

CREATION, RECREATION, BIRTH & REBIRTH

Genesis 1: 1-5; John 1: 1-5, 10-13; John 3: 1-8

Listen to these opening verses of the bible which are about the creation of the world:

Genesis 1. 1-5

1In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, **2**the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. **3**Then God said, ‘Let there be light’; and there was light. **4**And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. **5**God called the light Day, and the darkness God called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day. Amen.

Did God create out of nothing, or did God have matter, earth and other materials God used to create the world? This has been debated over the centuries. Classical Christian doctrine has tended to confess what in Latin we call: creation “*ex nihilo*”, which means creation “out of nothing.” All that exists, every particle and molecule, was a creation of God when nothing as yet existed. This makes all that exists sacred, crafted by God. Nothing material is evil in itself and nothing living is evil in itself. No creature or person is evil in themselves. Evil is a corruption of something sacred and good which is life itself created by God.

On the other hand, in the very next chapter of the bible there is a second story of creation which describes what God makes like an artist who uses soil and other elements of the earth to fashion life. Creation is not a void but material full of potential that needs to be shaped and crafted. God, and then humans whom God brings forth out of the mother earth (Adam out of Adamah), creates using materials that already exist. Creation is a work of art like a beautiful garden that feeds all our senses as we lovingly care for it and work with it.

This also means creation can be recreated again and again. Life and the evolution of life is a series of recreations, a series of deaths and resurrections, of a dying to the old and a rising up to the new. Every year we are recreating our gardens. Have you experienced a dying to the old and a rising up to the new? Have you experienced recreation at different seasons of your life?

But this also brings us to a second word often associated with creation and recreation: Birth and rebirth. The creation story in the bible is found in the first book of the bible called Genesis. Genesis means beginning, but Genesis is a Greek word which also means birth. The creation of the world and the birth of the world are practically synonymous. God is a creator who is also

like a mother giving birth to the world. Art as creation out of nothing, art as crafting life and nourishment out of earthly materials, and art as a giving birth whether it is an idea or a life...

But what about rebirth? Among the various dictionary definitions of rebirth are these: a reincarnation like a being born for a second time in a new body, or like resurrection from death, or it can also mean a brand new beginning or genesis. It can also mean: "a spiritual enlightenment causing a person to lead a new life."

The opening verses of our second scripture reading from the gospel of John, gives us another version of the creation story in Genesis 1. Here creation and birth, recreation and rebirth are fused together. While Jesus who is the living Word of God is instrumental with the Creator God in the first act of creation, the time is ripe for a new creation, a new birth or a rebirth. The coming of Jesus, the Word of God into the world is about a rebirth. What is this rebirth about? Listen:

John 1. 1-5, 10-13

1In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. **2**He was in the beginning with God. **3**All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being **4**in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. **5**The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. **11**He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. **12**But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, **13**who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the human will, but of God. Amen.

This account of creation is telling us that Jesus Christ, the Word of God, was with the Creator at the beginning of creation. But it is also telling us that Christ the Word was instrumental in the creation of the human spirit – the life that was the light of all people, the light that shines in the darkness.

But sometimes, the darkness is thick. Sometimes, the darkness threatens the light. Sometimes the spiritual light in us becomes dim, and sometimes it may even go out, or at least, it feels that way... What threatens the light? "He was in the world and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him" Ignorance. Do we know the light? What is the source of our inner light? How can we find it? But there's also this: "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." Why would they and we reject the light? Maybe the light is calling us to live and do in a way that we do not want to. Maybe the call to love is too difficult when we are feeling anger, hate, indifference to the life around us because we are absorbed

with ourselves, or simply too burnt out, stressed, numb or hopeless to care... By ignorance, resistance or indifference, we do not receive the inner light of the Love who is Christ the Word of God.

But what happens if and when the light does get in? “But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the human will, but of God.” In other words, to receive the light that is Christ the Word, and to receive such a light past the ignorance and resistance that afflicts us and all humankind, is to enter into a state of new creation or recreation. To become a child of God requires a spiritual birth just like it does a physical birth.

OK, so what does spiritual birth or rebirth mean? This gospel tells us more. Here’s an encounter Jesus has with a religious leader where he tries to describe spiritual rebirth. Listen:

John 3. 1-6

3Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jewish people. **2**He came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’ **3**Jesus answered him, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.’ **4**Nicodemus said to him, ‘How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?’ **5**Jesus answered, ‘Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. **6**What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Amen.

“What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.” Jesus is speaking here of rebirth, a birth from above, a birth through the Spirit. What is this all about?

