

JOHN 3:1-17
ST JAMES', 8.3.20, 11.00 am

INTRODUCTION

Don't you hate the phrase, 'born-again Christian'? I know I do! There are two reasons for my dislike. The first one is that so many people use it judgmentally. Some people describe themselves as 'born again Christians' to distinguish themselves from people who call themselves Christian, but in these people's opinion, aren't true believers. Other people, usually non-believers, use the phrase 'born-again Christian' to refer to believers they see as either fanatical, or holier-than-thou in their attitudes.

But Jesus himself told Nicodemus, *no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again* (v 3). So we need to find out what Jesus means when he says that. As we think about that, I hope that the second reason that I hate the phrase 'born-again Christian' will become clear!

YOU MUST BE BORN AGAIN

When Nicodemus goes to visit Jesus, he gets a shock! He thinks he's going to gather evidence, to assess Jesus, to try and work out who he is – whether he's just a *Rabbi, a teacher who has come from God* (v 2), or whether he's even more. Instead, Jesus very quickly starts exposing Nicodemus. He might be *Israel's teacher* (v 10), a leading theologian, with all the right qualifications, and a reputation to match – but he hasn't grasped something which should be self-evident to someone who

knows the OT Scriptures: he hasn't grasped that *no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again* (v 3).

Nicodemus obviously doesn't understand what Jesus is talking about, and so Jesus puts the same thing slightly differently: *no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit* (v 5). For an OT scholar like Nicodemus, this should give him a clue. He'd know the passage in Ezekiel 36:25-28 where we read this:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. Then . . . you will be my people, and I will be your God.

In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus sums all this up with a new phrase: *you must be born again* (v 7). Nicodemus hasn't thought of it like this before, and he's obviously bewildered. Nicodemus could probably have echoed a great deal of what Paul says about his religious credentials: *circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.* (Philippians 3:5-6). In our day and age, we might boast, for example, that we were baptised as a baby, confirmed as a teenager, a lifelong Anglican, attending church

every Sunday, receiving Communion faithfully, and so on and so forth. Paul says of his credentials, *I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.* (Philippians 3:8-9). Jesus says simply, it doesn't matter who you are, it doesn't matter what your religious credentials, *you must be born again* (v 7).

There are various other phrases in this passage which put the same thing in different words. Jesus talks about seeing the Kingdom of God (v 3), entering the Kingdom of God (v 5), being born of the Spirit (v 8), believing in the Son of Man (v 15), and having eternal life (v 16). If you know the prologue to John's gospel, in chapter 1, you'll also realise that the same experience is described there as becoming God's child, and being born of God (1:12,13).

What Jesus is getting at is that no-one can force their way into God's kingdom. The only way to receive eternal life is through the supernatural process of rebirth, birth of God, birth from above, birth of water and spirit.

Jesus is very clear that we can't control the work of God's Spirit; it's like the wind: we can see its effects, but we can't control it or understand it. But if we want to be born again, we can invite God to work that miracle in us. Jesus says, *as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so*

the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life (vv 14-15). Jesus is talking here about his work on the cross.

What Nicodemus hadn't yet grasped, and what so many people find so offensive about the message of the gospel, is that no matter who we are, no matter how well we obey God's law, no matter how much we study God's word, we are lost and condemned in our sins. But *God so loved [us] that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life* (v 16). Believing in Jesus isn't primarily about obeying his commands – it isn't about coming to church on Sunday, it isn't about reading our Bibles, it isn't even about living a 'good' life – although those are all good things to do. But none of them do us any good unless we first acknowledge that we can only be saved through his death on the cross. We're totally and utterly dependent on Jesus for our place in his kingdom; we can do absolutely nothing to earn his favour; we simply need to accept his wonderful gift and put our faith and trust in him. That's how we come to be born again.

Going back to the passage from Ezekiel, when we're born again, God promises to give us a new heart and a new spirit, and he promises to put his spirit in us and see to it that we follow his laws and commands. We need God's Spirit to be at work in our hearts every day of our lives, because only he can transform us into people who bear his family likeness, people who love him and love one another. This is where it's important to do all those good things I mentioned just now: coming to church on Sunday, reading our Bibles regularly, trying to live a 'good'

life. These things don't earn us our place in heaven, but they do help us to be open to the work of God's Spirit in our hearts, so that he can transform those hearts into 'hearts for love alone'.

CONCLUSION

We don't know what Nicodemus was thinking when he left Jesus that night. The last we hear of him in this passage is in verse 9, when he's still incredulously asking, *How can this be?* But we do hear about Nicodemus again. In chapter 7, when the other Pharisees are trying to have Jesus arrested, Nicodemus pointedly asks: *Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?* (7:51). And in chapter 19, Nicodemus helps Joseph of Arimathea to prepare Jesus' body for burial, and to lay it in the tomb. So we can assume that Nicodemus did come to accept that the only way to enter the kingdom of God is to experience the new birth which Jesus speaks about in today's passage, that he came to believe in Jesus and so receive eternal life.

I hope it's now clear that the second reason I hate the phrase 'born-again Christian' is because it's tautology – it says the same thing twice! No-one who hasn't been born again is a Christian; no-one can become a Christian without being born again!

The question is, have you been born again? God loves you so much that he gave his only Son to be lifted up on the cross, so that you could have eternal life, so that you could enter his kingdom, so that you could receive the right to become God's child. Have you accepted that wonderful, free gift? Have you experienced the miracle of rebirth? If

you haven't, and you're ready to receive it now, I'll give you the opportunity in just a moment. If you're not ready to receive that gift just now, please don't go away and forget about it. Nicodemus obviously thought deeply about what Jesus had said to him, and came to the point where he was ready to believe. This decision is the only one which will affect your eternal destiny, so don't just put it to one side.

Let's pray:

Lord Jesus, thank you that you came into this world to be our saviour. Thank you that everyone who believes in you is born again and has eternal life. I acknowledge before you now that all my religious credentials have no bearing on my eternal destiny. Lord, I know that your death on that cross is the only reason that I can have eternal life. Please now bring me to that new birth by water and spirit, that I may become your child and enter your kingdom for ever. For your name's sake. **Amen.**