

Sermon for Second Sunday in Lent, 8 March, 2020 – Year A

'The Breath of Life' John 3: 1-17).

King Canute was once said to have placed his throne upon the beach and commanded the tide to stop coming in. Some people concluded that he was mad, very arrogant or just plain daft. But all of them had missed the King's subtle point: that human strength, even that of kings and queens, is very limited, and that many of the really important forces and powers in this life are beyond our control.

This was most certainly our Lord Jesus Christ's point to the wealthy and aristocratic pharisee, Nicodemus. Jesus tells him that just as we know neither the origin nor destination of the wind as it blows over the face of the earth, so it is with the divine wind of God's Spirit. We know not whence it comes nor where it goes, neither can we control its life-giving activity. Like the wind, God's spirit is invisible, and we can only 'see' the wind through its effects, as it makes tree branches sway and stirs the waves of the sea. As an intriguing aside, it is relevant to recall that in both Greek and Hebrew the words for 'spirit' and 'wind' are the same, *pneuma* in Greek and *ruach* in Hebrew. So when Jesus compares God's spirit with the wind, he is making a clever pun.

A pharisee like Nicodemus would have found this message about the unpredictability of God's spirit very challenging, because pharisees were the ultimate control freaks. For them the moral Law as expressed in the first five books of the Old Testament, was the perfect word of God. They believed this Law taught them everything they needed to know to lead a good life. To be sure of this, they took the great moral principles of these five books, the Pentateuch, in order to derive rules and regulations for every situation that might occur. These additional rules were known as the *Mishnah*. In this codified Law the section on the Sabbath alone ran to 24 chapters. The pharisees were experts on all these rules, and swore to live by them, which could make them very interesting companions.

To give an example, it was illegal to tie a knot in a rope on the sabbath, as this was deemed to be work. For reasons of modesty, however, women were allowed to tie the strings of their girdles and on the fronts of their skirts. So, if you wanted to lower a bucket into a well to draw water on the Sabbath, this was okay, if you tied the bucket to a knot in the strings of your wife's girdle or skirt. Wells must have been interesting places to gather on the Sabbath! By the way, you probably shouldn't wear a wooden leg or dentures on the sabbath, as this could be seen as carrying a burden, which was strictly against the Law!

As a pharisee, therefore, Nicodemus would have had very precise ideas about what was morally right and wrong. One thing he definitely shouldn't have been doing was to be visiting a law breaker like Jesus. It comes as no surprise that Nicodemus came to Jesus under cover of the night, to avoid disgrace and scandal with his brotherhood. He came, we might imagine, because he was desperate for real spiritual life; not the letter of the law that kills, but the Spirit of life that brings joy and peace and fulfilment to the depths of the human soul.

Jesus told Nicodemus and indeed all of us, what he and we really need: that is to be born ***anōthen***, a Greek word that can mean anew, again or from above; that is, to be born from God, so that one's heart and mind are kindled and awakened in a radical way, like the princess being kissed awake by the handsome prince in the fairy stories we know so well. This kind of awakening cannot be governed by regulations, or even by the church representation rules. It is the kiss of eternal life. It is also to know oneself as a Son or

Daughter of God the Father in a new and wondrous way, and to have the kind of spiritually awakened experience of life that Jesus called living in *the Kingdom of God*. This kingdom is not a place, but a state of grace., and this gift comes to those who love God freely and whole-heartedly.

This gift of God's Spirit cannot be controlled or manipulated; it knows no bounds or rulings. Like the wind, this Spirit has tremendous power; the power to cleanse the past and re-create us for the future; the power to take broken lives, and make them whole again through God's love and forgiveness given to us in the gift of Jesus Christ. This love prompted Nicodemus to come to Jesus by night. May this same love prompt our own journeys to Jesus, and open our hearts and minds to the wind of eternal life that blows where it will.

Amen.

Revd Ian Welch