

SCRIPTURE

John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus by night and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.' ³ Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'

⁴ Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' ⁵ Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." ⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'

⁹ Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' ¹⁰ Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

¹¹ 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

¹⁶ '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.

¹⁷ 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

MESSAGE – HUMBLY ASK

Our Gospel this morning is about Nicodemus – a Pharisee – one of the respected elders of his culture. This is our first introduction to Nicodemus in John's gospel. Nicodemus was a good guy; we like Nicodemus. Nicodemus came to Jesus when the other religious leaders would not. He confessed to Jesus 'I know that you are of God, because no-one could do the things you do without God.'

Later on we will read of Nicodemus defending Jesus before the Sanhedrin, the religious ruling council, and Nicodemus appears once more in this same gospel together with Joseph; together these two removed Jesus' corpse from the cross and laid it to rest in the tomb.

Nicodemus was a friend to Jesus. He wanted to learn from him, which is why he sought him out in the middle of the night.

When Nicodemus arrived, Jesus wasted no time in idle chit-chat. Straight away Jesus said 'No one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born anew – born from above.'

This completely threw Nicodemus; he had no response. Nicodemus thought to himself 'I understand these words Jesus is saying, but what on earth can he mean? Being born again? This makes no sense.'

And Nicodemus was completely right. By worldly standards what Jesus said is completely incomprehensible.

St Paul wrote 'The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,' that is, those of the world.

And by all accounts, Nicodemus, despite his desire to learn from Jesus, was still at this point a very worldly man. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council. He was politically savvy.

He was wealthy. Nicodemus had the means to come up with one hundred pounds of embalming ointments and a very unusual one-piece burial linen for Jesus that was worth fighting and gambling over. Certainly he was wise in the ways of the marketplace.

And finally, Nicodemus was a Rabbi. As such he would have received much of his social standing by publicly debating the finer points of the law and the prophets – in fact we see him doing just that in chapter 6 of John’s gospel.

So we see that Nicodemus was indeed wise in the ways of the world, and he tried to use this wisdom to figure out what Jesus said to him about being born anew. And his worldly wisdom completely failed him.

‘How?’ He asked. ‘How can one be born again – surely we don’t go back into the womb? That’s silly. So what could this mean?’

Jesus chided him a little bit, saying ‘How can you call yourself a teacher,’ remember Rabbi means teacher, ‘how can you call yourself a teacher and not understand these things?’

This question seems like an inconsequential aside - Jesus putting Nicodemus gently into his place – but what if we were to put ourselves in Nicodemus’ sandals? Would we do any better?

Most of us are fairly wise in the ways of the world; we’re living reasonably comfortably, staying out of trouble, coming to church regularly. Can we answer the question?

Jesus made a distinction between being born of water and being born of the Spirit. What does it mean to be born of the Spirit?

This isn’t an idle theological question. Jesus said that our place in the kingdom of God depends on being born in the Spirit.

If we can’t answer this question, then we have cause for concern. The kingdom of God isn’t just some abstract notion of heaven or an afterlife. Jesus said the kingdom of God is among us; it’s like yeast spread throughout our culture – present, growing, changing the very nature of our society.

In fact, God has chosen to grow his kingdom through his church, through Spirit filled believers. That’s us. Therefore, spiritual birth has more significance than

simply determining our own individual salvation. Our spiritual birth has an effect on our families, our neighbourhoods, and creation itself.

So, with Nicodemus we ask 'What, Jesus, are you talking about? How can one be born a second time? What is this Spiritual birth that you speak of?'

St Paul spent quite a bit of time writing about the effects of being born of the spirit. He wrote that after being born of the Spirit we will:

- Walk according to the Spirit (8:2-4).
- Set our minds on the things of the Spirit (8:5-8).
- Put to death the deeds of the body by the Spirit (8:13).
- Be led by the Spirit (8:14).
- Know the Fatherhood of God by the Spirit (8:15-17).
- Hope in the Spirit (8:23-25).
- Pray in the Spirit (8:26-27).
- Serve in the Spirit (Rom 7:6; 15:16).
- Love by the Spirit (Rom 15:30; Gal 5:22-23; Col 1:8).

That list is an entire year's worth of sermons – but let's just look at the first point.

If we are filled with the Spirit then we will walk according to the Spirit. To walk in the Spirit is to be "in step" with the Spirit. To walk alongside someone suggests much more than a common destination. When we walk alongside each other we 'do life' together.

We eat together, move together, laugh together, and cry together. Walking in or with the Spirit involves embracing the mind and heart of Christ, and following his lead.

