

BORN AGAIN

Christ's Interview with Nicodemus

Reading: John 3:1-16

Our reading today from the beginning of the third chapter of John's gospel, is the record of Christ's first conversation with an individual called Nicodemus, shortly after the start of Christ's public ministry. This is the first mention of Nicodemus in scripture, but he is mentioned two more times, once supporting Jesus against the complaints of the Jews (John 7:50) and finally helping with Jesus' burial. Thus we can take it that he was impressed by this encounter with Jesus and that he became a secret supporter. Indeed, as we shall see, there are indications in the reading that he was already impressed by Jesus.

I'm going to look at our reading in some detail, so can I suggest that you turn to page [**] of your bibles and follow it there with me.

Verse 1 of our reading tells us that Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin consisted of 70 high priests, elders and scribes who were the Jewish leaders. We know this because the Sanhedrin was the Jewish ruling council referred to at the end of verse 1. A person with the name Nicodemus is referred to in non-scriptural Jewish writings. He was probably the Nicodemus of our reading today. This Nicodemus was probably related to Josephus the Jewish writer and was said to be very rich – one of the three richest men in Jerusalem. These Jewish writings speak of his daughter having a dowry of a million gold denarii. Although he was probably rich I think we can be quite sure that Nicodemus is not the rich young ruler referred to in chapter 18 of Luke's gospel.

In verse 2 of our reading we see timidity and sincerity struggling together. "He [Nicodemus] came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no-one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Nicodemus came at night – presumably so that he could meet with Jesus secretly- an indication of timidity – although it is just possible that he merely wanted a long private face to face conversation, which would have been difficult during the day given the crowds around Jesus. There is a moral for us all there. We each need to seek out Jesus and spend private time in his presence.

In the second part of verse 2 Nicodemus affirms Jesus as a Rabbi or teacher (even though Jesus was not an official graduate of the Rabbinic schools) who has come from God. There is absolutely no indication of sarcasm or insincerity here as he says: “for no-one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.” The implication is that Nicodemus has heard some of Jesus’ teachings and seen some of the signs – the miracles – Jesus performed. So Nicodemus decided to cautiously investigate. Yet behind Nicodemus’ statement in verse 2 was the question as to whether Jesus was really the Messiah. I’m sure that finding out the answer to that question was his real purpose in coming to see Jesus.

Now when I was first a Christian I always thought that Jesus was being a little bit hard on Nicodemus in the rest of this story. In verse 3 Jesus suddenly says to Nicodemus that no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again: "I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Now it seemed to me that the idea of being born again was not easy to understand. So when Jesus says to Nicodemus in verse 10 "You are Israel’s teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things?" – it always seemed to me that this was rather a harsh criticism.

Actually, a real understanding of this part of the story lies in the fact that the Greek word “anothen” translated in our bibles as “again” in verse 3 has a double meaning in Greek. It can mean “again” but it can also mean “from above” and I think that was the sense in which Jesus was using the word here. He was saying that to enter the kingdom of heaven we must be born from above, that is transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

It was Pentecost a couple of weeks ago and we know about the dramatic changes which came over the disciples then as a result of their being baptised in the Holy Spirit. Jesus is saying here that this baptism by, and rebirth in, the Holy Spirit is what every believer needs to enter the kingdom of God.

Perhaps realising that Nicodemus has not grasped his meaning from what he said in verse 3, Jesus expresses himself again slightly differently and even more clearly in terms of his intended meaning in verse 5: "Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit."

That's why Jesus berates Nicodemus so severely in verse 10 – because Nicodemus has ignored the correct spiritual meaning of what Jesus is saying and allowed himself to become confused by an alternative earthly meaning. Jesus was going behind the opening words of Nicodemus and his unspoken question as to whether Jesus was the Messiah and telling him that what he really needed to know was how to enter the kingdom of God. That's still the most relevant piece of information for us today.

I heard a modern story that reminds me of Nicodemus. In an autobiography of Billy Graham called *Just As I Am*, he tells about attending an event in Warsaw where Catholics and Protestants joined together. He says, "I sat beside a monsignor who told me about his own spiritual background."

The monsignor told Billy Graham that years before, he had been in Chicago riding a bus. He was surprised when he felt a tap him on his shoulder. When he turned, the black lady sitting behind him demanded, "Sir, have you been born again?" He looked down at his religious robes, then back at her and sputtered, "I'm a priest, Ma'am!" The lady wasn't fazed. "That's not what I asked," she boomed. "I asked, Have you been born again?"

When the priest got back to his residence he couldn't get this question

out of his mind. He said he got out his Bible and read the passage where Jesus told Nicodemus you must be born again. After reading John 3 several times with new eyes, the priest knelt and prayed a new kind of prayer.

Jesus' words in verse 5 are full of meaning. Water could represent actual physical birth, but it can also represent the water baptism of a believer – which is where the idea of being baptised by the Holy Spirit comes from – and water also represents a cleansing. Here I think it is significant that a water baptism was part of the ritual for initiating someone into the Jewish faith and in this baptism the convert would promise to renounce idolatry, to take the God of Israel for his God and to have his life conformed to the precepts of Jewish Law.

