

Jesus The Saviour

John 3:1-21

Preached at 8.15 and C@10 on 7th June 2015

Intro

A man I used to work for said to me once that there was nothing that got on his nerves more than reformed smokers and born-again Christians!

After he remembered I was a Christian he went a bit red in the face and apologised.

When I became a Christian some of my friends called me 'one of those born-again Christians'. But I just thought I was a Christian.

I thought 'born-again' Christians were just those people a bit like Ned Flanders on the Simpsons that annoy the daylights out of everyone.

Do you think of yourself as a born-again Christian, or just a regular one? Or maybe neither at this stage?

Is being a born-again Christian just for the real enthusiasts?... like being a born-again fan of 80s music, or a born-again gardener, or...?

Born Again?

Here in chapter 3 Jesus meets a respected leader and teacher of God's people. And he tells him that he needs to be born again.

Born again!

If I think about our three kids, who are all now in their 20s, as those little tiny babies born in the delivery room at Greenoaks Hospital...

I was there in the delivery room when they were born... I can't imagine them being born again.

Nicodemus had come to see Jesus secretly to suss him out.

He says:

John 3:2 "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

(John's only written about one of these signs so far, but remember he says at the end of his book that there were plenty of others.)

I was talking to one of the friends I invited to church at Easter after the service and this is the kind of thing he was saying – Jesus is a great moral teacher and did some unexplainable miracles.

Nicodemus can see from what Jesus has been saying and doing that he's a teacher with God's stamp of approval on him.

But as a teacher and leader, he wants to make his own assessment of Jesus.

But before he gets to ask the first question, Jesus hits him with:

"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." (John 3:3 NIV)

...probably not the question Nicodemus had in mind – how do you get to be in the kingdom of God?

What does that even mean?

The kingdom of God is a concept that develops through the Old Testament.

From the start, God made people to live in his world under his rule – his kingship. That's the picture in Genesis 1-2.

But everyone's rejected God's rule and declared ourselves king of our own lives – starting with the first people.

Beginning with Abraham in Genesis 12, God promises to restore his world to what he created it to be – that his people will live under his rule in his place.

That takes shape as God forms the people of Israel – Abraham's descendants – and establishes his rule over them through his word.

In time he brings them to the land he promised and exercises his rule through a human king who rules according to God's word to him.

Under the reign of David and then Solomon the kingdom of God reaches its highpoint in Old Testament times.

But the age-old problem was still there. Starting with Solomon, the kings rejected God's rule and ignored his word.

And by the end of the Old Testament the prophets were reassuring any Israelites who were still listening that God hadn't gone back on his promise, despite how things looked.

So the Old Testament ends full of promise that the kingdom of God – God's people under God's rule in God's place – would yet come.

Life where everything that's wrong in this world because we refuse to live under God's rule will be put right when people stop living as if we're king because God is king.

Back to Nicodemus...

You *must* be born again if you want to see this kingdom that God's bringing, Nicodemus.

What did he think Jesus meant?

"Surely you can't mean a person would have to go through the natural birth process again to be in that kingdom."

I think he's onto something there!

But the word "again" in the original language could mean more than just 'again'.

It also carried the meaning of "from above".

If it's ridiculous to think Jesus was talking about a second natural birth, maybe he means 'born from above' – whatever that might mean.

It wasn't too much to expect Nicodemus to have got that. He was a teacher of God's people. But he just dismissed what Jesus was saying as ridiculous.

How should we understand what Jesus means?

Born from Above

What do you do when you're not sure what someone meant?

Sue and I are finding as we get older our hearing isn't quite what it used to be, and we're saying 'pardon?' more and more.

[[[example of where I've misunderstood something Sue said]]]

You don't just leave it at that, do you? You check what the person meant – especially if it's something important.

Jesus explains that he's talking about a new and different birth that you need to have to be in the kingdom of God.

You must be born of water and the spirit.

We might wonder if that's made things a whole lot clearer for Nicodemus.

It's pretty clear that Jesus expected that he, as a teacher of God's people, should have understood what he meant because he's critical of him for not getting it in v7. He shouldn't be surprised.

What Jesus was talking about was all there in the Scriptures we call the Old Testament that Nicodemus was supposed to be able to teach.

In Ezekiel 36:25, Ezekiel's prophesying what God was going to do to establish his kingdom.

"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." (Ezekiel 36:25-27 NIV)

God works through water and spirit to regenerate or give new life to people so that they'll be able to obey him from the heart – to live under his rule.

Jesus is talking about the spiritual rebirth that anyone who wants to live in God's kingdom must have.

Yes, you must be born again! You must be born from above. You must be born of water and spirit.

But you can't do that.

There's no leaf big enough for you to turn over that'll be enough of a change for you to live as God wants us to. That's just empty morality.

The problem that prevented Israel from fully experiencing the kingdom of God lives on in us – our sinfulness...

And there's nothing we can do to change that about ourselves.

We need a restart. We need to be born again.

As far as I'm aware I didn't have anything to do with my natural birth!

