

Genesis 12.1-4a

Romans 4.1-5,13-17

John 3.1-17

I've always loved the complexities of language. The way words have synonyms, double meanings, or carry different connotations for different individuals or in different contexts. The way we use language changes constantly - words or phrases can develop completely opposite usage in a surprisingly short period of time.

There was a TED talk a few years ago that explained how our ability to think, to conceive of ideas or to understand concepts, is shaped and bounded by our vocabulary. If we don't know the words for something, we are literally limited in our ability to process the idea. Words shape who we are and how we operate in the world.

I could talk about this for hours - there's also the fascinating quirk that in languages which use gendered pronouns for objects (German or Spanish for example), the gender of the grammatical pronoun for a thing deeply affects the way we unconsciously perceive it. For example, if you think, in your mind's eye, of the Golden Gate Bridge, I wonder what adjectives you'd use to describe it? In an experiment by Lera Boroditsky, an assistant psychology professor at Stanford University, she found that when a bridge carried a feminine pronoun, as in German, speakers of that language tended to describe a bridge with words like 'slender', 'elegant', or 'peaceful'. Whereas a Spanish speaker, for whom a bridge carries a grammatically masculine pronoun, might describe one as 'strong', 'powerful', or 'sturdy'. So language is incredibly powerful, and endlessly interesting. But what's this got to do with Abraham or Nicodemus?

Well I feel a bit sorry for Nicodemus, I will admit. Many of the commentaries I read this week paint him as a bit of an idiot for not understanding what Jesus is talking about. He's a teacher of law, as Jesus slyly points out, how can he be so slow on the uptake? My interpretation of this encounter is that we're seeing Nicodemus at quite an early beginning stage of his faith evolving. He is curious about Jesus, fascinated to the point of quietly seeking him out by discreet darkness, but he doesn't understand much yet. And there is an element of word play, or misunderstanding of the double meaning of words, here as well. When Jesus says that you must be born from above, that also meant born again, so Nicodemus' seemingly absurd misunderstanding, asking if a man must try to enter the womb a second time, is not as daft as it might appear. Born again, or born from above, was the same phrase.

So Jesus goes on to elaborate what he means, and again we find language being used that has an interesting and complex richness. The Greek word *pneuma* could mean 'wind', 'breath', or 'spirit', and it seems that Jesus is playing with this ambiguity. Through this word *pneuma* our thoughts may be drawn towards the creation story, which Nicodemus would certainly have been familiar with, where God's breath, or spirit, is moving over the waters of the deep. It is this breath that God uses to breathe life into human beings when he creates them, making our own breath, which we think of in quite individualistic terms today, part of God's breath. Throughout the Old Testament God's power, creative energy, wisdom and presence is found in wind, in spirit, in breath. So here when Jesus declares that to see the kingdom of God, a person must be born again of water and spirit, it carries a wealth of biblical connotations. It could be summarised to mean that a person must be born of water and God, that a person must be one with God, united in purpose and intent.

So this word *pneuma* captures what we now think of as two distinct things: individuality versus thinking of oneself as part of something bigger - a collective understanding.

To see the kingdom of God, to be part of the kingdom of God, we cannot stand alone as our own little selves, clinging to our independence and ability to do and think whatever we want. Instead we have to be willing to lose, in a way, our sense of individuality. We have to embrace being one with God's spirit, and be open and willing to live in a world where that spirit blows where it chooses, and we do not have control over it. That's a difficult concept for us in the 21st century who are brought up from birth to have a strong sense of self and how we are independent beings. But Jesus is basically telling Nicodemus that to be able to see and understand the kingdom of God, you have to give yourself to it wholly, and not to try to hold anything back.

Be born again of water and spirit. Be born into a new life, a new way of thinking about yourself and God and how you are joined together. Perhaps this makes you think of baptisms and confirmations which we celebrate in church every year. Well this is partly why those are such special occasions, they are moments when people are acknowledging that they are irrevocably joined with God's spirit, that their breath is God's breath, and embracing it with joy! So the language of *pneuma* has a rich treasure trove of meanings, and lends itself to mystery, but it is a mystery that is well worth contemplating.

It is the mystery of eternal life, which Jesus makes explicit at the end of the conversation. We often, or usually, think of eternal life as being after we die - an eternity being united with God - but actually this idea of sharing in the one spirit or breath of God in *this* life implies that eternal life is not only in heaven (whatever that looks like), but in fact begins now. It begins when we are able to see the kingdom. It begins when we choose to acknowledge our dependence on the Spirit, when we embrace being part of God's breath and see the world through the lens of God's kingdom.

To see the world like this should propel us toward imagination and humility, as we see God at work around us here and now, and find ways in which we are joined in with the moving of the Spirit.

Nicodemus here is at the beginning of his journey. Later in John's gospel we find him twice more, once defending Jesus' rights to a fair hearing when the Pharisees want to seize him, and finally John's gospel has him accompanying Joseph of Arimathea to take Jesus' body and wrap it in spices for burial. By the end, Nicodemus seems to have put aside his worries about being known as a Jesus follower, and instead is wholeheartedly invested in orienting himself around this man who taught him to see and be one with the Spirit.

Nicodemus has found faith, the means of grace and righteousness. May he inspire us to rediscover and re-embrace our faith this Lent, allowing ourselves, too, to find our purpose and meaning in being united with God through whom we live and breath and have our being.

Amen.