the disciples, then going on to the people who the disciples touched and affected: the church, that is.

Well, this is a fairly convincing account of a God who makes things more difficult: who asks Nicodemus difficult questions (questions which, of course, Nicodemus can't answer right), and who then goes on, as Jesus, to thoroughly puzzle and confuse his disciples. But we are celebrating a baptism here, a joyful and happy and thoroughly Christian thing – and we didn't ask the child any hard questions before we did it. And the child's role in this was remarkably easy (just have a tiny bit of water splashed over you), and ours was not too much more difficult (apart from the bit about the promises, of course). And all this seems, from our point of view, too easy: it can't be a gift, we say to ourselves, it can't be free, it can't be graciously offered to us. So, one way or another, we are not ready when God comes to us: we either make God too difficult, or too easy, for us: we want things to go on as they do in our human game of reinvention, when we can have things a bit hard but not very hard.

But things are both very difficult and very easy. The things we claim to try to do – sorting out our own lives, reinventing ourselves – are too difficult for us, because they are the things which God does. But these things really are not difficult for us, because God is already coming to our aid: the "God [who] so loved the world that he gave his only Son". Hard for God, of course: hard to actually reinvent himself, reinvent himself from God, the God in awesome majesty, to Jesus, the man who proclaimed God's ways to the world, and who was lifted up, on the Cross, not in triumph, but in giving us freedom. Hard for God, easy for us.

There are two final things to say. One is this: it's easy to mock, as I have, our yearnings for reinvention, or detox, or any of these things. Many of them are, after all, rather silly, especially in the versions that you get exposed to if you watch too much TV. But concealed in most of these things is a quite genuine yearning: a yearning for a life that is, maybe, more in touch, in which we are more genuinely free than we are now, in which we do not do the things that we don't want to do. And we all need to be able to change, especially now, living as we do in this fast-changing and rather terrifying world. And this will become, no doubt, even more significant for our children. But we shouldn't forget that it's God who reinvents, not us: we should take seriously this easy, but significant, thing we've done, this water that we've sprinkled on this child's head. And so we must pray, and continue to pray, for the presence of the Holy Spirit: the Spirit who listens

to these yearnings of ours, even before we've properly expressed them, and who will, if we consent, lead us into a genuinely new life.

The other thing is this: today is Trinity Sunday, and the Trinity is usually thought of as a rather dry and obscure piece of theology: about the one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, three persons in one God, and so on. Well, there have been a lot of rather difficult books written about the Trinity, and they are fine in their way, but what is most important, and what we should remember, is what the doctrine of the Trinity is *about*: it is about God, and it is about the fact that God reinvents herself. Out of love: not being content to remain, holy and isolated, in glory, but becoming also the Son, becoming also the Spirit, the better to express love for the world, for each one of us, for this child here.

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