

The Second Sunday of Lent
St Mary and St Nicholas, Wilton, 2023

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17
John 3:1-17

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight O Lord, my strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

“Let me become what you should choose to make me, freed from the guilt and burden of my sins. Jesus is mine, who never shall forsake me, and in his love my new-born life begins.”

Words that we sung a moment or two ago in our first hymn.
Words by Timothy Dudley Smith.

‘Jesus is mine, who never shall forsake me, and in his love my new-born life begins.’

Lent carries us on a very clear trajectory. Lent, of which there are still 35 days left - if you include the Sundays - drives us towards the cross, because it is at the cross that we find ourselves freed from the guilt and burden of our sins. And one of the paradoxes of Lent is that it gets more and more hopeful as we get closer and closer to the Cross. You would expect it to be the other way ‘round wouldn’t you? You would expect things to get gloomier and gloomier, more and more laden with language of sin and suffering as we march deeper and deeper into this season of penitence. But interestingly, that isn’t what happens. It gets more hopeful.

And once every three years, in what the Church, in a flash of extraordinary romanticism and creativity labels ‘Year A’, that’s

this year, the year in which we read St Matthew’s gospel on Sundays, we get a real treat, because, we get these big gospel readings on the second, third, fourth and fifth Sundays of Lent which are a system, there are a teaching tool, to remind us how God is saving us.

Actually these big gospel readings are the ones that way back the church always used to prepare people for their baptism at Easter, because they are absolutely stuffed full of theology, pictures and images of how it is that God saves us.

So we start today with Nicodemus and Jesus, and questions about the Christian life. And then next week we get the story of the Samaritan woman at the well, where Jesus teaches us about how our thirst is quenched by knowing Christ. The week after that we get the story of the man born blind, and hear how, when we encounter Christ, we start seeing for the first time. And then finally on Passion Sunday we hear the extraordinary story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead, and we learn that our God is one who can even reach down to us in our grave and lift us into the light.

All that is for the next few weeks. And enjoy it. Romantically titled it may not be, but Year A is a gift.

And this morning we hear this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus, this man who comes to Jesus by night because he is afraid that his colleagues, local religious leaders will judge him, perhaps even punish him, for giving airtime to this crazy preacher from Nazareth. **Nicodemus, who of course we will hear about one more time, on Good Friday, when he offers to provide a burial place for Christ.** And he opens up his mind and his heart enough for Jesus to deliver this extraordinary teaching about what it might be like to live a new life.

Here on this second Sunday of Lent, come two pieces of extraordinary hope. As I said a few moments ago, each reading over the course of this season just layers on more and deeper and more profound hope.

And I encourage you to collect these sparkles of hope over the coming weeks, gather them together in your hearts, in your prayers, and allow them to reset your trajectory in your own life, as you prepare for Good Friday and Easter Day.

Piece of hope number one this morning: a brand-new life. 'No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above', says Jesus, or as most translations put it, 'no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.' There used to be strops and scraps at university between the various different Christian denominations and organisations, and accusations that, 'Oh you're not a real Christian, you're just a cradle Christian. Have you been born-again yet?' And 'born-again' became a sort of shorthand for being a particular type of charismatic evangelical. And all that's rather unhelpful really. What Jesus is saying is that gift of God is a new start. A new, deeper, identity. The journey through the desert, the slow, steady, progress of the Christian, is not a *hopeless*, dark, dusty trudge. It is the joyful, hopeful, often fairly chaotic and undignified steps of a newborn baby. We are to born again. And just like a baby, we get better at walking as we go along. Spiritually at least. We learn, we develop, we hone our skills. We grow into our newborn life.

And we do it through water and the Spirit. And the church has, of course, always seen in this the pattern of Christian baptism. What do we do when we baptise someone? We immerse them in water, and then we pray for the Holy Spirit. And of course we also see here the pattern of Eastertide. In Easter night we pass through the waters of death with Christ, down into the darkness

and then up again into the light, and then 50 days later we keep the feast of Pentecost when we remember the gift of the Holy Spirit being poured out. And all of those pattern your life and mine, washed in the water at our baptism, and then praying constantly at the Holy Spirit will be with us to accompany us. Daring, like Nicodemus, to ask the questions of faith, and being ready, like Nicodemus, to offer a home for what looks like defeat, but us really our lives being born again. The first message of hope.

The second message of hope is also about the cross. Jesus says, 'just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up.' I spend rather a lot of time with doctors, and at the hospital, and of course it's this gospel reading, and the verses in the book of Numbers that Jesus is referencing, that has given to the medical profession across the world their principal symbol: the serpent on the pole. Next time you go into the cathedral, look up at the high east window. Not the blue one but the one above it. It's an extraordinary image of the serpent and the pole, and of course the pole is the cross, and it brings healing. In the original story in Numbers the people are dying of snake bites, and God commands Moses to build a bronze serpent and set it up on a pole, and as people look at this symbol they are made well.

The cross is going to make us well. The cross is the place of healing. Where everything that has become broken and corrupt and bent out of shape since we passed through the water is made whole again. Is, to use the word at the heart of the Eucharistic prayer, re-membered. Put back together again.

Two messages of hope on this second Sunday of Lent. We are afforded the privilege of being born again. The gift of starting again, like a toddler, taking excited, wobbly steps into a brand-

new life. And then when we fall over, we need only gaze at the Cross, and know that we are healed.

Feel your baptism this Lent. And find a Cross, or make one, take some time to gaze upon it. And renew your hope.

[Please be seated] the choir now sing a setting of verses from Psalm 1 and 128, the music by Roberto Brisotto, which begins, ‘Blest it is the man who walks not in the council of the ungodly.’

The choir now sing *O nata lux*, which is a text taken from the mediaeval liturgy for the Transfiguration, to the setting by 16th century English composer, Thomas Tallis. The English translation of which reads,
“O Light born of Light,
Jesus, redeemer of the world,
with loving-kindness deign to receive
suppliant praise and prayer.

Thou who once deigned to be clothed in flesh
for the sake of the lost,
grant us to be members
of thy blessed body.”