

John 3: 14-21 **Jesus and Nicodemus**

March 10th, 2024, Grenoble, 4th in Lent

readings: Numbers 21: 4-9 The bronze snake
John 3: 14-21 Jesus and Nicodemus

Preamble

It is good to be back at St Marc's, Grenoble. For those who don't know, I am a retired vicar from Edinburgh. Before retirement I was from 2000 to 2013 Chaplain along the road in Lyon. Susie and I spent some time here in 2019 and 20220. A generation earlier, our much-loved daughter Joanna was part of the congregation in 1997-98.

According to something I read on the Internet recently, 4 out of 10 people in the United States regard themselves as 'born again' Christians. Which is either something to give thanks for or something that might alarm you, depending on your perspective. Very worryingly the great majority of those 'born again Christians' will be voting for Donald Trump. Which raises a lot of questions.

My evangelical Christian friends would regard being 'born again' as the non-negotiable mark of a 'real Christian'. My liberal friends think of it as a rather sinister operation which starts with the surgical removal of the brain. The words '*born again*' only occur twice in the Bible, both times here in John 3. So - we need to look closely at the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, which is this morning's gospel passage.

John 3: 1-17 Nicodemus comes to Jesus

John's Gospel records: Nicodemus, a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council, comes to Jesus by night. He addresses him respectfully as '*Rabbi*', meaning '*Master*'.

Why did Nicodemus come by night ? Was it because he wanted privacy, and didn't want to be disturbed ? Or was it because he was embarrassed about seeking this meeting with a Galilean itinerant preacher, the son of a carpenter ? That he felt his position/status would be compromised ? We don't know. And it doesn't greatly matter.

Jesus completely challenges Nicodemus by telling him bluntly: "*I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.*" For Nicodemus, as an orthodox Jew and a Pharisee, and a member of the Sanhedrin, this is both cryptic and challenging. "*How can a man be born again ?*", he asks; "*Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb.*" .

But Jesus repeats his assertion. "*I tell you the truth, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.*" It is a very blunt statement. [Jesus is often more blunt with seekers than we are !] And it challenges Nicodemus' mind-set; for he, as a trained theologian, knew very well that it was only by keeping the Mosaic Law that one could *earn entry* into the Kingdom of God. That was a foundational truth in Old Testament Judaism. But Jesus makes no mention of this all important law. He speaks only of new birth.

John's Gospel suggests that Nicodemus, although no intellectual slouch, has trouble understanding Jesus' words (v.4 and v.9). But the encounter, and Jesus' injunction, must clearly have had some effect on him because, when Nicodemus reappears in Scripture in John 19: 38-42, it is as the collaborator with Joseph of Arimathea; when the two men come after the crucifixion, and with

Pilate's approval take the body of Jesus away for burial in the tomb in the garden. The leading Pharisee has apparently become a secret follower, a disciple of Jesus. One could say that Nicodemus has himself been "*born again*" by the encounter.

What did Jesus mean by the words '*born again*' ?

What Jesus seems to imply is that what is required is a wholly new start, a re-birth. The kind of new start that Abram makes when, prompted by God, he leaves the familiar surroundings of Ur, to set off to an unknown country to which God is calling him.

This re-birth involves both water and the Holy Spirit. For Nicodemus water refers to the baptism of John; a baptism of repentance, to mark the washing away of sin. Something offensive to a Pharisee, who would have believed that circumcision was a guarantee of moral and ceremonial purity. So for him, this is a new and challenging concept.

But this washing/cleansing ceremony is not by itself sufficient. For Jesus insists also on being born again *of the Spirit*. The Spirit which blows invisibly like the wind and guides our our decision-making. The Spirit which (v.8) blows and guides people where it pleases.

This cryptic injunction is amplified a little further on in vv.16-21. This new way of living is directly linked to the relationship with Jesus, with God the Son. Salvation through keeping the law, the way of the Old Covenant, is doomed to failure. So Jesus, the Son is (v.16) God's chosen instrument for reconciling a sinful world to himself. "*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life*".

But it is not only about belief. God brings light into a murky and sinful world. Those who love evil (v.20) will prefer to live in the shadows. But those who turn to Jesus Christ will want to walk in the light of Christ and to model their life on his. As Paul explains in Ephesians 2.

More than baptism

For Roman Catholics and perhaps some Anglicans, being born again of water and the Spirit is a clear reference to our own Christian baptism. For as we say in our own baptismal liturgy, "*We thank you, father, for the water of baptism ... through it we are reborn by the Holy Spirit.*" But John Stott, the respected Evangelical Anglican of his generation, insisted that baptism, important though it is, must not be confused with the kind of new birth that Jesus presents to Nicodemus. Stott insists: "*the new birth is a deep, inward, radical change, worked by the Holy Spirit in the inner recesses of the human personality.*" Baptism is a sign of new birth, but it does not operate mechanically to effect what it signifies. If we confuse the ceremony of baptism with the life-changing regeneration of which Jesus spoke to Nicodemus, then we risk colluding in a form of nominal Christianity in which parents might imagine that "*getting the children done*" discharges their spiritual responsibilities as parents !

Into prayer

I know that a good number of children were baptised here by Nick in the past couple of years. We give thanks for that commitment. And so, I pray for them, and for each us:

- * that we may want to come out of the darkness of this world
- * that we will want to live our lives in the light of Christ
- * that we will look up to Christ on the Cross
- * and that we may know for ourselves the reality of Jesus's love and his salvation

Amen.