

COMING ALIVE, BEING ALIVE, STAYING ALIVE

A friend recently sent me a photo of a weather forecasting system from the Australian outback. It's called 'John's Weather Forecasting Stone' and there it is - a stone, hanging down from a wire. And on a board behind it is a list of, on the one side, the condition of the stone, and on the other, the forecast that goes with it. So, Stone is wet? Forecast – rain. Stone is dry? – not raining. Shadow on ground? – sunny. White on top? – snowing. Can't see stone? – foggy. Swinging stone? – windy. Stone jumping up and down? – earthquake. Stone gone? – tornado.

I love it! We've had enough wind this last month, though fortunately no tornados. But our gospel reading today makes good use of the image of wind, as a metaphor for spiritual new birth. 'The wind blows wherever it wants. You hear the sound of it, but you don't know where it's come from or where it's going.' It's like that, said Jesus, when we're born spiritually, born from above.

Put very simply, the spiritual journey is about *coming alive, being alive and staying alive*. In the encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus is talking about the first two, coming alive and being alive.

Nicodemus comes by night. Probably because he's a man of influence in Jerusalem society, a member of the 70 strong Sanhedrin, made up of chief priests, elders and scribes, many of whom, like Nicodemus, were Pharisees. He was a leader amongst leaders, a high-flier, a man making a mark - and he was

uncomfortable. He was uneasy with the religious straight-jacket he had to wear, he knew there was more than he was finding in his traditional religion. And he'd heard of this young guy from Galilee, who brought fresh air to the old traditions, who sang a new song; so he came to check Jesus out.

'Rabbi' he started, 'we know you're a teacher who's come from God. No one could be doing what you're doing if it wasn't from God'. Jesus cut straight in, 'Nicodemus,' he said, 'you know, don't you, that no-one can see the Kingdom of God without being born anew, born from above.' Nicodemus played it straight back, literalistically, not understanding the metaphor. 'Oh please, (he said) how can anyone be born again when they've grown old? Can you enter a second time into your mother's womb?'

But Jesus refused to give up the metaphor. 'You can't enter the Kingdom of God without being born from water and spirit,' he said. Water – ordinary birth. Spirit – spiritual birth. They're different. Just because you were born as a child of Abraham and go to the synagogue, that doesn't make you truly alive in God.

Or we might say: just because we were born in a Christian culture and go to church, that doesn't make us alive in Christ. Just because we were born in a garage, that doesn't make us a car.

How did you become alive in Christ, alive spiritually, I wonder? For some of us it's a gradual process, for others it's a considered choice, for yet others it's a dramatic decision. I think of it like

crossing over from one country, one Kingdom, to another. Some of us cross the border without noticing, on a country path, out in the hills, without a fence in sight. We just realise, later on, that the air tastes different, the language is new, the customs are kinder. We're in a new country. *These I think of as once-born Christians.*

For others, we come up to the border post, look over at the new country, weigh it up, and make a considered decision to enter. We get out our passport, show it, and walk through. We become citizens of a new country, through a conscious choice. *These I think of as once-and-a-half born Christians.* That was how I entered the Kingdom.

For yet others, it's like coming up to the border post with its well-armed guards, plucking up courage and making a dash for it, bullets flying past us as we run for safety. *These I think of as twice born Christians, who we usually call born-again.* They're the ones who write a book about it, and make the rest of us feel a bit inadequate because we haven't had such a dramatic experience.

But the important thing about all this is that we have moved over and 'come alive' spiritually. And it doesn't matter **how** we came to be alive, how we crossed the border; it matters, simply, that we **are** alive. We don't have our birth certificate hanging on the wall at home do we, to prove that we were born at a certain time in a certain place, and we don't show it to everyone who enters the house? (Or if we do, could we have a word later?) What matters is that we *are* alive, now, we've come alive in faith, moved on to a full

colour, HD vision of life and faith. In the spiritual journey *being alive follows coming alive...*

Being alive means we see there's so much more to life. There's a joyful intensity, a sense of gift and grace. Life is multi-dimensional, not flat but deep. The values of this new country are beautiful. Grace, mercy and peace; compassion, forgiveness, and justice. Above all, love. Admittedly, it's easier to name those values than to live them out, but that's our commitment, to live fully, to live well, to live with and for others.

I think my favourite quote of CS Lewis is this: 'I believe in God as I believe the sun has risen; not just because I see it, but because, by it, I see everything else.' Someone said 'To a Christian, a cow looks different.' I'm not sure I'd go that far, but I know what they were trying to say!

The American poet, Emily Dickinson, said, 'To be alive is so marvellous there's hardly time for anything else.'

But what about *staying alive*? *Coming alive* in a particular way, *being alive* as fully as we can. But *staying alive* for the long haul – that's quite a task. The Christian journey doesn't stop when we cross the border. There's faith and doubt aplenty as we travel on. Usually we're up for the good times, but what about when it gets really rocky? When, in John's weather forecasting system, the stone disappears in the tornado? Who helps us then?

That's the task of the Spirit, the wind that Jesus spoke of. That's where we learn to trust the Spirit of God.

What does that mean? I have two answers. Sometimes the wind does amazing things. George Muller was a 19C philanthropist from Bristol who founded over 100 schools and in his lifetime looked after around 10,000 orphans, and all of it was done entirely through what's called 'living by faith.' No appeals for money; just trust in God. He once stood before 300 hungry orphans gathered for breakfast, knowing there was no food in the kitchen. Nevertheless he said grace, thanking God for the food they were going to eat. Suddenly there was a banging at the door, and the local baker came in carrying three huge trays of fresh bread that he'd been baking for them since 2 o'clock that morning. Then the milkman appeared, saying his cart had broken down outside and he wondered if they could use his load of fresh milk.

