

John 3.7: “You must be born from above.”

Grosvenor Chapel, Second Sunday of Lent 8th March 2020

It must have been shady business these two characters were up to. Nicodemus the Pharisee came to Jesus by night. Their paths will cross again just one more time. On Good Friday, Nicodemus will take the dead body of Jesus and arrange for its decent burial. Some venerate Nicodemus as the patron saint of undertakers, and perhaps he has undertaken a similar task in arranging this meeting with Jesus. The undertaker’s business is winding up a man’s affairs, and it is as Nicodemus wants Jesus’ help to wind up the business of life. To wind up a business you take a good hard look at it. You value you it according to certain conventions, trying to establish which bits of it might have some residual worth to set against the expectations of those with a vested interest. You consider the debts it might have incurred, and how much can be written off. Whether it was his own life that Nicodemus was weighing in the balance, or perhaps the national life of Judea, then at a very low ebb, this leader of the Jews was ready to consult Jesus about how much of it all was a going concern. I see him as akin to a probate lawyer or perhaps an official receiver. Somebody has got to take a view, to see if anything useful can be realised from an ailing business, to determine what if anything of value can be salvaged from a life growing old.

You may not be quite at the stage of looking back over life in the seeming twilight of your earthly existence. But Lent is always a good time to reflect on one’s life as a going concern, to take stock – as it were – with Jesus. Now stock-taking, in business parlance, is the annual exercise of valuing the assets you trade with. Looking at yourself objectively, how do you think you do? Are you like the Pharisee in the parable, capitalising on your

many virtues – that you fast twice a week; give tithes of your income – thanking God you’re not like other men? Do you look at yourself and see such good stuff that it’s obvious what makes you loveable: this Narcissistic reflection you adore? Or do you look in the mirror and see only ugliness, like a skin-and-bones anorexic who views herself quite literally as a hideous, repulsive fat slob? As one survivor of this disease put it: “I will never forget the first time I saw my own reflection without wanting to see less of it.”

Making this assessment of human worth is fraught with danger. We either credit ourselves with virtues that are vastly over-valued. Or we write ourselves off with vices that don’t really exist. We do this because this is our nature as fallible human beings. I leave you to judge whether you personally were born deludedly over-optimistic or self-defeatingly pessimistic, but the fact is you were born to get it wrong somehow, and you must be born again – from above. The whole point of the Gospel passage is that our system of values is radically corrupt unless we renew it completely – unless we look at ourselves, our world and each other in an entirely new spirit – unless we are born again.

In John’s Gospel, the most radical of all the four, Jesus tells us to rip up our balance sheet. There are no virtues to be debited because you can’t do that with goodness. It’s not a thing you can capitalise. It’s a here-and-now thing – not a thing you can bottle. The same applies to God’s love. God loves us not because we have stored up goodness to our account. He loves us simply because he loves us, not for any measurable worth. Even if we were to be measured as having negative net worth, God would love us in the very same way. God doesn’t even recognise sin as a quantifiable measure of human deficiency. Our notions of sin, like our notions of virtue, do not constrain God’s love. God loved the blind man whom Jesus healed in John’s Gospel,

saying “it was not this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be manifest in him.” Hence, in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus’ gratuitous, free and utterly unmerited forgiveness of the thief on the cross, welcoming him into paradise. In God’s economy, there is only one real sure-fire investment, which is the investment of love Christ made on the cross and which is being realised here and now by God’s Spirit.

That means that your faith, your religion, is not some sort of investment. You’re not here at church to store up virtue, or to draw down some of your good character to cover your sins. You are here because you are loved by God and are called to pass that love on. That changes everything about what you do here, who you meet here, all that is going on around you. Can you dare, without any notions of worth or unworthiness, simply to receive God’s love? Can you see that this service that we call the Lord’s supper has been laid on for you? Can you come into God’s presence with gladness? Can you be glad of all who are here? If you like the music you hear here, can you recognise they’re playing your tune? Can you join your prayers with the prayers that are offered here, and make the thanksgiving also your own? If you’ve been married here, can you let others be glad with you, and feel for others here in their turn? Can you extend the fellowship and acceptance that you’ve found here to others in their turn? Can you help people living in the past with dementia feel conscious and alive here and now? Can you share this sense of being at home with worried souls and refugees? This is God’s economy, in which all sorts of things happen that don’t depend on strategic investment decisions, where “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.”

An economy that’s fuelled on a shared acceptance of grace. If this all sounds a little bit airy-fairy, reflect that’s it’s very much

the picture that Sam Wells is getting at in his book *A Future that's Bigger than the Past* – a picture that's based on the author's practical experience of a church in this part of central London. Far from being dead, St Martin's-in-the-Fields is a going concern, but it's the business model that's the most interesting thing. For big enterprises like the Academy-of-Saint-Martin's-in-the-Fields, the Christmas Appeal, the Homeless Connection, the Jazz Café – all of them associated with the church – you might expect to read about the mobilisation of capital, the realisation of historic assets, corporate sponsorship etcetera etcetera – all of which were indeed involved – but this is not what Sam Wells draws attention to. “For a truly holistic account”, he writes (last paragraph of our second reading), “daily encounter with the incarnate reality of how people live and sustain their lives, and collective endeavour to keep a community going, not with dramatic gifts but with careful, humble acts of common purpose is a beautiful yet pragmatic epiphany of craft and grace.”

It seems to me that this grace-filled economy is in stark contrast to certain characteristics of this neighbourhood which ought to make our presence much more telling. Many who buy in Mayfair do so not so much for love of the place but because it's a sure investment. It's not where many trade and live but where they visit and store their value, so the neighbourhood can sometimes resemble a warehouse of wealth or a catwalk of moveable assets. Away from Oxford Street and Shepherd Market, there's surprisingly little presence on these streets for a place so proverbially rich, and few transactions that could count as “humble acts of common purpose” rather than the high-value conveyance of wealth. Herein lies an opportunity for Grosvenor Chapel. People gathering, not to check on their investment, but in loving thankfulness for a love that's just glad that they're there

– listening, singing, praying, exchanging news and views, interpersonal transactions inspired by a holy but restless spirit. It's a shame that we don't look, on the outside, the going concern that we surely are. This building invites unfavourable comparison with valuable neighbouring real estate rather than being what it was originally built for – a community asset for people of the parish. Perhaps the answer is, as our archdeacon has suggested, somehow turning ourselves outside in, so that the pragmatic epiphany of craft and grace that are our acts of common purpose are invitational – on public display. Those who can stay after this service for lunch and fellowship might want to explore this further.

Turning ourselves inside out. Receiving acceptance and affirmation that squeezes itself into our very midst and then is somehow squeezed out like an overflowing sponge. If this sounds strange to our puzzled minds, it's no stranger than Jesus's response to Nicodemus' puzzled question: "can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Yes, we can be born again. We can be turned inside out. Indeed, it's a vital part of our Lenten discipline as we review our existence and have our lives revalued in God's economy of grace. Our presence here is of value to God. We are his going concern. It's for us to feel it, show it and share it with gratitude. We are not to write ourselves off. Amen.