

**2020-03-08 Ali Cooper**

**Lent 2: John 3: 1-17**

Holy Spirit, heavenly friend, reveal your truth in us, that we may speak only and always of your glory. Amen.

Today we hear Jesus having a conversation with Nicodemus, a Pharisee who came 'by night'! Something very secretive about this, maybe, but even so, we are allowed to listen in to some of that conversation.

Jesus was speaking to Nicodemus of a Spirit who brings new birth, who opens our eyes to see the kingdom at our door. This Spirit does not come to bring condemnation, says Jesus, but sets us free to receive eternal life, and to enter into it now, for it surrounds us wherever the way of peace and compassion, the way of the Kingdom, is established.

So, wherever peace and compassion are established - well, if you've been watching the news this week, you will have seen something of the heartbreaking, endless refugee situation on the Greek/Turkish border, and on the island of Lesbos, and the renewed wave of bombing in Syria.

At first, it does not appear that peace and compassion are established in these places, and when one wants to speak of the Good News of Jesus Christ and life in his Spirit, I think it is imperative that we do so from out of the reality of the struggles of our world, and indeed our own lives. So we are faced with a challenge to find an authentic message of hope that speaks to God's troubled people.

There are so many places where there is distress and disruption today, we know, with the clean up after the floods up north, and indeed the spreading fear surrounding the corona virus. And while I was mulling over these thoughts, and feeling a little glum, my mobile 'pinged'!! And on it was a message from our granddaughter who is working for Medicin sans Frontieres on another Greek island, Samos.

The island of Samos is also a place where many refugees are held in a squalid camp, the sanitation and resulting health issues an absolute nightmare. Relief agencies are doing as much as they can with limited resources, but it is an uphill struggle, to say the least.

Now, I don't tell you this to make you feel depressed, or helpless, in fact the opposite, because I want to share with you the message our granddaughter Natasha sent from within this very camp. She was in fact standing outside a make-shift church that had been set up by a group of refugees from the Congo, in the heart of this site - and she had recorded for us the sound of their singing and praising and worship, I would imagine lifting whatever temporary roof may have been built on to this wobbly structure.

It's so easy to despair of the situations we hear about, quite understandable, and so as a body, we are blessed indeed to have our New Cross and Tanzanian links, and local projects to give expression to our commission of mutual love and an exchange of friendship in Jesus' name. But where further concerns we hear of from the media normally

may seem to leave us despondent, at least today we can rejoice in this significantly timely reminder from over the air waves, that in spite of the unimaginable hardship many people are facing, some still have managed to praise God, to let God's Spirit lift them for that second, out of their dark night and into a moment when heaven breaks through.

And I'm wondering too if this was possible for these Congolese people because they had remembered that in spite of it all, they are precious in God's sight. This is as much our Lenten message as is our need for a deeper, more sober reflection, because everything turns on the understanding that we are freely embraced by divine love and if we don't grasp that first, then we will never be able to approach matters such as personal repentance and the concept of forgiveness and welcome it as a gift.

We will never understand how deeply we are accepted and valued in God's eyes, and will always have that sense of having to do better, be better, instead of growing into the people who God created us to be. We will never celebrate the possibility that in us the Spirit of God can be born anew, a rejuvenating spirit of freedom that breathes into us and through us, body, mind and soul, and I think it was something of this teaching that was at the heart of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus.

There are times and places when we do feel the wings of the Spirit brushing very close to the earth, and I believe this mobile message was one of those moments. We should anticipate God's Spirit because it is the promised presence of Christ in our midst and yes, we may be surprised where we find it touching our lives. It blows like a breeze, wherever it will, Jesus says.

The Spirit may come to us in many guises, in many different people and experiences to breathe hope and gladness into our lives, often from quite unexpected sources, even from a ramshackle Congolese church founded on the faith of these displaced people.

In every generation of Christians from the Gospel days to this, we need the breath of God within, life-giving, sanctifying, activating, strengthening, and as a church we need to set our sails to the wind, to be driven into every area of life, equipped to meet challenges and receive blessings alike.

Every time we hold the body of Christ in our hands, it's as if we are receiving that commission – here is the body of Christ for you. Be fed by him, so that you in turn can go and feed others - as we pray, 'may we whom the Spirit lights, give light to the world.'

As a faith-community that is our task, to assist in the creation of wholeness, to be the place and the people where each one of us is nurtured into being. The Spirit of God is always ready, and so let us pray, like our Congolese brothers and sisters, that we may be ready too, expecting this fire of love to burn in our hearts, for so it is given to everyone who is born of the Spirit.

Amen.

