

Living in eternity

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Alison Sampson, reflecting on John 3:1-17

‘How can anyone be born after growing old?’ asks Nicodemus. ‘Can someone enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ I’m someone who has given birth three times, and my children are now all bigger than me. The idea of shoving one of them back in is so grotesque, I suspect Nicodemus is playing for a laugh. Either that, or he’s a fool. Because everyone knows you can’t enter the womb a second time: what a nincompoop!

But whether jester or fool, I adore Nicodemus, for his story resonates deeply. Like me, Nicodemus began his journey with Jesus by thinking literally. ‘Born again?’ he wondered, and got stuck on the science of it. I know the feeling. I was a child with no sense of the divine. I said my prayers like a good little kid, but with no sense that anyone was listening. Instead, my prayers seemed to mash flat against the ceiling. I grew into a teenager who furiously rolled her eyes at everything: creation, the parting of the Red Sea, the virgin birth, the healings, the miracles and, of course, the resurrection. I had answers or dismissals for everything. I also questioned the church, I questioned the Holy Spirit, I questioned the very idea of love. ‘How can this be?’ I wondered as I stumbled around in the dark.

Like all of us, I am a product of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was a period of great upheaval, first in Europe and then elsewhere. Its major themes included scepticism, individualism and reason, and it marked a radical shift in how we understand the world and our place in it. This affected all areas of life, including faith.

Philosophers argue over exactly why this happened, but one explanation is this: Modern ways of knowing and exploring the world stripped away our sense of the sacred. As mysteries such as conception, growth, illness and death became more open to explanation and management, as more and more of the world was collected, catalogued and described by colonial powers, as even the moon became a place to visit and a potential resource to be mined, people’s sense of the sacred gradually diminished. We moved from a relational experience of the world to a functional and even exploitative

approach. For if we can switch out genes and clone sheep, what then is left of mystery? And if bread and babies can be manufactured and bought, what need do we have of God?

With this change in worldview, faith shifted from mystery to morality. Reason and science were elevated at the expense of poetry and metaphor, and the faithful began to be defined by doctrinal statements and behavioural codes. Where Christianity had once been a corporate reality, now it shrank down to matter of personal identity. Where creation had once been considered a source of divine speech and action, now it was treated as a resource. Where it had once been almost impossible to imagine life without faith, now it was not just a realistic option but the worldview of many: and so we live in a secular age.

The result is that faith seems largely irrelevant; for secular humanism is enough for morality. And God now seems a bit unnecessary if God ever existed at all. Because when even the Christians have nailed down right belief and right action, there's not much room for a lively God to participate in the world. Indeed, in its reluctance to change (on the right) and its reluctance to pray (on the left), much of the church seems functionally atheist.

And just look where this has gotten us. It has led to a toxic culture of polarisation, where people assert ideas and demand agreement as a condition of relationship. On both left and right, what people intellectually believe is frequently seen as more important than how the fruit of the Spirit plays out in their lives. Contempt is rampant, and churches are fracturing all over the place. Theological arguments split families, congregations, denominations, even nations, as people move in ever-smaller circles of belief and refuse to engage with difference.

Beyond the church, the loss of mystery or any sense of engagement with a living, active, relational God has led to skyrocketing rates of depression. It's triggered social atomisation and the widespread breakdown of relationships in families, workplaces and neighbourhoods. Loneliness, anxiety and despair abound. Meanwhile, the rupture of right relationship between humans and the created order is leading to climate catastrophe.

Into this litany of misery explodes the Jesus of John's account. Because it doesn't have to be this way. The world doesn't need to seem so flat, people with different ideas don't need to be enemies, and life doesn't have to be so blah. Instead, trust in God, says Jesus. Enter into a loving relationship with

the God who lives in me, and I in him, and you in me, and I in you. There's a long history of translation and shifts in language which I won't go into here. Trust me when I say, when Jesus says 'believe', he's not talking about intellectual agreement but love. In effect what's he's saying is, don't worry about the rational. Get relational. Open your heart to God right now and let God's Spirit dwell within. Participate in God's life, a life shaped by self-giving love. For by entering into God's life here and now, you will know the heights and depths of eternity.

Indeed, the eternal is already here. Jesus isn't talking about some future hope or possibility. Instead, his language is in the present tense. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only son,' says Jesus, 'so that everyone who trusts in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' (John 3:16). Then in John chapter 5, he says, 'Whoever hears my words and trusts him who sent me has eternal life ... he has crossed over from death into life.'

This having is not in some distant and elusive future; it's always already happening. Eternal life is not something given at some later stage to a worthy few on their deathbeds. Instead, to those who open their hearts to God right now the Spirit is already giving life. Born from above, we have already crossed over from death to life. We are already living in the eternal now, God's life is already flowing through us, and we would do well to notice this.

We might learn to notice the sweet heavy presence of the Spirit when she fills the room and falls like gentle rain on dusty hearts. We might attend to the Spirit like fire inspiring visions and dreams, the Spirit like wind bringing a cool and much-needed change, the Spirit gifting peace and freedom. We might be guided by the Spirit as she strengthens relationships between people, or between people and the beyond-human creation. And we might testify to the Spirit shaping human lives into gospel form: for through the Spirit, Jesus forms us.

Of course, this noticing isn't easy in the secular age. In my experience, it takes time, effort, orientation, openness and a whole heap of grace as I engage in the practices of faith. Learning to live in the eternal flow and see the whole world as holy is a lifelong process of transformation.

As I learn and grow, I am encouraged by the story of Nicodemus. For in chapter 3, Nicodemus is in darkness. He's thinking literally, feeling sceptical, and doesn't have a clue about the life of the Spirit. But by chapter 7, he is emerging from the shadows to speak in Jesus' defence, and by the time of

Jesus' crucifixion, he is a faithful, committed disciple who dares to take Jesus' body and lovingly anoint and bury it.

His story suggests that people – even religious leaders! – can be transformed. We don't have to settle for life as we know it. We don't have to accept a flat, boring and entirely literal view of the world. When we turn to God and open our hearts, we will be filled with the life of God's Spirit and she will transform us here and now. As she wells up within us, she will pour out like living water, bringing to the world more metaphor, more insight, more grace, more truth, more steadfast love and faithfulness, more unity, more connection, more kindness, more joy.

This is the life we are plunged into by the waters of baptism. It's the life which grows within us every time we eat Jesus' flesh and drink his blood, participating in his life at the table. It's the life which prioritises relationships over being right, and which always strives for love. It's the life we experience when we share our food with a hungry person, and visit the sick and the lonely, and welcome strangers and even enemies into our world. It's the life which death cannot contain, it's in the present tense, now, and those of us who enter into it know that when our own day of dying comes, death will be only one more experience in a much bigger, more magnificent story.

My friends, the world is so big, so full of curiosities and wonder. Through everything flows the ebb and surge of the Spirit, and we have the chance to participate. We live in a secular age, but through the power of the Holy Spirit who lives and breathes among us, we can transcend our present moment. Through baptism, prayer, bread and wine, through generosity, hospitality, kindness and community, through worship and justice and creation care, we can know a relational, loving God. And as the Spirit's life flows through us, charging everything we see and do with the sacred, we shall find ourselves living in eternity.

Indeed, the world is God's altar where everything is radiant and connected. So let us not limit ourselves to numbness, to disengagement, to the blindness of flat literalism and a protracted living death. Instead let us come fully alive as we share in God's life which flows through us. With Jesus, let us worship God in spirit and in truth: for then we shall know life without limit both in the age to come and in our secular age, in this moment, today. Ω