



From darkness to light

John 3:1-17

The third chapter of John's Gospel has to be one of the most familiar in the New Testament and possibly among the most treasured for many Christian people. It is in John 3 that we are presented with the well-known encounter of Nicodemus with Jesus, as well as the declaration of God loving all the world. In John's Gospel the familiar phrase "the kingdom of God" is found only twice and both in this passage (v.v. 3 and 5)

The theme of light and darkness is a powerful one throughout the whole of John's Gospel and when Nicodemus, a member of the powerful Sanhedrin, came to Jesus at night this theme is easily recognised. It is of course a passage that is unique to John's Gospel.

He comes by night so as not to be noticed by his colleagues and friends, for he has issues he wishes to explore. The dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus is not merely a personal encounter; it is a description of the new life that God gives us through his Spirit.

Let us put John 3 into its gospel setting. In the previous chapter, Jesus has made a clear statement about himself in relation to the proud religious heritage of Israel:

- God's kingdom is transformative, like the dull water of religion which becomes sparkling wine
- God's kingdom is radical in nature and is prepared to confront and overturn the tables of false religion

Against that background, Nicodemus is introduced to us as one seeking the enlightenment of God and yet under the cover of darkness. As we shall discover, he came to find out who Jesus was but ended up being told what he needed to become.

Eternal life is not something we possess by nature and Jesus is not going to let Nicodemus avoid the impermanence of his humanity and his religion.

It is clear that Nicodemus is in the dark about who Jesus is. He was also in the dark about the nature of spiritual reality and his experience has been understood by countless people down the years.

"Jesus replied, 'Very truly I tell you, no-one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.'" (John 3:3)

It used to be a favourite text for wayside pulpits or hoardings, but I have wondered why. Even Nicodemus, to whom the words are addressed, is puzzled by the statement, so how a passer-by will pick it up easily I don't know.

However, I do know that the power of knowing God gives us a new beginning and is so thrilling to people who have experienced it that they want tell the whole world about it.

It was William James in his classical book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, who distinguished between the once born and the twice born believer. His purpose in that book was to draw attention to the fact that some Christians experienced their faith as a



process of growth over the whole span of their lives, while others undergo a sudden, what we might call dramatic change.

The book is helpful but it doesn't quite work in relation to Nicodemus because he may well have been brought up all his life in the search for God's way and certainly he would be well-versed in the formal patterns of religion.

Jesus Christ appealed to Nicodemus' heart and will; he is dealing with someone who represented the very world that Jesus came to change, to transform and to which he would ultimately bring a new source of life and power.

It was Professor A M Hunter who drew attention to the link between the encounter of Jesus with Nicodemus and also, in the following chapter, with the Samaritan woman. I found some of his words helpful when we consider this passage in the season of Lent. He refers to the in-breaking of the new age of the kingdom and goes on to say, "John also gives us glimpses of the struggle between the old and the new, which climaxed in the cross."

There is no doubt that the interplay between light and darkness describes the condition of Nicodemus' soul. What we don't know for sure is whether he had heard news of the ministry of Jesus, the transformation of water into wine at Cana, or more likely the turning of the tables at the temple. But we know that he wanted to know more about Jesus and what necessary changes in himself were required for him to fully understand the kingdom.

This passage is both rich in content and provocative in nature. We are not told where this took place; only that Jesus is in Jerusalem for the Passover (2:23).

The warmth of Jesus' welcome that made it possible for Nicodemus to come to him

We don't know a great deal about Nicodemus. He is not mentioned in the three other gospels. What we can conclude is that he is a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. This is referred to in John 7:50. Many writers have tried to pin down the nature of this man, about whose character we actually know very little.

I prefer to understand his character through his two later appearances in John's Gospel, which show his remarkable courage:

- In John 7:50-51 it is Nicodemus who speaks up and questions in the difficult setting of the rulers and the Pharisees
- In John 19:38-40 Nicodemus is seen to be around when the body of Jesus is placed in the tomb. He is even described as one who was closely involved in those difficult moments. Again we notice that Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night.

Nicodemus would appear to feel so at home with Jesus that he could engage in a conversation which begins with his acknowledgement of the importance of Jesus, because he calls him "Rabbi", and also the recognition that God is with Jesus (v.2).

In John's presentation of the gospel, it would appear that Nicodemus is actually a major character, even though he is not mentioned in the other gospels.



Christian thinkers have dealt differently with Nicodemus. John Calvin is very harsh, “Because Christ sees that he is wasting his time and energy in teaching this proud man, he now rebukes him.”

Matthew Henry, who might have been expected to have followed Calvin’s perspective, was much more sympathetic when he wrote, “Not many mighty and noble are called; yet some are and here was one ... this was a man of the Pharisees, bred to learning, a scholar.”

Jesus was prepared to welcome this man and what Nicodemus brought to the moment was:

- The highest of credentials because of his standing
- A willingness to risk coming to see Jesus Christ, even if it was at night
- A gentle heart and an enquiring mind

He may well have come believing that he would be able to engage in a familiar conversation, but as one writer put it, he is soon “rapidly being swept out of his depth”.

There is another point to make about Nicodemus’ enquiry of Jesus. One writer referred to Queen Victoria who once said of William Gladstone, one of her Prime Ministers, that he “addressed her like a public meeting.” There is something of that in this encounter.