One of the great pioneers of the psychology of religion in modern times is an American scholar and practitioner named William James. In the year 1900, James gave some important lectures which were then published into a famous book entitled: “*The Varieties of Religious Experience.*” In the book, James provides testimonials from hundreds of people who describe experiences of being “born again,” born from above or born of the Spirit. James collected these testimonials from people throughout the world and from various spiritual traditions, describing the phenomenon of transformation and inner change. Whether people were within a spiritual community worshipping when it happened, praying in solitude, on a mountain, in a forest, out on a walk, or whatever else, he catalogues how things shift in people changing their whole outlook on life, their disposition and energy - from sadness and despair into gratitude and joy, from doubt and fear into faith and hope, and all of it centered within an overwhelming blanket of love and light that wraps around a person and transforms the way they live henceforth, what matters to them, their priorities and perspectives and more...

In one section of his book, James summarizes the qualities of what this rebirth and transformation are about:

First, the experience is of being caught up within a larger power, energy or force, where our personal challenges, struggles and issues become so much smaller and less significant than we have made them and felt them before.

This leads, second, to how this power and energy, call it God if you like, enters us, surrounds us with a fullness of light and peace, and we surrender ourselves in faith to its control and leading.

This then leads, third, to an immense joy, ecstasy and freedom from what has so far entangled us and kept us stuck and imprisoned.

And finally, fourth, there is a shifting of our emotional centre towards what James calls: “loving and harmonious affections, towards a “yes, yes,” and away from the “no, no” where the judgemental and critical voice in our heads has dominated. We feel loved in ourselves and loving toward others and the universe.

When these four elements start to take hold, James says, other things also begin to happen in us, such as:

1. Commitment – we become disciplined in positive directions with our physical and spiritual health, diligent in taking up practices and the development of healthy habits that feed the positivity of heart and spirit.
2. “Strength of Soul” which for James means self-serving motivations and inhibitions dominated by fear give way to faith and hope, with energy to persevere trusting what will be, and resilience to face hardships with patience and grace. Quoting James: “Fears and anxieties go, and blissful equanimity takes place. Come heaven, come hell, it makes no difference now.”
3. There is also what he calls “purity” which sadly can have negative connotations for many of us. But what he means with that more traditional word purity, is a sense that we are going clean, turning away from toxic and unhealthy habits and addictions. Imagine having that kind of overwhelmingly positive energy passing through you that gives you that passion for purging yourself of all those negative attachments and addictions!
4. Finally, and most importantly, he says that all this energy shifts your emotional centre to increased compassion and tenderness for all life within you and around you. This is especially

powerful when such compassion, patience and understanding even extends to those who would previously irritate you if not enrage you. Even enemies are not hated, as that kind of energy is swept up in the new currents of love.

Wow! Isn't this incredible? But one more thing James says, something which is absolutely critical for us and something absolutely critical in what Jesus reveals and embodies. Even as there may be and hopefully will be for us key moments where we are swept up by the transforming joy, power and love of divine rebirth, life keeps coming at us left, right and centre, and sometimes we find ourselves ground down again. Even the experience of transformation and rebirth can seem like a distant dream. We may even question: "Did it really happen to me?" This is where we need to find our way back again and come to the light. Divine rebirth must be an ongoing process and a journey with downs which then require new pathways up and out. There is a repeated dying to the old, the negative and the difficult that is required as we open ourselves to resurrection, recreation and rebirth...

Somehow, Nicodemus seemed to have no clue about any of this. But he felt there was something in Jesus he needed to access, to understand, to come to know ever more deeply. And Nicodemus does appear later in the gospel narrative as a quiet follower of Jesus. The fact that his name is recorded in the gospel also tells us that he may have become an important leader in the early church in time. Who knows what opposition and trouble he may have faced from his fellow Pharisees for betraying their order to follow this peasant messiah. And yet, the gift he was given was to see in this human the very Word and light of God promising a birth of a whole new kind...

What about you and me here today? Do we need rebirth? Have we ever tasted and felt something of rebirth? The fact that we are here in church opening ourselves and getting in touch with the seeking side of our hearts... This seeking and stirring is of God the creator and recreator... like Nicodemus, the Spirit in Jesus is seeking us too, to awaken us, to fill us and to take us yet further into a transforming journey... will you surrender to it?

Prayer: Come to us, O Word made flesh... May we die to the old with you in order to rise up to the new, awakened, refreshed and renewed... May your Spirit move through us and give us the transforming energy we need to rise up. Don't give up on us as you did not give up on Nicodemus. Stay with us until we experience rebirth... In your name we pray, Amen.