



TO TAKE IT FURTHER

The breakthrough moment

Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.
(John 3:6)

Read

John 3:1-8

Bertie worked and worked at the technical tools to control his stammer, but it was not enough. Lionel Logue knew it would not be. Right from the start, when he tried to get Bertie to talk about his earliest memories, he knew that something deeper inside would need to be unlocked. Since Bertie would only come on his own terms: ‘Strictly business. No personal nonsense’, Logue agreed. He worked with what he had – and he waited. Gradually he gained Bertie’s trust until the moment came when he would begin to unburden himself. It came after the old king’s death – perhaps the first time when Bertie could even acknowledge to himself the depths of his childhood pain. That scene was a first in another profound way: the first time Bertie could allow himself to have a friend. ‘What are friends for?’ asks Logue. ‘I wouldn’t know,’ answers Bertie.

I talked in the preceding chapter about the need for hard work and perseverance, but I knew as I did so, that it would not be quite enough. Whatever the task before you, sometimes all the hard work in the world simply can’t carry you through. You may learn the craft, practice your skills, push yourself as hard as you can, strive and struggle, travail and toil – and still that indefinable spark is missing. It is at times like these that you acknowledge the wisdom of Thomas Edison’s formula for

genius: '99% perspiration and 1% inspiration.'⁵

But how can we find the inspiration and when does it occur?

As I thought about this, I was reminded of the episode in the gospel where Nicodemus comes to see Jesus by night. As a member of the Jewish ruling council, Nicodemus was one of the religious elite. To get to that position, he must have studied long and hard and laboured diligently to prove himself. Now he had got to the top, and you'd think that would have been enough. But the fact that he came so secretly to see Jesus, implies that it wasn't. Whatever Nicodemus' overt reason for the meeting, Jesus' strange response suggests that he sensed the need beneath.

This passage is very often used for its evangelistic potential: 'You must be born again', 'For God so loved the world ...' etc., and so the rather strange remark in verse 6 about flesh and spirit is often overlooked. I think it must be Jesus' version of perspiration versus inspiration. He is trying to tell Nicodemus that what his religious efforts produced were religious results. They would not result in the spiritual breakthrough he craved.

Whether Nicodemus found the spiritual new birth he needed is not recorded. His only other appearance in the gospel record is another secretive excursion, when after the death of Jesus, he went with Joseph of Arimathea to reclaim the body, taking costly perfumes with which to embalm it. The fact that he does not appear thereafter suggests that his spiritual yearnings remained hidden and unfulfilled. Perhaps he, like Bertie, would have 'None of this personal nonsense'. Perhaps he remained locked inside his public persona, unable to turn his back on his religious security and unable to break through.

Someone who did discover such a breakthrough, with powerful results, was John Wesley. Wesley was a determined and very religious young man. While studying in Oxford he became a founder member of something called the Holy Club. Its activities included religious exercises, studying mystical writers, visiting the poor and prisoners ,and fasting twice weekly. At that point he could have taken up a safe Anglican parish and continued in the same vein, but it was not enough.

He decided to respond to a call to go to the new American colony of Georgia to evangelise the primitive Indians. Wesley soon gave up his attempt with the Native Americans however, to work among the colonists themselves. Basically he made a big mess of it. It was all to do with courting a woman and then breaking it off. After her understandable fits of pique at his vacillations, he refused her communion. She and her new husband then indicted him for ecclesiastical irregularities. In the end he quit the colony – essentially a fugitive from justice. So much for holiness!

But it was in his contact with some humble and primitive Moravian believers that he glimpsed something deeper. He had shared the outward voyage to Georgia with some of them and been impressed by their calm in a terrifying storm. Back in London, he sought out one of their leaders and weary and ashamed went to him for counsel. It was soon after this at a Moravian meeting that the breakthrough occurred – the famous moment when he described himself as having been ‘strangely warmed’. Quite what happened is hard to define – as all spiritual breakthroughs tend to be – but clearly ‘the Spirit had given birth to spirit’. Wesley went on to be responsible for the Methodist revival, the greatest spiritual awakening in English history, one that transformed society and is credited by some historians as staving off the sort of bloody revolution that occurred in France.

The wind of the spirit, as Jesus said, ‘blows wherever it pleases’. Breakthrough moments are elusive, be they the big one-off, life-changing ones or the small day-by-day, task-by-task ones. We cannot command them to appear. We can, however, put the right conditions in order. They seem to come only when we have reached the end of our own efforts, when we admit, at least to ourselves, our weakness and need. But very often the most genuine admission and therefore the real breakthrough is only when we reveal our need to someone else. We may need to say very little. Nicodemus’s opening remarks were unspecific: ‘We know you are a teacher who has come from God’. Bertie’s breakthrough moment came, I think, with

the simple admission: 'I'd kill for something stronger.' Good counsellors like Jesus or Lionel Logue can pick up the signals. More importantly, so can the counsellor that God has given within us – the Holy Spirit.

Nothing comes to us in life without effort, but inspiration – the breathing into us of the life of the Spirit – awaits the moment when we acknowledge that perspiration alone is not enough.

*Lord of the long hard road,
I come to you weary
And bring you my efforts.
How foolish I am, Lord,
So often just struggling on,
Refusing to open up the personal stuff,
Refusing to reveal the roots of my weariness.
But now I am here
And I breathe deeply
Longing to inhale the fresh sweet air of your Spirit.
Come, Holy Spirit, inspire me now I pray.
Amen.*