
Family Values

or Blood, Water & Spirit

a reflection on baptism : inherited religion and personal faith

Reading : John 3 : 1 - 10

One of the Pharisees, called Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish Council, came to Jesus by night. "Rabbi," he said, "we know that you are a teacher sent by God; no one could perform these signs of yours unless God were with him."

Jesus answered, "In very truth I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he has been born again."

"But how can someone be born when he is old?" asked Nicodemus. "Can he enter his mother's womb a second time and be born?" Jesus answered, "In very truth I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born from water and spirit. Flesh can give birth only to flesh; it is spirit that gives birth to spirit.

You ought not to be astonished when I say, 'You must all be born again.' The wind blows where it wills; you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born from the Spirit."

"How is this possible?" asked Nicodemus.

"You a teacher of Israel and ignorant of such things!" said Jesus.

There are two different things : (1) our religious community, the Church; our religious heritage and traditions, passed on down the generations (2) people's personal relationship with God. The two are not the same thing.

As a religious community, we trace our descent to Abraham – more accurately, to Sarah (since Muslims also trace their ancestry from Abraham, but via Hagar his slave-wife). That community claims its inheritance as originating in a promise that God made to Sarah. The religion that was a response to that promise – circumcision – holds that community together through the generations. It was Abraham that had the relationship with God; those who followed are merely, by their ritual action, 'claiming their inheritance', just as we claim a baby's Christian inheritance for it in infant baptism. But God's promise is not a *guarantee*. It's like a cheque : we have to open a bank account with God and then bank it. If we haven't opened an account with God by being a part of the religious community we have no way of banking it.

But even claiming your inheritance, by (say) being baptised and confirmed and then accepting the responsibilities and privileges of membership of Christ's Church (or going through the initiation rituals of the Muslim *ummah* or Jewish people) – although vital to the continuation of the tradition – is still having a relationship with God 'second-hand'. Some atheists protest that to bring up children in a religious home is 'indoctrination'. Richard Dawkins famously says "There's no such thing as a Muslim child, or Christian child". Well, I don't think there's such a thing as an 'atheist child' – because there is no recognisable 'atheist community' or tradition or culture as such (although the British Humanist Association is trying to create one). It's just individuals – maybe individual families – who don't believe in God. But if those individuals lived in a Christian society, they would be Christian atheists. Because there clearly *is* a Christian community and culture and language and religion and . . . and . . . What Richard Dawkins means, I think, is that a child, who is not yet free of their parents' influence, cannot be considered to have a personal Christian faith (or Muslim faith, or Jewish faith) – their own, free relationship with God.

You can have a relationship with God second-hand (as it were) through your parents, through your religious tradition, accepting that tradition willingly (or at least, not *rejecting* it by refusing to participate in its rituals) and that's fine. I know our Protestant tradition sets great emphasis on having a personal one-to-one relationship with God, but we also know (do we not?) that you can't *engineer* people into that relationship. You can't *make* people experience God. You can indoctrinate people for all you're worth but it won't give them a personal relationship with God. It stands to do the very opposite : by portraying God as a bully it risks closing their minds against all God-talk. A personal relationship with God always comes at God's initiative, just as it did to

Abraham, Moses, the prophets, and Jesus. And maybe – who’s to say not? – to the Prophet Muhammed?

Second-hand faith – faith that is content to simply be a participating member of a religious community, faith that draws its identity from the relationship that Abraham, or Jesus, had with God may not be *all* there is to it, but it is important. Inherited religion, family religion passed down the generations – down the blood line – accounts, I’m sure, for the vast majority of religious people in the world, without whom the traditions would soon die out.

But when second-hand faith like this believes that it is the only sort of faith there is, when second-hand faith refuses to believe that, maybe, God didn’t stop speaking in the 1st century and maybe does still speak ‘first-hand’ in people’s hearts, then religion starts to become oppressive. When such religion starts thinking it knows all the answers it starts ceasing to be a faith at all, and becomes a mere ideology – a political force.

