Years ago, when I studied in Germany there was a great divide among the American students over how we understood ourselves in relation to the McDonald’s in Freiburg. I was on the pro side never having been embarrassed over the occasional Big Mac attack, plus they sold beer. On the other side was a much more vocal group who tended to treat McDonald’s in the same way Hester Prynne was treated in *The Scarlet Letter*. In a weird way McDonald’s ended up being a shibboleth, at least for the McDonald’s disdaining group; it was a way for them to identify what kind of American they were. My guess is that back home McDonald’s did not loom so large in their minds but by being strangers in a strange land there was a deep need to identify themselves as the type of American who hates the American fast food industrial complex. This need for approval and distinction among strangers is something I also find in Christian communities. We may not express it in terms of disdain for the Hamburgler, but we want people to know the type of Christian we are and this is often achieved by explaining what kind of Christian we are opposed to. For example, if I decided to replace the organ with a drum kit and some groovy electric guitars, my guess is that many of you would announce what kind of Christian you were by leaving the church (in fact I would probably join you, even though in this scenario I came up with the idea). And while some of the distinguishing has theological origins and should be encouraged (i.e. we are not snake handlers) much of it does not. Yes, certainly I can quibble with some of the atrocious lyrics contained in many of the praise songs that are popular in mega churches these days but much of my problem with such music comes down to a matter of taste. I dislike them for the same reason I dislike most of what Phil Collins put out in the 1980’s. But there can also be a danger in issues of taste as it relates to our understanding of our Christian identity. And this danger is that sometimes in establishing what kind of Christian we are we throw the baby out with the bathwater. That is, we dismiss something because it comes wrapped in a type of Christianity with which we are uncomfortable. And we have just such an issue arising this morning and it comes in the phrase Jesus uses when he says, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’”

The way that this text gets translated by various Christian groups is that we have to be born again. In fact, it is the place from where we get the term born-again Christian. But here is the problem because as good Episcopalians we all know that born again Christain’s are a bit much – their ministers talk too loud and their members are always signaling for a touchdown. If we go down this path, I will have to pick up a white suit and get a toupee. But on a serious note, Jesus does make the statement that we, in so many words, need to be born again. So, what is a good Episcopalian to do? Is there a way to follow Jesus’ instructions without, you know, being tacky?

To answer that question let’s first take a minute do something you are not supposed to do in a good church argument and that is to try and figure out what Jesus actually meant. And one thing we need to do when trying to understand this passage is to look at the whole passage because there is another part that sometimes gets missed and it concerns itself with the crucifixion. Often this passage gets chopped up and we are left with a passage about being born again and a separate passage about the crucifixion and they pass like ships in the night. They are related, Jesus did not go into the bit about the Crucifixion by introducing it with the phrase, “On an unrelated note.” Rather he went straight into saying, “so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” So really this thing about being born from above or born again is completely related to what God is doing and what God will do. And in this context the “above” in born from above can reasonably be interpreted to mean the “above” of Jesus being on the cross. Because if Jesus is lifted on the cross, he will be quite literally be above us. In other words, our rebirth happens because of the cross.

In the Air Force I am around a tremendous number of born-again types. Many of them are good and decent people but part and parcel of this understanding is their testimony in which they tell you the moment in which they were born again. You have probably heard the stories – I was a sinner until I met my savior. This is fine, Jesus should and does change us, but the problem is when the story never goes beyond the individual; it is too small. It can locate all of God in that person and that person alone. But when we look at what Jesus says today while he does emphasize that there is change that will take place in the person, he also spends time identifying the source of that change.

I am not sure if this is a great analogy or a stupid one but think for a moment about Covid 19 vaccines. Up until a few months ago we were all at risk of not only getting the virus but of getting very sick from it. However, after we received the vaccine, we have greatly reduced this risk. Now when we talk about what has happened, we don’t say, “Philip Cunningham is no longer suspectable to Covid 19”, no instead we talk about what the vaccine has done for humanity. The vaccine has lowered the infection rates across the country and in many parts of the world. We celebrate the vaccine. But strangely in this passage, if we forget the second part, it becomes all about us. Here I am talking in broad stereotypes but I think much of my discomfort with the born-again talk is that it makes me the product. The argument seems to be that God changed me and how do we know God changed me because I am changed. But in all that we can miss God. We forget that God sent his only Son and that his Son was crucified and then rose again. He did all of this to put us right with God. Yes, we are changed, but we are changed because of God and what God has done.

Today is Trinity Sunday. As you have probably heard me say the reason today is Trinity Sunday is because it is the point on the Church calendar when all of the ingredients for the Trinity have been introduced. God the Father shows up at the beginning of Advent, God the Son on Christmas and the Holy Spirit showed up last week on Pentecost. And I think one of the reasons we get this passage from John is to spend some time in contemplation of the breadth and mystery of what God has done and is doing. It is a chance for us to think about God in his totality and to be grateful for his love. The passage from John ends with the very famous phrase of, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

We can speak of being born again and not be tacky because we can speak of it in the context of God’s wonderful and marvelous love. We can use this phrase to put our focus where it belongs on God who sent his Son to save us. If we can be thankful for the scientists who came up with the Covid vaccine then how thankful should we be for God saving us from sin and death. That is the exciting news on Trinity Sunday and every Sunday so that we may be his this day and forevermore.