

20140316Lent2Sermon

On Sunday morning's in Lent I'm looking the Gospel themes but in light of John Bunyan's classical allegorical story, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The "Gospel themes" I refer to are the short phrases given in our Prayer Book for each lesson. These are *Jesus conquers temptation* which we had last week; *Being born again* – this week's Gospel; *water of life*; *Christ gives sight to the blind man* and *Christ the resurrection and the life*. Now, during Lent I was expecting to deal with a lot of negativity from Gospel but in fact we get very positive themes.

Lent is really a season when we undergo change. As the Wednesday evening group realised at last week meeting, change is not easy. Nicodemus was called upon to change and he tried to avoid the threat by playing dumb. It reminded me a bit of the Oscar Pistorius trial. The witness is asked questions by the defence lawyer and one starts to wonder just how intelligent the lawyer is, as he seems to misunderstand the answers, and before you know it, the witness has said something that incriminates himself even more than the accused! And that supposedly 'thick' lawyer goes straight for the jugular.

Nicodemus was a leader we are told – most probably a religious leader and amongst the Jews, religious leader means a religious lawyer. So he asked questions of Jesus trying to find understanding. The press report daily about the Pistorius trial that 'the witness withstood the barrage of questions from the defence advocate.' In the same way Jesus withstood the barrage of questions from Nicodemus.

"How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?", "How can these things be?" What Jesus is saying is that the Wind of Change was about to blow: *The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.*

So Nicodemus was being called upon to change and nothing is more drastic in change than being born again. It is pointless to be born again exactly the same as you are now. Being born again means change and us humans don't like change. Abram was called to change: *'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'* His change was so dramatic that God gave him a new name – Abraham.

Abraham was willing to undergo these changes because he had faith. Paul tells us: *For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.* And Jesus calls on Nicodemus to change by being re-born of water and spirit: *'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.'*

Now all this sounds wonderful but it is not as easy as it looks. John Bunyan had a dream about a man called Christian who at the start of *The Pilgrim's Progress* weeps as he realises what changes he had to undergo. The whole of books deals with these changes but in allegorical and symbolic form. Last week he had to resist the temptations of Vanity Fair – just as we have to resist temptations at our Vanity Fair, wherever and whatever these temptations might be. This week Christian and two companions arrive at the Valley of the Shadow of Death and it was necessary for Christian to pass through it because the way to the Celestial City was in that direction. Bunyan tells us: *Now this valley was a very solitary and lonely place. The prophet Jeremiah describes it as, "A wilderness, a land of deserts and of pits, a land of drought and of the shadow of death, a land that no man" (except a Christian) "passes through, and where no man dwells."* And it is here that Christian has to face, not so much his own death which awaits him at the end of his pilgrimage, but rather hellish things and persons that accompany death.

The imagery Bunyan uses here is based upon David's walk through "the valley of the shadow of death," from Psalm 23. That verse 4 seems to be the fulcrum of that psalm – before it there was a quiet confidence – *the Lord is my shepherd* after it is exuberant joy *my cup will be full*. But this change happens because David has to pass through *the Valley of the shadow of death*.

Christian's companions chicken out after what they see and do not accompany Christian into the Valley. They report that they saw "hobgoblins, satyrs and dragons" lying in wait for them. Christian says that this is the only way to the Celestial City so he will journey on. "Hobgoblins", are also mentioned in Bunyan's most famous hymn. They are mythological, ferret-like, mischievous, ugly little demons. "Satyrs" are mythological, hairy, lascivious demons with mixed animal features. In bible the word is often translated as "hairy goats" or "wild goats". "Dragons" are mythological, reptilian monsters that often breathe fire. Once again in the bible the term is translated as "serpent or Leviathan (sea monster) or jackal.

The MEN give up. *So Christian parted with the two men and continued to move forward, though his sword remained drawn, at the ready, for fear that he might be assaulted... Yet Christian went on and it was here that I heard him sigh ever so bitterly; the reason was that besides the dangers mentioned ... the pathway here was so dark that often, when he lifted his foot to take a step forward, yet he did not know what he would find when he put it down.... So the trembling pilgrim found it necessary to resort to another weapon called All-Prayer. He would cry out, "Oh Lord, I implore you to deliver my soul!"... Yet the fiends seemed to draw nearer and nearer; but when they seemed to be almost upon him, he cried out with such an impassioned cry, "I will walk in the strength of the Lord," that they drew back and ceased their approach... When Christian had travelled in this depressed condition for some considerable time, he then thought he heard the voice of a man on pilgrimage ahead of him, saying, "Though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death, I will fear no evil, for You are with me." ... Eventually the light of the morning dawned; at this Christian exclaimed, "He has turned the shadow of death into the morning." As he looked back he perceived just how narrow the way was that lay between the perils; furthermore, he also identified the hobgoblins, satyrs, and dragons of the pit, even though they were now some distance from him. Apparently after daybreak they were reluctant to draw near. So Christian was greatly moved with his deliverance from all the dangers of his solitary journey thus far.*

For Christian it was the twenty third Psalm that quieted his fear-filled heart. Today we sang Psalm 121:

I lift up my eyes to the hills :

but where shall I find help?

My help comes from the Lord :

who has made heaven and earth.

He will not suffer your foot to stumble :

and he who watches over you will not sleep....

The Lord himself is your keeper :

the Lord is your defence upon your right hand;

....

The Lord will defend you from all evil :

it is he who will guard your life.

The Lord will defend your going out and your coming in :

from this time forward for evermore.

Yesterday, at Avondrust I said this Psalm as part of the Service of Anointing as I anointed Jane White. I'm not sure how much she heard nor am I sure whether she is still with us this morning but I'm sure the words of that familiar must have brought comfort as she faced the Valley of the Shadow of Death.

As we continue our Pilgrimage this Lent we remember the words of our Collect: *God of amazing compassion and lover of our wayward race, you bring to birth a pilgrim people, and call us to be a blessing for all the world: give us*

grace to receive this generous gift and step with courage on this holy path, confident in the radiant life that is your plan for us. Yes, we will undergo change. Yes, that change will be frightening. Yes, we will face our fears – our hobgoblins, satyrs and dragons but we will realise, as Christian does, that Jesus is the way for us to change and to assist us in that change. W H Auden has a poem which summarises it for me:

He is the Way.

Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness;

You will see rare beasts, and have unique adventures.

He is the Truth.

Seek Him in the Kingdom of Anxiety;

You will come to a great city that has expected your return for years.

He is the Life.

Love Him in the World of the Flesh;

And at your marriage all its occasions shall dance for joy.

As a prayer we sing the third verse of hymn 212