

St Nicholas Church
Sunday 26th October 2014:
The Christian Faith – Vow 1
Jeremiah 32:33 & John 3: 3 to 17

The Jeremiah reading is just one example of how the Old Testament looks forward to the new covenant – a new agreement between God and his people – and that could only happen once the messiah, the Christ, the anointed one came.....And when Jesus came, he changed people's hearts....

The second reading is where we listen into the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus.

Nicodemus epitomises the apparently perfect Pharisee.....who knew the scriptures from Jeremiah and the Torah...the writing of Moses – a highly educated man of notable status in the Jewish council known as the Sanhedrin.

But Nicodemus struggled to understand this new prophet and teacher called Jesus.....because Jesus makes some amazing statements and claims and leaves Nicodemus bewildered but fascinated by Jesus' answers.....which is why we meet Nicodemus again later in Scripture on the day of Jesus' crucifixion – what we call Good Friday – when the body of Christ was taken down from the cross, Nicodemus was ready to help look after the body.....

Jeremiah 31:33 Good News Translation (GNT)

³³ The new covenant that I will make with the people of Israel will be this: I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

John 3:3-17 Good News Translation (GNT)

³ Jesus answered, "I am telling you the truth: no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again."^[a]

⁴ "How can a grown man be born again?" Nicodemus asked. "He certainly cannot enter his mother's womb and be born a second time!"

⁵ "I am telling you the truth," replied Jesus, "that no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ A person is born physically of human parents, but is born spiritually of the Spirit. ⁷ Do not be surprised because I tell you that you must all be born again.^[b] ⁸ The wind blows wherever it wishes; you hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where

it comes from or where it is going. It is like that with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

⁹ "How can this be?" asked Nicodemus.

¹⁰ Jesus answered, "You are a great teacher in Israel, and you don't know this? ¹¹ I am telling you the truth: we speak of what we know and report what we have seen, yet none of you is willing to accept our message. ¹² You do not believe me when I tell you about the things of this world; how will you ever believe me, then, when I tell you about the things of heaven? ¹³ And no one has ever gone up to heaven except the Son of Man, who came down from heaven."^[c]

¹⁴ As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the desert, in the same way the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. ¹⁶ For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life. ¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its saviour.

MESSAGE

The Church of Scotland has 5 vows and we will work through them during the next 6 weeks.....we will have a different subject at our Remembrance Service on 9th November

My hope and prayer in preparing this series of 5 sermons is that everyone feels that their faith has been reinforced and that your faith is able to cope with the knocks, disappointments and sadness that we all suffer from time to time.

It is always good for us to be willing and ready to say what we actually believe. Often, we are challenged to explain our Christian Faith to a family member or neighbour when we least expect it.

And if there are people here with doubts about whether there is a supernatural God, a living Jesus, and a Holy Spirit then my prayer is that our readings and our understanding of scripture over the next couple of months will help you to become stronger in faith, and to cope with such doubts.

It is of course natural to feel depressed when we listen to the news from around the world or read our newspapers or I Phones.

And at the personal level, how do we cope with all the problems and challenges that we face day by day,

the problems of relationships, the problems of unemployment, debt, dwindling pensions, the anxiety we have about health of our loved ones and sometimes ourselves, our concern about the education of our children, and grandchildren and the need to address housing and social problems for many people in our city and so on.

The answer is that practising Christians counter the bad news with the Good News of Jesus – which means having new life in responding to Jesus, **where hope replaces despair, where an inner peace replaces turmoil, where fulfilment replaces failure,** and God replaces self at the centre of our hearts. **New Life.**

Practising Christians also become **a new family**: the church is a family – a group of people who believe distinctive things about Jesus.

They are all ages, all personalities, all races, - a world-wide family.....

We become a new person when we accept the Christian faith – we change - we do not go on as before,
We behave differently..... yes it may take time.... Yes it may be hard but if we listen to God's word and take the Holy Spirit into our hearts, we do change.....