What I believe Jesus was saying to Nicodemus, and indeed to us all, here is that we need to be cleansed from sin and filled with the Holy Spirit, so as to convert us to the divine likeness, before we can enter the kingdom of God. When John the Baptist came baptising with water he made it quite clear that this would not suffice and that a baptism of the Holy Spirit would be necessary. Let me say here that I do not believe that Jesus is saying that a water baptism is a necessary condition for believers to enter the kingdom of God. There is no evidence whatsoever that any of the disciples were ever baptised for example. Thus I believe that water baptism is good and honouring to both scripture and God, but I do not believe it is necessary for entering God's kingdom.

As a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus had many advantages. If birth and religious advantages – and no doubt as a leading Pharisee, scrupulous observance of religious forms and practices – could put man into the kingdom of God, then Nicodemus could surely have claimed to be there. The sign and seal of his belonging to God was upon him. Yet, as we just saw, Jesus said to him in verse 5 "I tell you the truth, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit." Religious practice and observances are meaningless unless there is real life – and that is what

Jesus Christ came to give. Nicodemus might have known Jewish scripture from one end of the scroll to the other – but that is of no use unless we also have a relationship with God. Being born in a garage doesn't make you a car and going to church every week doesn't necessarily make you a Christian.

Jesus was saying to Nicodemus that the starting point in the Christian life is rebirth. What he was in the natural man would not enable him to enter the kingdom of God. God implants the faith we need for believing in Christ in our hearts. It is then that new life is conceived. The Holy Spirit opens up God's word to us and we begin to grow in our new life.

In verse 8 Jesus says: "The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." What Jesus is saying to Nicodemus here is that he should not judge being born again in the Spirit in terms of understanding the process, but rather judge it by its effects, its sound. When people are born again in the Spirit we see the changes that are produced and we don't need to worry about how that change has come about. In effect Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, let your relationship with God and the Spirit happen. You do not control it or command it – God does. In our relationship with God we need to trust him in and with those things we cannot fully understand. That doesn't mean that you should throw reason away – we are told to love God with all our heart AND mind.

Jesus had told Nicodemus in verse 3 that unless one is born again he cannot enter the kingdom of God. This is a general statement, not just applicable to Nicodemus, but to us all. This teaching was clearly a mystery to Nicodemus. Even after Jesus had expanded on his initial statement about being born again or from above, Nicodemus did not understand. He says in verse 9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asks the "how" question of being born again, and to this Jesus responds. Jesus' real answer is at the end of the passage, in verses 14, 15 and 16. Jesus says that he must be lifted up and that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.

Where Jesus refers to his being lifted up as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert in verse 14, he is referring back to Numbers chapter 21 verses 8 and 9. At that time whilst the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, many people were dying from snake bites. So God told Moses to put a bronze serpent on a pole elevated amongst the people, and promised that all those who looked upon this serpent when bitten would be cured. There is a direct parallel here. The bronze serpent is made to picture Christ. Christ's being lifted up refers both to his being lifted up as our example and to his crucifixion when he was lifted up on the cross and there atoned once for all for all our sins. All the sins of each and every one of us, past present and future.

We don't know whether Nicodemus was able to completely accept Christ's message at this time, but I think not. Unbelief binds the heart and mind from seeing spiritual truth and accepting the provision of salvation that God has so graciously given us in Christ. Nicodemus was a spiritual leader and teacher in his time, but he did not understand because of his unbelief.

Earnest Hemingway wrote a Short Story called "The Capital Of The World," where he tells about a father and his teenage son who lived in Spain. Their relationship became strained, and the son ran away from home. The father began a long search for his rebellious son,. He finally put an advertisement in the Madrid newspaper.

The advert simply read: "Dear Paco, meet me in front of the Madrid newspaper office tomorrow at noon. All is forgiven. I love you." Now, Paco was a common name in Spain, and Hemingway writes, the next day at noon in front of the newspaper office there were 800 Pacos --- all seeking forgiveness.

All of us need to be forgiven. In that respect, we're all named Paco. So Why doesn't everyone take advantage of God's amazing offer of grace?

Let us then turn to Christ lifted up for us on the cross, believe in him and accept him fully as our Lord and Master. Accept him as we are accepted by him. Let us repent of our sins and be born again, born from above, in the power of the Holy Spirit so that in due course we may enter the kingdom of God.

Verse 16 of our reading is one of the great verses of scripture. It tells us of God's great love and how in that love he sent his only son Jesus Christ to die for us. We see that it calls us all "whoever believes" that we may not perish, but have eternal life.

Let's just close with a few words of prayer. Jesus you call to all of us whosoever would turn and look at you and believe in you as their Lord and Master. We turn to you now and accept the sacrifice you made those 2,000 years ago on the cross for the forgiveness once and for all, once for all, for all our sins past present and future. We ask you to cleanse us with the power of the Holy Spirit in order that we may be reborn and spiritually regenerated into a new life. In Jesus' name Amen. Now I'm not a Billy Graham, so I'm not going to call you out to the front, but any of you who have been moved by what you've heard this morning might now want to turn to Jesus in prayer and ask him to cleanse you and remake you in the power of the Holy Spirit and ask him to come and live with you in your hearts from this day forward – and I'll just give you all the opportunity to do that now in a moment of silence In Jesus' name we pray Amen.