

## Sermon: St Peter's, Brighton Beach

5 March 2023

John 3: 1-17

*May I speak in the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.*

In our Gospel reading this morning, we learn about a man named Nicodemus who came to Jesus late one night, because he was hungry. However, he wasn't looking for a late-night snack; he was hungry for spiritual food. He was hungry for the truth about the kingdom of God. He came to Jesus because he had questions and he knew that Jesus would have the answers.

Nicodemus reminds me of the very hungry caterpillar. (*Read this part of the book*) In Eric Carle's book "The Very Hungry Caterpillar," the story begins with a tiny egg on a leaf in the light of the moon. On a Sunday morning, the warm sun came up and, "pop!", out of the egg came a very small and very hungry caterpillar. He began to eat and eat and eat, but he was still hungry. Finally, he had eaten so much that he had a stomach ache! The next day the caterpillar ate through a nice green leaf, and his stomach felt much better.

He built a small house called a cocoon around himself and stayed in there for more than two weeks.

Then he nibbled a hole in the cocoon and pushed his way out...and something amazing and extraordinary occurred. He wasn't a caterpillar anymore...he was now a beautiful butterfly!

That's a wonderful story. The very hungry caterpillar reminds me of what Jesus said to Nicodemus. I think the very hungry caterpillar could help Nicodemus understand what Jesus said. Nicodemus said to Jesus, "Teacher, we all know that God has sent you to teach us. No one could perform the miracles that you are doing if God were not with him."

And then Jesus said something so incredible, yet also confusing, for Nicodemus. Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, unless you are born again, you cannot see the Kingdom of God."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Nicodemus. "How can a man be born again?"

Jesus went on to explain to Nicodemus that a person is "born again" when the Spirit of God enters into his heart. Humans can reproduce human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life. And that's what it means to be born again.

Let's think again about the story of "The Very Hungry Caterpillar." When he came out of his cocoon, he was a totally new creation. A butterfly! That's the way it is when we are born again and let Jesus come into our heart. He makes us a new creation!

Those who place their trust in Jesus will have eternal life, being reborn from above out the wind and the water of the Spirit. The Greek word for this is *pneuma*. *Pneuma* can mean "spirit," "breath," and "wind," and Jesus plays with this ambiguity. Like the breath of God back in Genesis Chapter 2, the Spirit gives life to believers. Like the wind, God's Spirit blows wherever it wishes, and though observers may perceive its presence, they neither comprehend it nor control it. Strikingly, Jesus says that those who are born of the Spirit share in the Spirit's mysterious freedom.

Jesus refers to God's gift of new life both as eternal life and as the kingdom of God. Both phrases refer to the same reality, though they emphasize different aspects of it. Eternal life is life shaped by and utterly dependent upon God's love. It is not simply life in heaven after death.

Rather, it begins now, in the moment that believers entrust their lives to Jesus. When believers receive eternal life, they enter into God's reign in the here and now. They become citizens of God's kingdom, submitting to God's rule and depending on the Spirit's guidance. Citizenship in God's reign is not a purely individual affair. Believers are reborn afresh into God's new family.

As the Gospel says, "Therefore, if any man be in Christ he is a new creature. Old things are passed away. Behold, all things are become new."

Also, Rebirth into God's reign comes not by knowledge or doctrine, but by faith. If religious training were enough, Nicodemus, as a representative of Israel's religious leaders, should have all that he needs. But he is baffled, unable to enter into new life through his intellect. Only after the crucifixion does he take a step toward commitment, bringing myrrh and aloes for Jesus' burial. This risky act signals a change of heart, the beginning of a transformation — though it is clear that he does not yet understand who Jesus is. As Gail O'Day says, "We cannot always determine who Jesus is, but who we are must be determined by who Jesus is".

Jesus therefore invites all of us to receive life as God's gift. The crucified Son of God shows us God's love, scorned and rejected but triumphant. Those who trust Jesus, staking their lives on divine love, will be reborn from above through the Spirit. By God's mercy they will be not merely forgiven, but made whole, remade in God's image as participants in God's new creation.

And like the hungry caterpillar, we transform, by grace, into something truly beautiful!

Amen.