The spiritual power of Christian faith springs from the fateful collision between religion that was sufficiently sure it had all the answers buttoned down and its greatest prophet whose personal relationship with God was so intense and creative that it seemed to threaten the tradition. Whereas in fact Jesus had been called by God to renew and restore true life to it. Since Jesus’s resurrection, when it became clear to his followers that ‘God would not be mocked’ and would have his way anyway whether religious people liked it or not, the Christian Church has gone through several cycles of becoming violently oppressive and controlling, then reformed and renewed. Our United Reformed Church traces its origins to one of those upheavals, in the 16th century, has lived through at least one since (in the early 19th century), and may be in the middle of a third.

We have a saying in English : “Blood is thicker than water”. The ‘water’ in that saying is the water of baptism. It’s saying that

when it comes to the crunch, your family takes precedence over the Church. If my own extended family's annual gathering clashes with Community Fun Day (which it hasn't the last couple of years) which should I be at? With my 'blood relations' there, or my 'water relations' here?

But there's another saying. It comes from John's Gospel : "In very truth I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born from water and spirit." (John 3 : 5) The 'water religion' is the inherited religion, the 'second-hand' religion, the traditional religion, the faith that acknowledges the unique relationship Jesus had with God and puts its trust in that, accepting the call to follow Jesus. The 'religion born of the Spirit' is initiated by God, and can't be engineered, only waited for, humbly. Without the 'water' religion – religion celebrated as a gift of previous generations – we'd be in danger of losing our religious tradition altogether. Without the Spirit, we'd drown in the water, for our religion would become stifling and oppressive.

If you want an image of this to take away with you : In a service of infant baptism we see all three : blood, water and Spirit.

The child is taken away from its parents and baptised. Its life is joined to the life of God in the Christian community. It becomes, for a moment, dead to its parents – the blood tie is severed like the umbilical cord. It does not have a personal faith – how could it? It cannot yet be born of the Spirit, and that rebirth will only happen in God's good time and at God's choosing. But it gains an *inherited* faith. It is given (as it were) a cheque – a promise of God's ever-present forgiving love – and a bank account is opened with God on its behalf, ready for the time when, at confirmation, the child wishes to pay it in. And then the child is given back to its parents – its blood relatives – but something has changed. Within the 'water fellowship' (within the Church) the child is no longer a son or daughter of its parents. It has become their sister or brother. It has its own life with God, now, independent of them, within

the Church family. It is for the parents now to ensure that 'water is thicker than blood'.

That is called 'fundamentalism'. Because it's very religious, it makes the mistake of thinking it's grounded in God (capital G).

It's as if we are saying "God is *not* this, *not* that, not the other." This process of clearing away the clutter and 'letting God be God' can come over as austere, a bit dry and empty. When you clear everything away it can seem as if there's nothing there. Isn't that what Jesus felt in Gethsemane?

Maybe we would do better to do what the Quakers do and sit together for an hour in silence; and not have preachers and not celebrate communion.

Well, maybe. But we believe that amongst all the 'God is not this, not that' there are a couple of positive clues God has left us, which will not only free us from our delusions and false religion, but give us a *positive* spirit, a forward motivation, a 'lively hope'.

The Jesus whose death revealed how morality based on a religion that worships the one true God itself can turn sour and make a victim of its own God was no mere victim. Throughout his ministry he had revealed the heart of the mysterious God that is beyond all religion and morality, and what we have recorded tells of healing, forgiveness and new starts, new creation, freedom, reconciliation – each one of those a sermon in itself.

But there's more. The Jesus whom religion and morality killed was raised. Some may say that this was an imagined resurrection – wishful thinking turned into a certain belief. But the story as told in the gospels makes clear not only that it was the last thing the disciples were expecting, but that it wasn't even something they had been wishing for. They were terrified when it happened, because it confirmed the dreadful truth – this truly was 'God's Son' whom they had failed.

But with the resurrection came hope – not a sort of narrow and self-centred hope that "Oh, goody, I'm going to live forever" but the hope that comes from knowing that whatever tomb we bury God in – whatever false worship of things that are less

than God, and whatever rubble that results when its temple of false worship eventually comes crashing down – God’s Spirit is there to restore and rebuild.