

## March 10th sermon - Rev Jo Smith

### Opening Prayer

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, open our hearts and minds as we explore Your Word and its implications in our life together. May Your Spirit guide us into all truth, helping us to grasp the width, length, height, and depth of Your love. Amen.

How often do you invite others to church? Your friends, family, kids?  
Or do prefer to keep the spiritual part of your life in the prison of privacy I spoke of the other week? Its what the world wants us to do, that's for sure.

Perhaps there is another reason why

If you come faithfully week in and week out and yet it does nothing for you, if it doesn't change you or your life in any way; if its just something you sit through out of habit, of course you don't want your friends and family to endure the same. But if the church is helping you mature spiritually, to live better and more integrated lives, to know the peace that passes all understanding, then of course that is what you would want for your friends and family. Nobody would have to persuade you to invite your friends and family to church. You would do it because you would want to share the peace and the joy that it brings you. What is more, your obviously transformed life would make others want what you have too!

As Rick Warren wrote in *The Purpose Driven Church*

"A church full of genuinely changed people attracts others. If you study healthy churches you'll discover that when God finds a church that is doing a quality job of winning, nurturing, equipping, and sending out believers, he sends that church plenty of raw material. On the other hand, why would God send a lot of prospects to a church that doesn't know what to do with them? In any church where lives are being changed, marriages are being saved, and love is flowing freely, you'll have to lock the doors to keep people from attending. People are attracted to churches with quality worship, preaching, ministry, and fellowship. Quality attracts quantity. Every pastor needs to ask a very tough question: If most of our members never invite anyone to come to our church, what are they saying (by their actions) about the quality of what our church offers? " (Rick Warren, Purpose Driven Church p55)

Tough question indeed!!

When Rick Warren wrote about the quality of what we offer, he had in mind something a whole lot more profound than just a little tinkering with the presentation of the Sunday services. Its got a whole lot more to do with our understanding of conversion....what we think that coming to Christ means and how we think that happens. That's what we'll be looking at in today's sermon.

The classic way of understanding conversion is influenced by the best known and most dramatic conversions. Think Paul on the Damascus Road or St Augustine hearing a voice in the garden telling him to “take up and read,” immediately picking up a copy of the Letters of Paul and experiencing a dramatic change of heart. Stories such as these have been handed down from generation to generation and have shaped our understanding of conversion. The New Testament also uses language that definitely suggests a sudden and dramatic change. The imagery used to describe the difference between being Christian and not being Christian is very stark. Death to life, darkness to light, being born again. You are either one thing or the other. Not halfway between. This is true. But it is a shame to limit our understanding of conversion to a once off, instantaneous event. For a couple of reasons. Firstly, because as real and powerful as dramatic and instantaneous conversion experiences are, they are not the way that most people experience coming to faith. Many, perhaps most Christians struggle to identify “the moment” when they turned to Christ and many, perhaps most of us experience our faith journey as a gradual deepening of our faith, commitment and understanding as we are “filled with all the fullness of God.”

How then can we reconcile the biblical imagery that draws a sharp line between being a Christian and not being a Christian, being born again as Jesus explains to Nicodemus; and the gradual way which the transition is often experienced, and the ongoing need for conversion, transformation and renewal in every Christian’s journey, which is what Paul prays for us in Ephesians?

I don’t usually like to get too technical in my sermons but for today, I think it might help if we understand that conversion includes two concepts which need to be understood separately and held together: Regeneration which is the stark change from spiritual death to life - from being outside of Christ to being in him. Being born again. Transformation is a gradual process that can begin long before a person consciously becomes a Christian, and continues afterwards as they increasingly bear the image of Christ, living a life that is increasingly shaped by Christ under God’s rule.

Both are vital. If we have no concept of immediate regeneration, then we can end up thinking that there is no real difference between being a Christian and not being a Christian, no sense of the radical change that God can make in people’s lives when they open themselves to the life giving power of the Spirit. We may limit our sense, our assurance that we ARE Christ’s....ONCE AND FOR ALL.

On the other hand, if we do not value the concept of gradual and ongoing transformation then we are failing to obey the command of the New Testament to become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4)

In *The Provocative Church*, Graham Tomlin refers to Nicodemus’ encounter with Jesus that we read today and how Jesus explains that seeing the kingdom of God is like being born again. He describes how as first time parents he and his wife focused on the pregnancy, on the prospect of labour and birth. When their son finally arrived, they realised that this was not the end of the process....but the beginning. New life had come into the world that now needed feeding and nurturing and enjoying.

A new spiritual life is the same. There will be a crisis moment when we are born again, but it comes after a process of preparation and it is a stage (a critical one) in a much longer process of growth and new life beyond it.

We tend to think of ourselves as the converted and those who are not yet Christians as the ones who need conversion.....but our conversion never ends and our need for ongoing transformation never goes away.

Long term Christians, cradle Anglicans even, can easily stagnate spiritually when we don't recognise this need and nurture our spiritual growth.

Many people have left the church in our generation because they no longer see that the church has anything relevant to say about their lives. We can change this by taking the issue of transformation seriously. We can change this if we keep in mind the goal of the transformation of individuals and communities, in the real practical details of life, so that people learn how to live well and in a distinctively Christian way in their family, work and friendships, not just in church. When we think about bringing others to Christ, we need to keep in mind the long-term goal of producing transformed people, lifelong apprentices of Jesus Christ in the art of living well.

When the personal and spiritual growth of those who are already Christians is high on the agenda, a church will begin to be more effective in reaching others for Christ. A church in which people continue to experience ongoing transformation, where people are living more spiritually mature, integrated and authentic lives, will provoke others to wonder what it is we have....and want some for themselves.

In churches where people experience transformation, where the worship is energizing, the teaching wise and insightful, the sense of community genuine, I would imagine that you would want to bring your friends and family. Because deep down we long to learn generosity, kindness and love, to find those things is a precious gift. And if you find a place that can teach them to you, then you want your friends to have a piece of it too. In order to be fully human, we need, as Jesus himself put it, to learn to be poor in spirit, meek, hungry for justice, merciful, pure, peaceful and to suffer for other people's sake. The place to learn these things is in the kingdom of God. And when the Church begins to be like that kingdom, it begins to be immensely attractive. In other words, where Christians can experience what it means to have their lives increasingly brought under God's rule in Christ, then they will naturally want others to find the same reality for themselves. And others, when they see it will find it immensely attractive and appealing. A church that transforms people in real authentic, life giving ways is naturally an evangelizing church.

That is our goal when we speak of growing faith as part of our mission action plan...we are not only talking about more people coming to faith. The growth we are looking for is not just in numbers but also our own growth in faith as Paul prays for us : *that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. (Ephesians 3.16–19)*