

Sermon: Born from above

“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.” (John 3:16)

Is there any other summary of the Christian faith that is so well known? The first phrase of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son”, appears on Church signs, Christmas cards, Easter cards and of course on placards at protests and rallies.

And as we’ve heard this morning, those famous words from John 3:16 come to us as part of a conversation between Jesus and the pharisee Nicodemus.

The story of Nicodemus coming to visit Jesus is very well known, the focus of it is often on the need for people to be ‘born again’ rather than on what the discussion reveals about God and, particularly about Jesus.

The Sunday school tradition is that Nicodemus wasn’t too bright. “How foolish is he to think of being ‘born over again’ or ‘born again’ in terms of a second physical birth?” we might say. Ho ho ho – we’d never say something that silly! We know better, of course: we know that Jesus isn’t talking about a physical birth.

But dismissing Nicodemus as ‘not too bright’ isn’t consistent about what we know about him. He appears three times in John’s gospel: here, where he is described as a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council; in 7:50 when he speaks in Jesus’ defence against the other Pharisees, and in 19:39 when he and Joseph of Arimathea take Jesus’ body from the cross and inter it in the tomb.

Nicodemus is quite different to most of the other followers of Jesus we encounter in the gospels – he was a pharisee, part of the religious establishment. He would have had the robes and the long fringes and all the rest of it. He represented power in Jewish society. He would have been a wealthy man.

But despite Nicodemus being rich and powerful, and despite him being a pharisee, Jesus didn’t turn away from him; just like he didn’t turn away from the woman at the well, and he didn’t turn away from the Roman centurion whose servant was sick and dying (Luke 7:1-10), nor did he turn away from the woman caught in adultery, nor from Peter who denied him, nor from the penitent thief on the cross.

And just like he doesn’t turn away today from you or me, and just like he doesn’t turn away from anyone who turns to him: no matter what they’ve done or, not matter how poor or wealthy, no matter how weak or powerful they may be.

Nicodemus was rich and powerful, and as a Pharisee, he was an educated man. The way he frames his question – “...Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God...” Indicates that he’s not hostile to Jesus. He’s come to Jesus, not to ask him trick questions like the Pharisees do at other times, but instead, to find out how this Jesus fits into the Jewish faith as he knows it.

Sometimes people make a big deal of Nicodemus coming at night; and it’s often suggested that he did so in order to keep his visit secret; but the truth is we don’t know why he came at night. It could be that he went in secret – and that would seem to be consistent with him maintaining his position in the ruling council (Ch 7) – or it could simply be that that was a time – or perhaps the only time - that he could approach Jesus privately, for a one-on-one discussion.

And they do have a one-on-one discussion: Jesus makes a series of statements, and Nicodemus asks questions arising from them, exploring what Jesus says, as he tries to come to grips with the full implications of what Jesus says.

Jesus explains “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born again”, but the Greek word which is translated as “again” can also mean “from above”, and Nicodemus responds, ignoring what it might mean to be ‘born from above’ by fixing on the ‘born again’ meaning – he asks “How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”.

And today we live in the world where Chuck Colson’s 1976 book “Born again” generally comes to mind when we read those words. Often said with a loud American accent implying a certain strand of evangelical Christianity, which stresses our response to God.

But I think we can also look at the exchange from Nicodemus’ point of view. He’s built his knowledge of the scriptures and worked his way up, but Jesus tells him he must be born again - or born from above. He’s got to completely change his understanding, and give up his position of inherited and delegated authority if he’s to respond to Jesus.

It’s fair to conclude from his later appearances in John’s gospel that that is exactly what Nicodemus did, but we should take a moment to appreciate how dramatic the change that Jesus required of Nicodemus was.

To Nicodemus and other first century Jews, their relationship with God depended on being born into the right family, a Jewish family, to be a child of Abraham. If you were a child of Abraham, then you were part of God’s chosen people. The ‘born over again’ Jesus is speaking about isn’t simply describing a spiritual birth as an addition to a physical birth, it’s describing a birth into the new family of God, in which membership doesn’t rely on physical birth, but by God’s action “from above”.

