

John 3:1-17 "You must be born again"

We pray...

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

Do you recognise these words?

They were spoken by Martin Luther King Jr. on the 28th of August 1963. There is a lot of weight in these words, and they have gone down in history as some of the most significant words ever spoken, culturally and politically.

There are many examples throughout history where leaders, activists, or people on trial have spoken words with such weight and value that they still echo even for us in Australia today.

Can you think of any?

- "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind" Neil Armstrong
- "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender." (British Prime Minister Winston Churchill – 1940)
- "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." (US President John F. Kennedy – 1961)

Famous historical figures aren't the only ones with important things to say. All of you would have had times in your life where there were important words in your heart that needed to be spoken. But how do you speak those words? If you have something important burning on your heart, how do you get people's attention? How do you make sure they are listening?

Thanks to the writers of the four gospels, we have a multitude of recorded words spoken by Jesus. Now, we can certainly say that all the recorded words of Jesus are important (after all, that's why they are recorded in Scripture), but there are times where Jesus has something important to say, something that needs to be given full weight as the authoritative word of God.

So how might Jesus get our attention? What would he say to give that full weight to the words he is about to speak?

Well, it's abundantly clear throughout John's account of the gospel, and it comes down to these words:

"Amen, Amen, I say to you..." (ἀμην ἀμην λεγω σοι)

You might have heard them translated differently: "Truly, truly, I say to you..."

"Verily, verily, I say unto thee..." or "Very truly I tell you..." as we hear it in the NIV.

Whenever you hear these words spoken by Jesus, listen up, because he has something deeply important to say, something that ought to be given the full weight of the authoritative word of God.

Today, we heard this conversation between Jesus and this man named Nicodemus, a Pharisee, and a member of the Jewish ruling council.

He comes to Jesus for teaching, to learn from this renowned Rabbi, but what Jesus teaches, Nicodemus struggles to understand.

Let's listen again to how the conversation began:

"Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."

"How can someone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked.

"Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!"

Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit."

John 3:3-5

This is such a striking passage, as Jesus is taking the opportunity to teach one of the teachers of Israel. Nicodemus is seeking to know the things of God, to learn for himself what he ought to teach others, and what does Jesus say?

Amen, Amen, I say to you... Not once, but twice he says these words. Be prepared to hear teaching that must be heard with the authoritative word of God...

And what does Jesus say?

No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.

No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit.

Nicodemus is clearly confused by what Jesus is saying, he does not understand what he is teaching. Even when Jesus puts it plainly, he still does not understand.

What about you? Do you understand these words that Jesus is speaking? Can you receive this teaching that Jesus puts so much weight behind?

What does Jesus mean in these words?

It's all about baptism.

This is no metaphor. Jesus isn't hiding his teaching behind jargon or hard to understand concepts. He speaks it plainly. If you want to enter the kingdom of God, you must be born again of water and the Spirit.

In baptism, our old, sinful self is drowned, as we die with Christ on the cross, so too we are born again, raised to new life in him. So too, we receive the Holy Spirit, as we are filled with this precious gift of God, the comforter, who leads us in a life of forgiveness and faith. How does this all come about? By water, together with the word of God. We are born again of water and the Spirit.

There is so much richness in this promise from our Lord, of all that is given to us in baptism, when we are born again of water and the Spirit.

But in this Lenten season, there is a particular emphasis for us as we are drawn again into this question: Where is your attention?

In our life of faith, the only certainty that we find in our lives, is uncertainty.

There will be days when our faith is strong, when we hold fast to the Lord.

There will be days when our faith is weak, when we doubt the Lord and his promises.

There will be days when we serve the Lord fervently, when we can see our good works and their fruit.

There will be days when we fall so far short, when we are lost in our sin and our shame.

If we set our attention and our hope on ourselves, our faith, and our works, we set ourselves on the path of a life of uncertainty and fear, of whether we will ever truly be saved.

Instead, Jesus draws our attention elsewhere.

Away from our works, away from ourselves, as he says: Look at your baptism. Look to the moment when I united you with me in my death and resurrection. Look to your rebirth, not birth according to your will, but by the will of the Holy Spirit. Listen to the voice of God, that declared you his beloved child.

Jesus declares: Look to my work, not yours, for that is the only place you will find eternal salvation.

See, it's no coincidence that these words of Jesus come from John chapter 3. Because if you want to understand baptism, this rebirth by water and the Spirit, we still have more to hear from Jesus...

"Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

John 3:14-17

Look to Jesus, the only Son of the Father, who died so that you would not perish. He came, not to condemn, but that you have be saved through him. Hear his authoritative words of promise, and hold fast in faith to all that he has done for you.

I give you this challenge through this Lenten season.

Each morning, when you wake up, make the sign of the cross and speak the name into which you were baptised:

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit."

Affirm of yourself: I am a baptised child of God.

Set your attention on God's work for you, the cross of Christ, and your rebirth by water and the Spirit.

And enter your day, prepared for all that may come your way, as you hold fast in faith to all that the Lord has done for you.

So may the peace of God, which is far beyond our human understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

♪ LHS 831 O baptised people one and all

Pastor Jeremy Smith