

St. Ninian's Parish Church
Sunday 27th May 2018

John 3: 1 - 17; Romans 8: 12 - 17

I took the funeral of a gentleman who had lived a healthy and long life well in to his 90s. His four siblings had all lived equal long lives. His wife too was in her 90s, and still going strong. Speaking to his children I reflected that with that inherited gene pool they were likely to be on earth for a very long time to come.

If you want to live then being born matters - being born in the flesh and in to a material world matters. But, a big factor governing how long you will live in the flesh in this material world depends very much on the nature of the flesh you are born with: it's genetic make-up being a particularly important part of your material fleshly nature. In this life, what you are born as matters.

Not only does what you are born as matter, but also in this life when you are born matters. For example, if you were born a boy in the year 1896, then you turned 18 in the year 1914 just as the First World War broke out. Compare that life to a girl born in 1945 the year the Second World War ended; she turned 18 in 1963 just as the sixties started to swing. For that girl and that boy their fleshly lives in this material world were very different. Not only does what you are born as matter, in this fleshly life, in this material world, but also when you are born matters.

What you were born as matters, and when you were born matters, and also where you were born matters. In Scotland today average life expectancy for someone born in Glasgow is about 72 years. That is 7 years less than the national average of 79 years. If you want to live a long life in Scotland better avoid being born in Glasgow. But, if you were born in Glasgow try and avoid be born in the Calton area around the Barras, for there average life expectancy is a mere 54 years. Even in first world Scotland in the 21st century where you are born matters to your fleshly life in this material world.

In England 82% of those people who become barristers - barristers are the English legal system's equivalent of Scottish advocates - went to either Oxford or Cambridge University. Over 80% of those people who graduate from either Oxford or Cambridge University come from the top two socio-economic groups in the UK.

In this life if you want to rise to the top of the legal profession, better make sure that you are born to wealthy parents. If you don't, you probably won't. That is just one example of how in this material world, into which we are born as fleshly material beings, it matters who are our parents are.

What you were born as matters; when you were born matters; where you were born matters, and to whom you were born matters.

If you want to live a long, healthy, wealthy, interesting, loving, friendly, safe life in this world then it would be best if you could choose who your parents are; choose where you are born; choose when you are born; and choose what body you are born with; and above all, choose well.

That is true today in 21st century Scotland, and it is true everywhere; it was true in 1st century Palestine. There in our reading this morning is a story about a man called Nicodemus who was wondering how he could discover the kingdom of God. He sought out Jesus for answers. It is that seeking out Jesus for the answer that is the surprising thing because given the circumstances of Nicodemus' birth, you would think he had all the answers himself.

What was the fleshly nature of his birth? Nicodemus believed he was Jewish, one of God's chosen people by nature of his birth, his fleshly, material birth; what could be better for someone seeking to enter the Kingdom of God? Where was he born? He was born in Israel, the Promised Land, believed Nicodemus. As far as he was concerned, there was no better place to be born for someone seeking the Kingdom of God. To whom was he born - had Nicodemus chosen his parents well? He had, he was a Pharisee, which suggests he must have been born in to privilege. He was an educated man from a good family, he chose his parents well; surely a passport to the Kingdom of God.

In the first century, in Nicodemus' opinion, a person's life circumstances didn't come much better than those of his own: he was chosen by God by nature of his flesh; he was born in god's Promised Land; he was born in to privilege. But despite all of that Nicodemus knew something was missing, or else why did he go seeking Jesus?

Nicodemus recognised that his understanding of his place in this material universe was based entirely on the fortune of his physical, fleshly birth. He was who he was because he was lucky with his birth. Just like people born today, the fortune or the misfortune of our fleshly birth determines our place in this material world and it determines how we understand our place in the material universe.

What Jesus told Nicodemus back then, applies to us today. If you want to discover your true place in this universe, your true value in this world, your true relationship to God you can't rely on the circumstances of your material, fleshly birth: who you were born to, when you were born, where you were born, what genes you were lucky enough to inherit. All these things may help to make your life more or less comfortable, prosperous, or safe, but true meaning doesn't come from them, for those things are lotteries of chance.

Jesus told Nicodemus, and he tells us today; if you want to discover your true place in this universe, your true value in this world, your true relationship to God you can't rely on the circumstances of the lottery of your material, fleshly birth, instead you have to be born again, you have to be born spiritually.

Today in the calendar of the Church we mark Trinity Sunday. It is an opportunity for us as Christians to remember that we worship a God who is three distinct people, but with one distinct nature.

If we want to live then being born matters so no wonder we worship a God who in personhood is our Father, a parent, responsible for giving us fleshly life and responsible for the mystery of life and the material context in which life arises. To

live we must be born in to this material universe with a fleshly life, and so we worship a God who gives us life, a God who is our parent; God the Father.

But, that is not enough. Life is not just something that we are born in to and that we live as fleshly beings in a material universe. Life is also something that we experience, and that we feel, and that we are capable of thinking about and reflecting on. We are even conscious of the non-existence of our lives. That is why we need and we worship a God who has been a person in this world, who has taken human form and who knows and understands what it means to be alive, who has suffered and rejoiced as we do, and who because of that experience of living can help us to live holy lives, whole lives in the flesh in this material world. We need and we worship a God who is incarnate in the flesh in the world, a God born in to the world; God, the Son.

But, that too is not enough. Life is not just something that we are born in to and that we live as fleshly beings in a material universe. And life is not just something that we feel, that we think about and that we reflect on. Life is also something that is lived in a particular place, at a particular time, and in a particular social culture. We need and we worship a God who helps us to understand life and our own place and worth in this universe in a way that is not dependent on the material circumstance of our birth.

We need and worship a God who can help us transcend the material world, a God of spirit, a God who can make us holy whatever the fortune or misfortune of our material circumstances and the nature of our fleshly lives: a God who is spirit not flesh; a God who is holy not earthly; God the Holy Spirit.

Christians worship a God that has one nature, but which is expressed in three ways as three persons because that is how we experience life. Material fleshly life is something we receive, it is something we experience, but if it is to have true value, true worth, true meaning then it is something that we have to transcend so that our place in this world and in relation to others is not dependent purely on the material fortunes or misfortunes of our fleshly birth. It is in relationship to God, through the Holy Spirit, that we transcend this earthly life, and that we are born again with holy place in this world living a life with spiritual meaning.

As Paul wrote in his letter to the emerging church in Rome, a part of which we read this morning,

...our lower nature has no claim upon us; we are not obliged to live on this level. If you do so, you must die. But, if by the Spirit you put to death all the base pursuits of the body, then you will live.