Becoming a Christian or renewing our vows is like a new start – because everything centres on Jesus, he can make us alive, he can make us belong, he can help us to behave, and therefore give us new life, new attitudes.

John 3: 16 Page 119 (Born Again)

In our second reading Nicodemus is challenged in a way he had never been challenged before despite his religious knowledge and status.

To enter God's kingdom means a radical new beginning.
Jesus offers eternal life.....the old cycle of physical birth and death is over.
Eternal life involves something which can only be described as rebirth, being born of the Holy Spirit.

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.....

How did Nicodemus react to thathe was amazed, staggered and deeply troubled.....so much so that we find Nicodemus following Jesus all the way to his crucifixion.....

More importantly, how do we react to these words in John Chapter 3 verse 16.....???????

Does it give us confidence that when we pass through the door called death that life is not at the end.....?

But God does not just throw words at us or expect us to be inspired by people of faith; he gives us real help.....

Jesus said, just before being taken into heaven, that he would give us a helper.....

(Acts1 verse 4)

“Do not leave Jerusalem, but wait for the gift my Father promised, which you have heard me speak about. ⁵ For John baptized with water, but in a few days you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.

And hence the Church of Scotland's first vow is as follows:

First Vow: I believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and I confess Jesus Christ as my saviour and Lord.

At the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit visited the Apostles and followers of Christ, and they spoke in tongues and were anointed by the flames.

Peter explained who Christ was to the several thousand or more followers who gathered at Pentecost by saying:

(Reading 2: Acts 2: 22 to 24) Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by **miracles**, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. ²³ This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with **the help of wicked men,**^[a] **put him to death** by nailing him to the cross. ²⁴ But God **raised him from the dead**, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was **impossible for death to keep its hold on him.**

And so what ,we say, what difference does it make to us in our 21st Century world?

Let's listen to Peter's instructions as we read again from Acts 2:V38-39

Repent and be baptised, every one of you in the name of Jesus for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for whom the Lord our God will call.'

And that is what we are invited to do in order to be put right with God..... **And if our relationship with God is right, then our relationships with our families, friends, and neighbours will, in time, become right.**

God has given us free choice, we are not robots, If we choose to have no relationship with God and go our own ways, then do not be surprised if the burdens of life become too much to bare.....your faith is part of the way of dealing with every situation.....is part of the solution when coping with all the challenges we face of failing health or anxieties or bereavement or whatever.....

Peter tells the people and therefore us that they are to receive 2 free gifts:

The forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

God placed no limitation on these two gifts – it was not just for the apostles or his followers, these gifts are for everyone..... including us..... for people who live in your Parish, in your community and family.....

What a wonderful promise God has made to us all. And remember our thought for today as printed on our Intimation sheet:

For God did not send his Son into the world to be its judge, but to be its saviour. (John 3: 17)

Be encouraged, we worship a loving God, a God who loves each and everyone of us.....a living Jesus who does remarkable things through ordinary people like you and me by giving us the Holy Spiritwhen we turn to him and can truly say:

First Vow: I believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and I confess Jesus Christ as my saviour and Lord.

and next week we will hear the 5 key facts about Jesus.....4 of the facts are irrefutable.....and the 5th , which depends up believing eye witnesses

accounts provides remarkable evidence for Jesus as the risen son of God.....when we care to look at scripture.

Let's conclude by saying together if you wish – aloud or silently to God:

**I believe in one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and I confess Jesus Christ as my saviour and Lord.
(1300 words)**

Amen

Acknowledgments

To prepared these sermon / message notes, I relied heavily on a book written by Reverend Jeremy Middleton called Coming Alive, which I have used regularly over the last 20 years to a number of enquirers into the Christian Faith and for those people who wish to go over the basic vows again.

In addition, I have used reference material from Christianity Explored and the Alpha Course.....and for those people who read Christian Bible commentaries widely, John Stott's Bible Speaks Today features prominently in my sermon notes.

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26th October 2016