And dramatically, the new family, God’s kingdom, isn’t restricted to people descended from Abraham; it’s open to anyone.

In verse 7, Jesus says “You must be born again”, and in the original Greek the “You” is plural, so he’s not just talking about Nicodemus’s personal need: it’s a need that Jesus tells Nicodemus – and us - that all people have.

The importance of our need of God’s grace is a familiar enough concept for modern day Christians, but it was a radical departure from the teachings that Nicodemus and the whole nation of Israel were familiar with. In fact, when Nicodemus wonders how these things can be, Jesus responds with “You are Israel’s teacher,[...] and do you not understand these things?”

Nicodemus should have known – after all, he knew the scriptures, so he should have known – just as all the Pharisees and teachers of the law should have known!

As he’s talking to Nicodemus, Jesus claims he has a unique position in v13 – “No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.” he says. Jesus is the only one that can reveal heavenly things, which confirms what John says in the first chapter of his gospel (1:18) “No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.”

Jesus has come down from heaven and tells Nicodemus that it is going up that brings life. Just as Moses raised the bronze snake for the Israelites to look upon in the desert and saved them from death (Numbers 21), so Jesus being lifted up – in his crucifixion, in his resurrection and in his ascension – brings life.

Just as Jesus used the born again/born from above double meaning in verse 3, Jesus uses another double meaning in verses 14 and 15 – “so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.” Jesus must be lifted up on the cross as the sacrifice, and he must be glorified.

As Jesus sets out things here, belief in him leads to freedom from condemnation, and to life, but it follows that unbelief produces condemnation and death. Here and throughout John's gospel, the importance of the hearers response to the saving work of Christ, is stressed.

The climax of the passage, and the very heart of the gospel message is John 3:16 – “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” In that, Jesus sets out God's plan for the world's salvation. Not for its condemnation, not even for its judgement, but for its salvation.

And God's love is that of a father giving his son; there is no qualification, there was no requirement of the world to do anything to get God to do that. It is an undeserved and unreserved gift: God loves the world, he gives us his son. His only son.

You're probably familiar with the story from Genesis 22 in which God commands Abraham to “Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love...Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering...” And of course for any Jewish listeners or readers, and of course for Nicodemus, that story would have come to mind when speaking of a father sacrificing his only son. And Abraham – faithful Abraham – was about to sacrifice his son when God declared “Now I know that you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.”

We read in Genesis 22, God supplied a ram as a sacrifice in place of Isaac. But while the offering of Isaac is effectively a test of Abraham's faith, with God stepping in at the end – the offering of Jesus is a complete demonstration of God's love. And there was no way out – no escape at the end, not even when Jesus was praying in anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:42).

Just as Abraham was prepared to sacrifice his only son for love, so is God. It's a concept Christians are very familiar with, but we can lose the full appreciation of what it means through repetition.

What is it that makes someone a father? It is the fact that there is a child.

The child is the defining thing about the father. And it is that child that God gave up for us.

And the gift isn't just for us, it is for the whole world: it is not restricted by geography, or heritage, or even time. The gift is for the world, for everyone who believes in him. God doesn't require people to be descendants of Abraham to receive this gift.

We often say, as Christians, that Jesus was the sacrifice for our sins, but we don't always remember that it was God the Father, who gave up his Son in that sacrifice. God the Father who showed his love for us.

What Jesus did – what Jesus suffered – was the complete realisation of God's love for us.

So when we hear those wonderful verses, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him”, we should remember them not just as nice words of assurance, but also as a profound revelation who Jesus is and of the nature of God and God's love for us. Let's not stop, as Nicodemus had prior to that first encounter, with the thought that Jesus was merely a good teacher from God, but let's embrace the knowledge that Jesus is God the Son, who was sacrificed by God the Father.

Unconditionally. For each one of us here, and for the whole world.

Amen.