

Theme: Belief in God

- ◆ ‘For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life’. I read this sentence out nearly every week at the 8 O’clock service, but it is a sentence whose meaning, like what it means to be born again I have long struggled with. The most tricky word in the sentence is ‘believes’. It is a word that I have heard used too often as a stick to beat people with sadly, and too commonly a stick people beat themselves with.
- ◆ I am going to start trying to unpick this by coming at it sideways, from our first reading from Paul’s letter to the Romans. Over the years I have spent a long time wondering about what Abraham’s righteousness was. When you read Genesis, he does quite a lot of rather shocking things, not least on several occasions pretending that Sarah is his sister and not his wife and marrying her off for alien kings. This always ends in disaster and it is quite clear that God disapproves. Whatever Abraham’s righteousness is, it is not that he is being good and it is not keeping the rules because the law had not yet been given.
- ◆ The key to unlocking this puzzle is the missing preposition in verse three of Romans 4. Paul

writes ‘Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness’ not ‘Abraham believed in God’. It took me years to notice this as I was reading what I expected to see not what was there.

- ◆ Abraham is righteous because he takes God seriously. This makes complete sense in terms of Genesis. He is obedient to the call to leave Ur and go to Canaan. He prays and negotiates with God over Sodom. He accepts God’s covenant with him and trusts him to fulfil it. There is a time of faithlessness, when rather than trusting in God he accepts Sarah’s plan to beget a child through Hagar and causes enormous grief and suffering. He is faithful again when God calls on him to sacrifice Isaac and God is faithful in response and provides the ram.
- ◆ Abraham’s righteousness is not about following the rules, it is more relational than that. Abraham loves God and shows it by attending to God, responding to, engaging with and trusting in God. Abraham takes God seriously and that is reckoned to him as righteousness.
- ◆ So how does that help us understand what belief means in John 4.16?
- ◆ Nicodemus does agree that God exists, he believes from that point of view, but he doesn’t recognise God when he is standing in front of him. Nicodemus has no relationship with God so how could he recognise Him?

- ◆ The difference between Nicodemus and Abraham is that Nicodemus is still primarily concerned with what he understands and what he knows. He is still focussed on himself and thinks that everything is about him. He has studied and been trained; he is one of the religious elite. Many people are like Nicodemus, their journey of faith begins with trying to make sense of the world, with trying to understand and know about God. We want to understand so that we can believe. We want to be in control of what is going on and our lives. It is this desire to understand that brings Nicodemus to Jesus in cover of darkness.
- ◆ Jesus tells him that he is never going to get there under the power of his own intellect. Jesus tells this scholar that he doesn't understand and never will under his own steam. That must have stung.
- ◆ Instead of studying harder or asking better questions or reading the right books Jesus tells him he must be born again. This is a powerful metaphor for grace and the coming of faith. No matter what choices we do or don't have in the world the one thing that none of us have any control over is our birth. We did not choose where or when to be born or who our parents were. We are utterly powerless in birth.
- ◆ The same is true of faith, it is not of our choosing. We need the holy spirit if we are to be born into a relationship with God. It is through

the grace of the holy spirit that we are able to let go of our need for understanding and move towards trusting and knowing God. Our understanding can then grow on that firm foundation. For that to happen we need to start again, to go back to the beginning and let go of all that has been.

- ◆ In ‘Being Disciples’ Rowan Williams talks about this journey in terms of the ‘dark night of the soul’. We have to recognise and accept the inadequacy of our own understand and feel lost and drifting in order to discover that true certainly is trust in God and God’s faithfulness, not in the power of our own intellect. This is nothing to do with the ideas we agree with or understand, but this is true faith or beleif.
- ◆ The image of being born again is a powerful one. Not only does it remind us that we are not in control it also tells us that the process is painful and messy and usually happens at night, when we ,like Nicodemus, are in the dark. It also reminds us that like life itself, it always comes as a gift.
- ◆ One of the encouraging things about the story for me is that at this point Nicodemus seems rather unpromising disciple material. He sounds deeply resistant to what Jesus has to say; at the very best he just doesn’t get it. ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old.’ The lovely thing is that John tells us right at the end of the Gospel what

the outcome of this encounter is. Nicodemus reappears in the narrative after the crucifixion. He comes to help bury Jesus's body with large quantities of precious spices. Unlike the twelve he has not run away from the crucifixion, but has followed Jesus right to the very end. Was it the Holy Spirit coming to him and giving him the grace to trust in God without necessarily understanding, that gave him the courage and generosity to stay around, when all seemed to have gone totally wrong? I am sure we can trust that his faithfulness at this moment would have meant that he was still around with the other disciples when Jesus appeared to them all on Easter Day.