

Sermon Lent 2. John 3:1-17 - Reborn from above

SJP

Life changing conversations. Perhaps you can recall from your own experience a conversation that changed the direction of your life, an encounter where what passed between you and the other person altered everything. It would be fascinating to hear some of the stories you could tell.

All through this Lent, our Gospel readings recount life-changing conversations people had with Jesus. Last Sunday Jesus had that encounter with Satan (Matt 5). Next week Jesus speaks with the woman at the well (John 4); the week after, with the man born blind (John 9), and finally on the last Sunday in lent Jesus speaks with Mary and Martha and even with their dead man, brother, Lazarus (John 11).

Today's Gospel recounts Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus. We are going to look at what happens here, but first, who is this man? It's important to understand this because it underlies so much of what happens in the exchange between them. He was a scholar of the OT scriptures, especially the Torah; very importantly, he was a pharisee, that strict Jewish sect we hear so much about in the Gospels. They were serious about God and dedicated obeying his law in every detail. They believed the holy nation of Israel had to be pure: you had to belong to the family, to be born into the bloodline, and that righteous Jews had to stay away from the corrupting influence of the gentiles, the other ethnic groups in order to be God's set apart chosen covenant people. So, as you see they had their religion all sorted out and locked down; God in his place and other people in their place and themselves in pride of place. As you know Jesus criticises them severely for this in his teaching.

And Nicodemus is not just *in* this pharisee community – he is a leader (ruler); he is a member of the Sanhedrin (John tells us in chapter 7), the Jewish council who oversaw religious and civil matters in Judea. So he is a very powerful and well-connected individual in the Jewish religious world of Jerusalem....

...which makes it all the more intriguing that we find him here, meeting with Jesus (who even at this early stage of his ministry has become an *opponent* of the pharisees). And what's more, he comes to Jesus at night, under cover of darkness, so he won't be seen consorting with him. Very shady. So we know from the secrecy here that something out of the ordinary is going on.

The conversation that follows is very revealing, although it is not all that easy to follow, because of the deep unspoken connections that lie underneath the words that Jesus especially says here.

It opens with Nicodemus buttering Jesus up, perhaps even trying to schmooze him: 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent from God'. Now remember who it is that is saying this – one who is a highly respected rabbi himself, here recognising Jesus as one who is also a legitimate teacher, 'sent from God'. This is an old negotiator's tactic – capture your audience at the beginning with praise, establish a rapport, make the person feel respected. In so doing, Nicodemus is attempting to set the terms for the conversation here: he wants to define how Jesus fits into the picture in relation to himself so that he can approach Jesus on *his* terms, and importantly on the same level – two respected rabbis meeting to sort things out. Because, as you can probably see already, he wants something from Jesus but he wants it *his* way – in a way that won't threaten or upset his life, won't disturb the peace in Judea, disrupt the spiritual security or his status and position; that is why he has come in secret.

But this opening line doesn't work. This is Jesus he is talking to, who sees into men's heart. And he is not playing the game. He cuts across Nicodemus, ignores his open gambit and changes the subject, and none too subtly sets the terms of the conversation himself. He gets right to the point immediately: '*Nicodemus, truly truly I say to you, unless one is reborn from above he cannot see the kingdom of God*'.

It's no good Nicodemus – you can't have what I am giving on your terms. The kingdom of God I am bringing won't fit into the religious framework that you pharisees have all set up and that you want to keep intact. You need to start again. You need a completely new beginning.

Born again says Jesus: not born from a human body, according to Jewish custom and law as a blood descendent of Abraham, a member of the nation of Israel according to the flesh, but born again, or as the Greek really says, 'reborn from above', from heaven in other words, 'by water and the Spirit' Jesus goes on to explain in verse 6, referring to the rebirth of Holy baptism. Jesus is telling Nicodemus 'you have to let go of everything you are clinging to (your pure Jewish birth, your status, you control over your own life and those of others, your trust in keeping the law) and become someone, something completely new. It is not going to be simple or easy and convenient. It is going to be costly and painful'. But it is the only way.

