

I recall during one of the lectures I attended given by the late Canon Jim Hartin on Church History, he was talking about the vocation of the Anglican Church within the wider Christian Church. It had a special vocation to hold the middle ground between the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches on the one hand and the Churches of the Reformation on the other. He was speaking in 1977/78, a period in which the Troubles in Northern Ireland were particularly violent with awful things being done on both sides. He went on that day to speak of the particular vocation of the Church of Ireland at that particular time, as a community called to hold the middle ground. Those who occupy the middle ground in any conflict situation, he reminded us, are often accused of weakness, of not being prepared to take a stand. The middle position, he argued, is often a very lonely position; those prepared to hold the middle ground often end up getting hit by traffic travelling in both directions.

Those of us who occupy the middle position in Church life can however fall into the trap of being so conscious of our middle position that we avoid using language and terms that could be seen as being associated with one side or the other. We in the Church of Ireland can be wary of using words like Catholic or priest because we have reservations about the way those words are used within the Roman Catholic and Orthodox traditions instead of having the confidence in our own understanding of the terms Catholic and priesthood. By the same token, because we do not want to be associated with what are seen to be the narrow attitudes of those on the hard-line Protestant wing of the Church we avoid using words such as saved, born again, evangelical, judgement instead of having the confidence to offer our own insights into these profoundly biblical terms.

Our Gospel reading, the meeting of Jesus with Nicodemus who comes to him by night, contains one such expression, born from above, born again (the Greek word *ανωθεν*, bears both translations). We have allowed one interpretation,

that of a one off particular experience, to dominate our understanding of this term. Some have argued that if you do not have this particular experience you are not yet a Christian and others have dismissed it as emotionalism. Let us begin with a basic question. What is birth? Birth is first and foremost a bringing forth of life.

One aspect of my ministry I look back to with a particular affection is the three years I spent as Chaplain to the Rotunda Hospital when I was Bishop's Curate in Finglas. One thing I learned very quickly in the course of that time is that no two births are identical. I think of one lady who spent over three months in pre-natal, with all the anxieties, the fears and frustrations that went with that. I think of another lady who barely made it through the front door before her child was born. Two very different birth processes: but what both had in common was that at the end there was new life, with all its joy and potential. If no two physical births are identical why should we expect two spiritual births to be identical?

I often find myself going back and reflecting on the figures of Peter and Paul in the New Testament. Peter so full of enthusiasm and so often getting it wrong; on occasions so firm in his resolution to stand by Jesus and on others, such as in the courtyard of the High Priest crumbling but the whole journey of faith and failure culminates in that lovely scene of reconciliation as given to us by John as the risen Christ asks Peter, 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' 'Lord you know I love you.' 'Feed my sheep.' Paul, on the other hand started off his journey so sure that he was right and the embryo Church was wrong. So for Paul there was that moment of confrontation that turned his life around.

If you think about it, God dealt with those two very different personalities very differently in a way that was appropriate to them as individuals. Peter's coming to faith was a more drawn out process, in some ways gentler, in other

ways more difficult. For Paul it had to be more direct. I sometimes say it is almost as if the only way God could get through to Paul was to take him by the scruff of the neck. If he had dealt with Peter the way he dealt with Paul he would probably have broken him. If he had dealt with Paul the way he dealt with Peter, the odds are he would never have got through. God dealt with them, as he deals with each one of us, as individuals. But both of them found faith, both were born again, born from above. At the end of very different spiritual journeys we find both of them at the end of their lives in Rome, both witnessing to the same Christ, both suffering the same fate for the faith. I would suspect that some of us here can identify very closely with Peter, some with Paul and probably most of us some way between. What is important is that we recognise the integrity of each other's experience, that the Peters honour the faith of the Pauls and the Pauls the faith of the Peters, simply rejoicing that each has found faith and encouraging each other in that faith.

And what comes into our mind when we think of spiritual birth? Again I want to try and widen our perception of what this might mean, to break free from some of the stereotypes that can all too easily limit our thinking. In our Gospel reading, John tells us that after Jesus has spoken to Nicodemus about the need to be born again, born from above, he uses an analogy that would have struck a chord with many of his hearers.

⁷Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' *John 3:7ff*

The wind blows where it choosesyou hear the sound of it but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. On the occasions I have been out on a boat I have always been intrigued at the ability of an experienced sailor to judge the wind, where it is coming from, its strength and then the ability to react, to adjust when the wind suddenly changes. No sailor is ever going to

operate on the basis of assuming just because the wind came from that quarter yesterday, it will do the same today and tomorrow; there is an ongoing attention to the wind.

In our spiritual lives both as individuals and as a community there is a need for a similar ongoing attentiveness to the Spirit. We need to resist the notion that the Spirit will always manifest itself in a particular way. For let us not forget that even the Biblical images of the Spirit are varied there is the wind, the flame, the dove, the still small voice.

The Church of Ireland has always valued the Anglican principle of inclusiveness, that we are able to hold together within our membership a variety of theological insights and expressions of worship. We have within the Church of Ireland the Peters and the Pauls. We have those with a more liberal outlook on social issues and those who would be more conservative. We have those who feel compelled to explore, to question, to challenge theological issues and those who feel no such need. As I reflected on our Gospel reading for today I was affirmed in the integrity of our inclusive approach. It also underlined for me the importance of honouring one another, learning from one another as we undertake a shared quest for truth as we offer our own distinctive witness to the wider Church of God.