

St PP 20.3.11 - 8.00am and 10.00am

John 3. 1-17

Almighty God we look to you for truth and for hope. Reveal yourself through your word and meet us in your Son. Amen

Lets try and be brave this morning -and look at what is obviously really bothering us all.

I don't think I can remember a time in my own life when death and rebirth, death and resurrection were so vividly writ across the skies.

I was having coffee with an older man from the parish and he said to me 'it's hard not to get depressed isn't it?' And we talked about all that is going on -Japan -the earthquake and the tsunami -the threatened nuclear meltdown. Libya, -will there be more body bags before the day is out? - Bahrain, Egypt. The change in the balance of economic power around the world, for the first time for ages we can expect our children and grand children to have a tougher life than ours..... the cost of fuel, the lack of jobs for our young people, the high speed train scaring our beautiful countryside...it makes your heart grow heavy -hope seems in short supply.

Maybe it's an obvious shot- but I'm thinking Yeats:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: a waste of desert sand;
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,

A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Wind shadows of the indignant desert birds.

The darkness drops again but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

Written at the end of the first WW Yeats offers no hope -indeed corrupts the hope of the return of Christ -the world as he knew it spiralling out of control.

It didn't happen like that. Somehow humanity found the resources to restore, albeit in what turned out to be a temporary way, order and stability into society.

Today the world also seems on the brink. Leave alone for the moment all the personal insecurities -we'll come back to them in a moment - looking outwards -Yeats' concept of an out-of-control spiral of disaster seems pretty much on the money.

Do we as Christians have a message of hope in the midst of all this?

All this is in fact a funny old mixture. Some is political instability because men and women are fighting for freedom from oppression. Some is the sheer magnitude of natural disaster; some is the bitter, bitter irony of a country that experienced Hiroshima and Nagasaki under threat from their own nuclear installations. Some is about political decisions being played out on our own doorstep. Some is the fruit of our own greed and pursuit of wealth at all costs. The common theme is the resultant human suffering -real people -real pain.

There are of course huge philosophical questions -we have probably all struggled with them at some time or other.

Given that God is by definition: good,.. and all knowing..... and all-powerful -and given that he/she created the world (again in whatever way you chose to understand that) -well we have a problem.

If God is all knowing then he knows what this world is like.

If God is all powerful he could either have created it differently in the first place or intervened to correct it.

If he does neither of these things then he would seem to be morally at fault and hence not good.

Actually you could ask this in two ways:

We tend to ask: Is God to blame for causing evil?

I'm more inclined to ask: Is God to blame for creating a world which turned out to contain evil?' -

Can we as Christians continue to assert that God created the best of all possible worlds when we look at the mess around us?

This is the sort of stuff to get stuck into over a pint (so you've got a few weeks to summon your arguments till lent is over) -but even when you've worked it out it doesn't really help that middle of the night stress that happens in your heart and soul more than your brain. For what it's worth do think that this is the best possible world -if you want a world with moral independence. But I also think that an intellectual standpoint on this is never going to be enough -your brain, your imagination indeed your very soul needs to be ennobled by faith -and that's God's good gift.

Today's readings lead us a different route. Alongside the colossus of John 3 -God so loved the world -we have two very interesting texts. The basic story in Genesis and then Romans which takes us back to Abraham -listen to this:

'Abraham was first named 'father' and then became a father because he dared to trust God to do what only God could do: raise the dead to life, with a word make something out of nothing. When everything was hopeless, Abraham believed anyway, deciding to live not on the basis of what he saw *he* couldn't do, but on what God said he *would* do.

Maybe we could sum this up by saying that while everything is trolling along sweetly it is easy to say you trust God's promises -you can see the evidence -he is coming up with the goods. Times like now however it is tougher.

You may remember the illustration about the tightrope walker.

The young man is a genius. He can walk over anything -any length, in any conditions. He is acclaimed as the best there ever was or ever will be.

He becomes your friend and offers to take you across a rope in a wheel barrow -the rope is not high off the ground and there are new things to

experience the other side -so you say 'yes, you trust him.' And of course you reach the other side safely.

One day you and he are on one side of a chasm -but this time there is a forest fire raging behind you and beneath in the chasm are raging torrents . Suddenly is it isn't so easy to get in the wheel barrow. So he says 'look! I will go before you and show you I can get to the other side' And you see his face grow ashen and his hands treble -but he sets out and crosses the chasm -it has never been done before.