Sadly, at this point Nicodemus is not able to receive Jesus testimony. It is too hard. He dismisses Jesus' words, not understanding them or perhaps *choosing* not to understand them (you know how we do that sometimes?).

But Jesus does not give up. He says ‘You are a spiritual teacher Nicodemus, a rabbi. Don’t you realise that I am telling you the truth here, about this rebirth in the Spirit?’. He goes on: ‘Nicodemus, if you do not understand that, how can you ever understand where this new birth comes from, what this kingdom is all about? People can only be reborn from above one way – through him who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. Nicodemus, you know the Scriptures - remember that snake that Moses put up on the pole in the desert, so that the Israelites who had been bitten by snakes could look at it and be saved, well now there is a greater, deeper, bigger salvation – the Son of Man will be lifted up, on a cross, so that whoever believes in him may have *eternal* life. This rebirth from above, this new life God is offering you, is in and through this crucified Son of man. Jesus goes on preaching the Gospel to him as we read in in verses 16 and 17, but at this point in the conversation, we don’t know what Nicodemus is thinking. He has gone quiet, and we hear no more from him.

We don’t know exactly where Nicodemus’ went spiritually after this. It seems clear that he does not receive Jesus’ teaching *here* in faith. Not everybody in the Gospels who meets with Jesus comes to faith of course. You might recall the rich young ruler in Mark 10:21-22. He wanted Jesus on his own terms too, and finally he walks away from Jesus because he cannot let go of his wealth.

Yet it is also evident that Nicodemus was nevertheless impacted by Jesus encounter with him. He appears twice more in John’s Gospel, in chapter 7 where he reminds his colleagues in the Jewish council that Jesus must actually be proved guilty before he is judged and then again in chapter 19, where he is one who helps prepare Jesus’ body for burial, almost as if he is one of Jesus followers.

This conversation, on which we have been eaves-dropping this morning brings us first a disturbing *call to repent* and then a comforting *gift of grace*.

I wonder if the struggle of Nicodemus in this story might have felt familiar to you. We are after all, everyone of us, sin-enslaved human beings like him. It is in our fallen nature too that we want what Jesus is offering, but on *our* own terms. We want to go on in life pleasing ourselves and doing it our own way, that suits us, but have the kingdom of God as well. We don’t want Jesus upsetting the balance of things, making us look at ourselves so that we see our sin and our stubborn rebellion against God’s will. We can easily start to think like Nicodemus. We have our faith and our church and our God. We have it all locked down, sorted out and under our control.

I am aware that I am speaking to people who have, like me, mostly already been born again from above of water and the Spirit (probably as infants) in holy

Baptism, and have received what Jesus offered to Nicodemus. So the heavenly blessings of life, forgiveness and salvation are already ours.

But remember that baptism is not just a one-of event in our past. It is an ongoing state, a life to be lived. We do not receive it on our terms, but on God's terms. The Spirit of God blows where he wills, not where we will. That, says Jesus, is how it is with all who are born of the Spirit. We are not in charge and in control any longer, but under the Holy Spirit's calling and recreating direction. Being reborn from above – we have become and are still becoming completely new, not just once but continually. As Luther teaches in the Small Catechism, *baptism means that the old Adam (our old sinful nature) must by daily repentance be drowned, and die along with sins and evil desires, and that a new person should daily come forth (be reborn) to live before God in righteousness and purity.*

God calls us to daily baptismal repentance to be born again from above, to kneel down and confess our sins to him and receive his forgiveness, so that we can live a new life of faith and love.

But hear also the gift of grace. Like the serpent Moses raised in the desert, Jesus the Son of man has been lifted up for us, on the cross. This is where our eyes are looking during this Lenten season, at him, the lamb of God slain for us. Jesus preaches this powerfully and simply at the end of this Gospel reading, in that verse we know so well, verse 16: *God so loved the world that he gave his only son, so that everybody who believes in him, will not perish but have eternal life.*

We can be absolutely confident of those words. God so loved. God so loved Nicodemus that he sent his Son to call him to repentance and faith. He so loved and loves you that he gave his only Son to die in your place, to win forgiveness and eternal life for you, so that you could be 'reborn from above' and become a child of God.