It's the same with the new birth that we need to be in the kingdom of God. We don't make it happen.

God makes it happen.

He *gives* us the new birth we need to come into his kingdom by cleansing us of our sin and giving us a new heart...

...a heart that loves him more than we love ourselves or anything else.

...a heart that *wants* to live under his good and loving rule.

We can't make our hearts like that.

Only God can do that.

God is spirit and only he can cause the birth of the new spirit in us that opens our eyes as newly-born people in his kingdom.

In v6 Jesus says flesh gives birth to flesh, but only spirit gives birth to spirit.

You must be born again with a new spirit that only God can give you.

In v8 Jesus tells Nicodemus that you can't see this new birth coming any more than you can see the wind coming.

I didn't see it coming on that night in 1990 when I was born again.

But like the wind, you can see the effects...

Born of The Cross

Do you know how you tell if you've been born again into the kingdom of God?

In v14-15 Jesus reminds Nicodemus of how God in his grace gave the Israelites a way out when they were attacked by a plague of deadly snakes in the desert.

He told Moses to make a bronze snake and lift it up on a pole and tell everyone that if they looked up to the snake on the pole he'd spare them from death and give life back to them.

But now he – Jesus, the Son of Man, the Son of God, the Messiah, the King God promised to send – has come from heaven to be lifted up on a cross to die, and to be raised up again and exalted as the King of God’s Kingdom.

And he says that everyone who believes in him will have eternal life.

The most obvious evidence that God has given you new birth into eternal life is that you believe in Jesus.

Everyone who’s been born to eternal life looks to Jesus on the cross and realises he is God’s gracious means of sparing us from the eternal spiritual death we deserve for our sin and giving us life as his people – his family, his sons and daughters.

God does it. If you look to Jesus like that you have eternal life.

If you don’t yet look to Jesus like that yet, listen to his words this morning and believe them, and you will be born again into eternal life.

Eternal life and the kingdom of God are the same thing... it’s God’s people who are born anew from above – born of God as John said in 1:13.

It’s people born anew to live under the kingship of the king God sent – the king who was lifted up on the cross and then raised up to the place of all authority and honour at God’s right hand in heaven – that’s Jesus.

It’s people born anew to live forever as we were meant to in the presence of God where he lives – in heaven.

And everyone who believes in Jesus has entered eternal life – the kingdom of God – already.

The kingdom of God has arrived in Jesus Christ.

While we continue to live out our days in this world we’ll still struggle against sin to live the new life we’ve been given, and we’ll make mistakes and fail every day.

We won’t enjoy the full experience of our new life until Jesus returns and brings this age to an end.

But our failures can't take away what God has given us. Nothing can.

John 3:16 is probably one of the best known verses in the Bible:

"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" (John 3:16 NIV)

God gave his Son! That's grace.

We just believe and receive new life... washed clean of our sin with a new heart that longs to obey God's Son, our king.

There's so much more to be said but we need to see that the effects of God's Spirit giving us new life will be visible now.

Firstly, as we saw in Ezekiel 36:27, our new heart will be moved to obedience.

Later in John Jesus says:

"If you love me, you will obey what I command." (John 14:15 NIV)

We'll want to do what Jesus our king commands – not because we have no choice – but because we love him.

Because we love him we'll trust him enough to do what he says – in everything we do.

But let's just concentrate here on two things he commands us...

"This is my command: Love each other." (John 15:17 NIV)

Eternal life is life where people love each other. That's a sign that God's Spirit is at work.

And I'm seeing that love for each other growing here in our church, and I'm so thankful for this sign of the new life God's given us.

I'm seeing people sharing more of their lives with one another... inviting each other into our homes... making meals for each other when we're sick... going out together... people giving gifts randomly... ladies going for lunch after church every week...

When we love and trust Jesus, it's not a burden to obey his command to love each other.

And I see people who love Jesus and are growing to love Jesus more and more all over our church. Let's keep letting God's Spirit keep our eyes on Jesus to love him more so our love for each other keeps growing...

...because we live more and more as family – as God's sons and daughters... brothers and sisters.

And finally, Jesus commands us in Matthew 28 to make disciples by bringing people to meet Jesus and teaching them to obey his commands too.

The reason's the same. We love Jesus. We know he loves us when we look to the cross.

What he wants us to do is love other people into eternal life in his kingdom.

Evangelism's never a project or a task.

If we love and obey Jesus our lives will be an open invitation to everyone we associate with to see the effects of God's Spirit in our renewed lives and to give us opportunities to introduce them to the One who's made the difference.

Again I can see this happening already in our church.

I can see God's Spirit blowing through people who are jumping on the opportunities God pops up to love people into the kingdom by introducing them to Jesus – and praying God will do in them what he's done in us... to bring them to love and trust Jesus.

...that they will be born again like us.

Friends, we're on the right track. Let's keep going in the new life God's given us – loving and obeying the King of God's Kingdom, Jesus, loving each other as family, and loving others into the family to share eternal life with us.