He returns and offers you that seat in his wheel barrow. The same genius. You have evidence that he has done it before -you know him and trust him. How tough is it this time to get in the wheel barrow?

Of course it is hard! Of course it takes faith -but that's is what gentle times are all about. Learning to know and love and trust Christ.

Abraham knew that Sarah had had decades of infertility -but he had had decades of trusting God. This was the moment where he had trust even though he couldn't see.

When 'Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;' -that's when we need more trust and faith -not less.

Even so you might feel that all this offers is a sort of 'hang on in there - it will all be ok in the end' God's basically in control and somehow -we can't see how -he'll put it back together again. I don't mind that message -in fact I like it -but what about me -my pain and fear and anxiety. How can I stop myself being eaten up by the dark thoughts while God sorts everything in his own good time?

The gospel reading takes us deeper. The theme of course is rebirth. Lets start with the natural evidence; the way the world is created is built on death and rebirth.

This last winter has seemed long and dark, cold and depressing. Yet I did not ever think that spring would fail to come. Tender and fragile at first -resurrection is embedded in the very soil.

There are parts of the desert where a seed can lie seemingly dead in the sand for decades and then a few gentle drops of rain and a flower bursts forth.

Have you noticed how often an older member in one part of your family dies and in some other part a new baby arrives?

History teaches us this as well. Every great civilisation has grown – flourished –and in it's pomp sown the seeds of it's own death.

Out with the old -a new era is born.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus and we don't actually know just what question he asked him. He skirted around things - 'great miracles Jesus -you must have come from God....but I suspect from Jesus' answer that he had identified something within him that was dying -because Jesus launched into the whole wonderful teaching about re-birth.

Just as we physically give birth -and a new life is created, and the human race is renewed -so that creative power of God can work within you to renew -re-birth who you are.

Now if you have problems with the phrase 'born again' could you please set them aside just for now. It was after all Jesus' own phrase long before it got high jacked by a particular group.

Jesus message is simple and it is radical. He doesn't say 'try harder' he doesn't suggest that there is anything that Nicodemus can go out and do to bring about this inner re-birth . He tells him that he has to put himself into the hands of God.

This spiritual -rebirth comes about when God stirs your soul. There is a great and wonderful mystery at the very centre of it all.

Jesus puts it like this: 'The wind blows where ever it pleases. You hear it's sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the spirit.'

It doesn't really suit us that well. We are used to being in control - to making our own decisions and bringing our plans to fruition -and yet we are saying that at the centre of our faith there is an impetus which comes from God -and without which we more than flounder -we actually grind to an inner halt.

This God impetus is of course described best in the famous verse 16. It describes how God is aware of our need, aware of our incompleteness without him, aware of the pain and guilt we all carry around with us day by day. And....there is not a response of wrath - seeing how far we fall short of our God-given potential -nor even pity at our predicament - or the predicament we have brought about in our world.

No. God responds with a pure love, and love which leads him to take the initiative.

‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that whosoever believed in him shall not perish but have eternal life.’

God takes the initiative in our spiritual rebirth. Through the spirit of God our longings are awakened, our eyes drawn towards inner truths. And God takes the initiative in action -he sends his Son Jesus.

Those first steps of believing are just the beginning -in the next verses Jesus goes on to call Nicodemus to live by the truth. In other words spiritual rebirth comes about by believing, and then living a rich and creative inner life -and outer life come to think of it -is brought about by learning how to co-create your life with God. - and that is the task of daily living with in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Well. How did Nicodemus respond. We don’t know exactly. We don’t hear from him again until after Jesus death -when John says that Joseph of Arimathea was accompanied by Nicodemus bringing embalming perfume and spices -to give Jesus a decent burial.

It does make you think that the change he had longed for had come about -and that he truly loved Jesus.

So there we have it. A man in search of his soul.

But we have saved the best till last. Casting it’s shadow over all that we have talked about -the ultimate symbol of the darkness and pain , the violence and meaninglessness of human suffering -the cross stands as death. The place where death encountered the power of the love of God.

When we walk up to the altar we walk to a celebration meal. As we eat the bread and drink the wine -they are like the seeds of the resurrection in us. As we internalise his love so we join in the hope that is God’s gift. For when we -as Nicodemus -are re-born -so the resurrection becomes our birthright. The creator -re-creates.

This is our hope. This is the hope we make real for one another as we share this meal. This is the hope we are sent out to share. Amen