The text points to God’s embracing invitation, but more significantly to his transforming power which makes new life possible for all.

For close to 30 years, I had driven a motor vehicle manually – that is with the gear stick. Of course this is normal in the United Kingdom and, apart from a number of preaching trips to the United States, this was the familiar form for me when I arrived in Australia. Now, over 11 years later, I am fully used to the automatic vehicle. You can imagine the challenge, therefore, when I go back on holiday to Britain. It is a completely different way of driving the car and just occasionally, when I reach a roundabout, passengers very quickly realise I have forgotten what I am driving!

The change that God brings is fundamental to the way we live life. Lovingly, this is what Jesus is drawing Nicodemus’ attention to.

Nicodemus will have to make a clear choice

Whatever we may conclude about the person of Nicodemus and his background, there is no question that when Jesus told him he had to be born again or anew, or perhaps best described “born from above”, he was rocked to the very foundations of his being.

The challenging words that Jesus addresses to Nicodemus make it clear that unless he is born afresh he will not be able to see the kingdom of God.

Here I need to make clear that the way I understand the strong words of Jesus is not in terms of a momentary religious experience, but a change that affects every part of his life. With this in mind, we remind ourselves that:

- Nicodemus is being invited to enter into a whole new way of life



- He is being encouraged to think deeply about what entering into this life is going to mean
- He is told that this will all come about through the power of God's working through his Spirit

To further add to a point I made earlier, "born anew" or "born again" is actually a translation of a Greek phrase which means "born from above". Some writers helpfully remind us that the adverb in Greek can mean "born from the beginning" which would also help us understand it is like our life beginning all over again.

Nicodemus was familiar with thought about the kingdom that would come at the end of history, but Jesus challenges him in such a way that suggests that this kingdom is to happen now.

John 3 is our equivalent of the most familiar music, well known film or huge personality. Sooner or later we have to deal with it. The language of being "born again" and the power of John 3:16 are classical and are found on the staple highway of our faith journey. The truth we find here is begging to be seen and heard in our own context.

One famous preacher gives Jesus an impatient tone as he speaks these words. I prefer to acknowledge that Nicodemus has a difficult choice to make but:

- It is possible to begin life all over again, even for Nicodemus
- The Samaritan woman in the next chapter is so much further on (4:39)
- We can conclude that he left the presence of Jesus (v.v.9-10)

Eleanor Roosevelt, in her wisdom, said, "One's philosophy is not best expressed in words; it is expressed in the choices one makes. In the long run, we shape our lives and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our responsibility."

Though the work of God's transformation is entirely his, it requires on our part a willingness to make the choice which invites God to guide, direct and fill our lives with his purpose.

Nicodemus articulates the problem for all of us

The visitor to Jesus really doesn't know how a person can be born when they are old. All of us can share his dilemma in seeking to understand this thought. However, it is the regenerating work of the Spirit which makes a dynamic difference to life.

Nicodemus must feel uncomfortable, for Jesus does not offer him any middle ground. To further elaborate on the enquiry of Nicodemus, he talks of this birth using the illustrations of water and wind.

Some commentators have drawn attention to the link of water with baptism, but I don't think we must stop there – for water also refers to the refreshing water of God's Spirit.

- It is a water which brings cleansing
- It is a water which restores and renews
- It speaks of refreshment



We have experienced a very hot summer here in Sydney, Australia, and sensible people have carried their bottles of water, for there is nothing that refreshes more than cold water.

Jesus also uses the illustration of wind, which we are not able to fully control, harness or predict. When I watch the weather forecast I have come to understand how important are the prevailing winds and those that change so quickly and can bring devastation.

Being a member or worshipper of a regular Protestant mainline denomination is not exactly trendy and, though people may come to church occasionally, many of the people we meet are like Nicodemus in their wider life. Are you one of those people?

- You have faith, sometimes deep faith
- Yet you are spiritually curious
- You keep faith in its own sphere

Our cultural context often pushes religion into the private sphere; consider it highly appropriate for private and family morality, but inappropriate for public consumption.

Nicodemus would have been happy with the hidden confession of faith practised by so many today. Jesus suggests that Nicodemus' faith is incomplete, perhaps even immature! The invitation to rebirth is in one way nonsensical because no-one can literally be born again. In these provocative challenges, Jesus Christ dares us all to come into the light of day and be totally known for what we are meant to be.

Humour varies across the world and from person to person. The text might be helping us to understand this issue through Nicodemus, for he has asked all the questions, including the thought of entering his mother's womb to be born again. We might hear the amusement in the Master's voice when he asks, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you don't understand these things?" (v.10)

- Some have concluded that there is shame in those words
- But humour is often a better motivator than shame

I have come to the conclusion that it is probably a little rabbinical irony. At that point, we can all feel we are welcome, despite our ignorance.

The discourse of Jesus reaches its climax in possibly the most famous verse in the New Testament. Having challenged Nicodemus with a new way of seeing God's purpose for his life, Jesus speaks about the self-giving love of God.

In all the great stories of new beginnings, the account of William Booth is remarkable in its content and outcome. He wrote retrospectively, "I remember as if it were but yesterday ... the rolling away from my heart of the guilty burden ... and the going forth to serve my God and my generation from that hour."