When we are not in step with the Spirit we are controlled by the flesh – that is churchspeak for saying that without God we live only to satisfy our own desires - good food, good drink, a nice car to impress our friends and family.

But, as we well know, living a life of self-satisfaction is far from satisfying. Whatever our desire or our escape – tv., exercise, drugs or drink, love from others – it doesn't matter if our desire is for a good thing or a bad thing – ultimately we

become desensitized. We need more and more of that thing to satiate ourselves and the deeper we go the further satisfaction recedes. We never achieve the satisfaction that we so desperately pursue.

This is why Paul writes 'To set the mind on the flesh is death,' because this path can only lead to emptiness and void. We're quite simply chasing ever diminishing returns.

But, Paul writes, to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. This is the result of being born of the Spirit as Jesus said we must do.

When we are born of the Spirit we participate in building God's kingdom, which is eternal and has lasting value. It's a life worth living. Not only for the end result of heaven after death, though that is said to be beyond our wildest imaginings, but it's a life that, in the present, is joy filled and empowered.

Life in the Spirit is living in God's delight; it is a freedom and a hope that makes you feel as though you could burst.

Most people don't remain in this ecstatic state constantly. We have mountaintop experiences in which that presence of God's Spirit is undeniable. Then we come back into the valley for a time. We hold the memory of that experience as we anticipate another dose of Spirit. We tend to move back and forth between the two kingdoms.

As we mature as Christians and learn to more ably keep step with the Spirit we have more experiences with the Spirit. We continue to return to this present kingdom, but somehow the valleys are less dark, less deep, we spend less time in them.

By being born of the Spirit and learning to follow the Spirit we actually realize God's kingdom on earth. Everywhere we step, we claim that space for the heavenly kingdom. This is why being born of the Spirit is not merely about life after death – eternal life is a gift for the present – not just for the future.

Now, I can go on and on about the benefits of life in the Spirit. But we're mostly a bunch of Nicodemus'. First we need the practical answer of how. How do we

become born of the Spirit? Based on Nicodemus' later actions, it seems that he was indeed born of the spirit. How did he do it?

I think the answer is pretty simple. Sometimes we want to read more into the bible than we need to; we want the elaborate and sophisticated solution, when often the truth is quite straightforward.

The answer to being born of the Spirit is that we ask Jesus. This is the whole point of the story. But notice how Nicodemus asked.

Usually when we read of encounters between Jesus and the Pharisees they take place in public – in the temple; in synagogues, marketplaces, at the city gates. There is a reason for this.

In Jesus' culture, as in ours, honor and respect were won and lost through public discourse. A challenge would be issued in the form of a question or observation, and depending on the response, status would be transferred. Reputations rose or fell based on the exchanges.

Since the ancients had no twitter or Instagram – not even newspapers or tv – all this contending had to take place in common areas where lots of people could see and spread the news of who was besting who.

So, when the religious elite asked questions of Jesus in public, it was not because they genuinely sought answers. They saw Jesus as a threat to their hegemony, and so they'd challenge him with the intent of bringing him down a peg or two.

Not so with Nicodemus. Some interpret his visit to Jesus in the middle of the night as a sign that he was afraid of what the other Pharisees would think – and there may be something to that.

But it may also be the case that Nicodemus came alone at night because he wanted an honest conversation. He wasn't seeking to one-up Jesus or prove a point. The teacher came to learn. We can see this in the way he opened the conversation 'I know that you are a teacher who has come from God. No one can do what you do without God's spirit.'

The answer to how we can be born of the Spirit is quite ordinary, really. We ask Jesus. Humbly. Quietly. On our own. No big fanfare, no agenda, no preconceived ideas. Simply, 'Jesus, what do I need to do?'

The answer will be different for each one of us. Jesus responded to the rich man and the lawyer differently when they asked him the question. Jesus will have a particular answer for you when you approach him.

Psalm 27 comes to mind.

One thing I asked of the LORD,
that will I seek after:
to live in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to behold the beauty of the LORD,
and to inquire in his temple.

Let's inquire in the Lord's temple.

Most High God.

We know to experience your eternity we need to be born again.
Like Nicodemus we don't know how to do that, but also like Nicodemus we come to you humbly to ask.

Certainly just like in our physical birth we don't do the work; it is you who labours to give us life.

But there may be things that we are holding onto that are getting in the way – habits and hangups that simply aren't helping.

Lord, make clear to us any ways in which we are obstructing or hindering your work in us. Give us wisdom to see, courage to act, and the willingness to seek you above all else so that we receive the gift of life that you are so eager to bestow.

We make this prayer through Christ our Lord.
Amen.