

# Sermon All Saints Church 25/09/2016

Isaiah 43:1-3

John 3:1-12

St Paul with All Saints Church  
seeks to encourage all people to **follow Jesus Christ**  
by growing in our own personal relationship with him,  
with one another and with the community.

Are you a follower of Christ? Has anyone asked you this question lately? Or ever? I have at least never been asked this question, but I have lost track on how many times people have asked me: Do you believe in Christ? And that question is in a way so much easier to answer. Because believing is about saying yes or no to a system of beliefs, like: Jesus is the son of God, Jesus died and resurrected for our sins and so on. Following, on the other hand, is about a relationship with Jesus and being willing to let this relationship have consequences in my everyday life. Believing in Christ and following him are in a way two sides of the same coin, but it seems that in the history of Christianity from when it became a state religion in the 4<sup>th</sup> century we have tended to focus on the believing side of the coin, since that doesn't challenge society in the same way.

The Christians in the Early church however called themselves followers, Followers of the Way. And that certainly had consequences for their lives and led to severe persecutions. The Roman Empire, in which they lived, didn't care that they believed in Christ. That wasn't the main reason why they were persecuted. In the Roman Empire there was freedom of religion. You could worship any God or Goddess you liked as long as it didn't challenge what was required of a Roman citizen. But to follow Christ certainly challenged what was required of a Roman citizen. In the Roman Empire the Emperor was also like a national cult leader and one of the duties of a Roman citizen was to obey and adore him. For the early Christians it was impossible to follow Christ and at the same time adore an earthly leader and their refusal to do so led to their persecution.

Because of the persecution the early Christians developed a secret sign. A fish. When you met someone you didn't know you would draw a line in the sand (so

to say half of the fish) and if the other person was Christian too, she or he would draw the second line and complete the fish. And if the person wasn't Christian no harm was done, because then she or he probably thought that the other person only was playing around in the sand. The reason why the fish became the secret sign is that the letters in the Greek word for fish, ICHTHYS, give the following sentence: **I**esous **C**hristos **T**heou **Y**ios **S**oter (= Jesus Christ Son of God Saviour)



The fish, the secret sign itself, shows us what it means to follow Christ. And actually it starts with God's wish to follow us, the very reason why we should follow him. And that is the first line beginning at the top and ending at the bottom. That is the direction of God – he came from heaven above to show the way... God came to earth and became one of us so that we could get to know him and turn to him.

And there is a distinct turning point at the bottom, so to say at the mouth of the fish. And that turning point, that bottom, is our meeting point with God. Our bottom - our human weakness and our wounds is the place where many of us have the most life changing encounters with God. In the darkness and in the despair, as Nicodemus in today's gospel reading comes to Christ during the

night, we really meet with God. Because as with any other relationship the relationship with Jesus presupposes that we dare to show our vulnerability, that we dare to be ourselves. And so Jesus says to Nicodemus: “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit<sup>[b]</sup> gives birth to spirit. <sup>7</sup> You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You<sup>[c]</sup> must be born again.’” With flesh Jesus means the fallen human being, the human being who doesn’t live in relationship with him. And the natural direction of the flesh would be to try to go high (like the people built the tower of Babel in Genesis 11 for their own fame), to not acknowledge our human weakness, to try to hide it by taking control over others. But Jesus says: “You must be born of water and of spirit” and by that he means, that we must face our darkness, we must let go of the control of our lives and die with him. That is what happens in baptism – we die and resurrect with Christ in the water and then we are given God’s Holy Spirit to live in us. And this whole process is based on trust. On trust in God having the control over our lives and not ourselves, just as God promises in Isaiah 43:

“Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

<sup>2</sup> When you pass through the waters,  
I will be with you;  
and when you pass through the rivers,  
they will not sweep over you.  
When you walk through the fire,  
you will not be burned;  
the flames will not set you ablaze.

<sup>3</sup> For I am the LORD your God,  
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.”

“You must be born again” Jesus says. And being born again means having been at this turning point, the rock bottom of our lives, acknowledging our human weakness and letting our wounds meet and be healed by the wounds of Christ. At this point we realise that I myself can’t do anything to gain real strength – it is only through surrender of my life to Christ that I can be saved. It is only when I give everything up that I receive what I need.

The personal experience of this paradox is what gives us direction in life and encourages us to follow Christ. Because when we let Jesus transform our lives, Christian Faith is not something we have only in addition to our ordinary life as

a nice decoration, but being born again – out of darkness into God’s Light, which becomes a totally different way of living. And this different way of living will challenge and upset the society we live in. Today, just as it did in the Roman Empire. Jesus never promised that it will be easy to follow him, he actually said that the world will hate us because we are following him. And if the world doesn’t hate us we have to ask ourselves if we actually have understood what it means to follow Christ.