

Reading: John 3:1-8

Open the Bible to us, O God, in a fresh and exciting way.

In Jesus' name we ask it.

Amen

Every New Zealander knows the story of how Sir Edmund Hillary climbed Mount Everest, the highest mountain in the world. What is not widely known until you read his book, High Adventure, is that just 2 years before, in 1952, he had tried to climb Everest and failed. A few weeks after his failed attempt he was asked to speak to a group. He walked on to thunderous applause, the audience recognising his attempt at greatness, Hillary himself thought of himself as a failure. He moved away from the microphone and walked to the edge of the platform. Behind the platform was a photo of the mountain. He made a fist and pointed to the mountain. He said in a loud voice, "Mount Everest you beat me the first time, but I'll beat you the next time because you've grown all you are going to grow. But I'm still growing."

"But I'm still growing."

The Gospel records for us the story of one who is still growing. Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. He has a lot to lose by being seen in the daylight with Jesus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee. He is respected, he is wealthy (probably from selling spices) and his reputation is worth protecting. He is a member of the ruling council, a person of influence - but at this point Nicodemus is committed not so much to his wealth, or his power but his interest in this radical teacher Jesus. You see Nicodemus is still growing. Like Hillary he is still growing. We 2,000 years later are witnesses to his faith growth, because by Chapter 7 of John's gospel Nicodemus is openly talking with Jesus in the daylight for everyone to see. And by Chapter 19 he is a fully committed follower of Jesus.

But what of us? For some of us the journey to faith is so dramatic so sudden that it is like being born anew. Or being born over again. For others it might be more gradual, and it might even be hard to name the moment and the place where we became a Christian. It's like flying to another country. You might be asleep when you cross the border, but you can still say you have arrived in a new country.

The important thing is not the suddenness of our conversion or even the way it happened but that we are committed to still growing.

Faith is like riding a bicycle. If you aren't moving forward, you quickly fall off. I meet people who say, "I've lost my faith." I always find that what has really happened is that they can't be bothered growing.

Jill, a pakeha woman in her forties, described her coming to faith like this...

I didn't grow up in a Christian family. My mum didn't take us to church when we were children, and I had no concept of a relationship with God.

Then one Saturday night I was slumped on the sofa watching 'Who Wants to be a Millionaire?' and a question came up on the Bible and I remember thinking I should be able to answer that question - it wasn't a difficult question - and in a flash of inspiration I thought I'm going to put a Bible on my Christmas list this year to improve my general knowledge.

I was at work talking to a friend about my request for a Bible for Christmas and my conversation was overheard by a colleague. She was quite a gentle person; she came up to me afterwards and said, "I'm a Christian." That's when she told me about a course - a chance to explore Christianity through Mark's Gospel.

I thought, "No way am I doing a course like that." Nobody I knew would consider doing something like that and I certainly wasn't going to. So, I was surprised to find myself turning up for the first lesson a short time afterwards. First impressions were good - great buzz in the room, lively people, good conversation. I loved the format of the course, but I thought, "Well, I'll just come along for one or two, and then I'll walk away." Actually, I didn't miss a single session. And overall, I was just blown away by the figure of Jesus walking off the pages of Mark's Gospel to me and really talking to me.

When I got to the end of the course. I had a lot of questions, and I wasn't ready to become a Christian. I kept asking myself, "What is going to happen to me if I become Christian? Am I going to wake up as a transformed personality with a halo shining over my head? What about my lifestyle, my smoking, my drinking, what would my friends and family think of me?" I didn't think that I was the kind of person that God would want to have as a Christian. But I did start to pray about it, and I did go to church.

A few months later I fractured my knee in a skiing accident, which at the time I didn't see as an answer to prayer! I was devastated. I was off work for weeks, how was work going to be able to cope without me? How would I cope without work?!

But actually, it was during that time that I had the solitude to reflect upon what I had learned. I listened to Bible talks, and I came to understand that I didn't have to be good enough for God because Jesus had died for me, and that the Christian life is a journey. I would have the Holy Spirit in me working with me every step of the way and it was a fantastically liberating experience to understand that truth. I was still on crutches when I became a Christian. (Jill's story is from the Christianity Explored website).

I wonder what your journey to faith looks like. Was it a dramatic born-again moment or are you like Nicodemus just sneaking a talk with Jesus by night, or even a 'Who wants to be a Millionaire?' Christian like Jill?

You see the good news of today's Gospel is that not one size fits all. God accepts you where you are on your faith path. You don't have to be anybody but yourself, God has a unique faith journey shaped just right for you.

But be sure of this, the important thing is that you are still growing. You see God's love is calling you. Gently, persistently God is calling you into more and more meaning, more and more purpose and He has more and more grace for your life. Unlike Mount Everest, you and I with God's help are still growing.