Sometimes the wind of the Spirit blows amazing things into our path.

But sometimes there are no miracles, and this is the second answer to what 'trusting the wind' means. I've mentioned Kate Bowler before, the academic in her 30s from North Carolina who wrote a book called *'Everything Happens for a Reason: and other lies I have loved.'* She's a young mother and found she had stage 4 cancer. She was reflecting on the words of Job, 'Though he slay me, yet will I trust him.' And she wrote, 'Yes, yes, yes. Yet will I trust him. I don't

know what the word trust means anymore, except there are moments when I realise it feels a lot like love.'

That also is the wind of the Spirit - unable to change the ultimate outcome of a condition beyond repair, *but guaranteeing the unwavering, inexhaustible love of God.* It was Kate Bowler who also wrote those words I often use: 'God is here. We are loved. It is enough.'

Coming alive, being alive, staying alive. It's all the work of that same wind, the same Spirit, that blows where it wills.

So, the inevitable question - will we *trust* the Spirit with our life? How will we trust God this week?

Intercessions – lead by Alexe Finlay

With confidence in God who gave up His Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, to benefit us all, we humbly ask Our Loving Father to help in all our needs.

We pray for the Church that in this time of preparation we may be renewed in faith and hope reaching out to one another as true disciples. In God's infinite love we have each been called to repent and renew our lives in Christ. May we help each other to grow in our understanding of the Word of God and receive it in love and joy. Almighty and ever-living God, we give thanks for all the graces that you bless us with. Help us to be filled with your spirit of Love and compassion as we prepare for the Day of the Lord. May be true witnesses to your Love. As we continue our Lenten journey, mindful of the temptation and suffering that your son Jesus Christ endured in the wilderness, we ask you to strengthen us, as we find

ourselves in the desert of human faults, failings and sinfulness.

Lord, in your Mercy: Hear our Prayer

Gracious God we ask for your guidance in all that our church plans for the coming weeks of Lent; For the Lenten events and for all special services to be . We celebrate International Women's Day and in our own church family pray especially for Lady Hale and Doctor Captain Hannah Sawford.

Lord, in your Mercy: Hear our Prayer

Creator God, your love reaches out to the boundaries our world, to the rich who have everything they need and the poor who have nothing except misery and oppression.

We pray for all your people whoever they are, wherever they live and whatever their circumstances; that in their joy and sorrow, the knowledge of your presence might bring comfort, healing and restoration. Let us pray that the world's leaders and diplomats may find the courage and will to work together for justice and to build a world of peace and hope for future generations. Let us remember the victims of violence and hatred everywhere, and especially the children who suffer so much. May they know the Love and compassion they need. And again, on International Women's Day, let us hold Nazanin Zaghari Ratcliffe in our hearts.

Lord, in your Mercy: Hear our Prayer

Father God, we pray against all areas of our society where good food is wasted or disposed of unnecessarily when it could be used to relieve suffering. We thank you for the work of food banks and charities which support disadvantaged individuals and communities.

Lord, in your Mercy: Hear our Prayer

Loving God, we pray for all of those, dear to our hearts who are ill or in any kind of need. We ask for your blessing on all who have a special Healing Ministry within your Church. We also give thanks for those on the road to recovery following illness, surgery or procedures and for those whose only healing will come through death. Let us pray that they may all be aware that the Lord is with them in their troubles. We pray that we may unite to protect ourselves and others against Covoind-19 and we think of those allied to our church family who are helping us – Amanda Pritchard. And in the silence of our hearts, let us pray for our own families and friends.

Lord, in your Mercy: Hear our Prayer

Merciful God, when death comes close to us through the loss of a family member or friend help us to remember them and rejoice in their fellowship, giving thanks for the way that, as their lives touched ours, so we were enriched by that relationship.

Lord, in your Mercy: Hear our Prayer

Lord Jesus, when I am sad and depressed
Help me think of you praying in the garden.

Lord Jesus, when I am fearful
help me to think of you being taken prisoner.

Lord Jesus, when I am ill
help me to think of you being scourged at the pillar.

Lord Jesus, when I have a headache
help me to think of you wearing the crown of thorns.

Lord Jesus, when I am tired
help me to think of you carrying the cross for love of me.

Lord Jesus, when I am humiliated
help me to think of you being stripped of your garments.

Lord Jesus, when I am in pain
help me to think of you being nailed to the cross.

Lord Jesus, when I am lonely
help me to think of you hanging on the cross.

Lord Jesus, when I am dying
Help me to think of you dying on the cross for love of me.

Lord Jesus, help me to remember
how much you suffered for love of me
and help me to love you more and more.

Amen.

God of Mission
Who alone brings growth
to your Church,
Send your Holy Spirit to give
Vision to our planning,
Wisdom to our actions,

And power to our witness.

Help our church to grow in numbers,

In spiritual commitment to you,

And in service to our local community,

Through Jesus Christ our Lord

Everlasting God your love and forgiveness washes over us and astonishes us with generosity. May we go out from this time of worship today as people who enjoy complete forgiveness and a restored relationship with you and all those with whom we share our lives.

Merciful father: accept these prayers for the sake of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen