Nicodemus
John 3:1-16

Over the Summer we're looking at the lives of people in the gospels who had life-changing encounters with Christ. And we're starting with Nicodemus and this incredible statement by Jesus that he must be born again.

But those words 'born again', come with a whole load of baggage. At least they did for me. Because growing up in a non-Christian, middle class family in the South of England, being *born again* was not exactly something you aspired to! It was something Americans did, not the English. I mean, at best it was linked to the Billy Graham crusades, and all their emotionalism, and at worst to tele-evangelists and their financial and sexual scandals. I was even taken to a stage show called 'Born Again' which depicted born again Christians as rhinoceroses - dim, unable to think for themselves, and frankly morally aggressive. And that's the picture I had of being born again. Until it happened to me!

So, as we look at Nicodemus we're going to look at three things: the need, the means and the life-changing difference of the new birth.

The Need
Look how John describes Nicodemus: v1, 'Now there was *a man of the Pharisees* named Nicodemus.' And today Pharisees don't exactly have a good name, do they? Call someone a Pharisee and it's practically the same as calling them a religious bigot; a legalistic kill-joy.

But that wasn't Nicodemus. John tells us in v1 that he was, 'A ruler of the Jews' - a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council. And yet, he comes to Jesus and calls him v2, "Rabbi". That's a term of respect. And especially so because Nicodemus knew that Jesus had no formal academic training, and he would almost certainly have known - as others did - that the legitimacy of his birth was questionable. And yet, Nicodemus treats him as an equal.

And while other Pharisees were hostile to Jesus, Nicodemus isn't: v2, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God." So while he's not saying, 'Jesus, you are the messiah!', he recognises him as someone special. I mean, other Pharisees are going around, saying that Jesus miracles were the works of the devil, but not Nicodemus: v2, "No one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." So he wasn't just respectful, he also wasn't cynical.

And in v10, Jesus calls him, "the teacher of Israel". He's a distinguished teacher in his own right. And yet the fact that he comes to Jesus at all tells you, he knew there was stuff he could still learn. So he's teachable, not opinionated.

And yet he was a Pharisee. Which meant he believed the Bible and took his religion seriously and in all likelihood lived a highly moral life. In fact, as a member of the Sanhedrin, he's one of the 70 leading men in Israel. He's the kind of guy who would have made it on the list of the 100 most influential people of our times. And he wouldn't have been at the bottom of the list.

So, put all those together. He's a deeply religious, he believes the Bible, but no bigot. He's well respected, but is himself respectful of someone lower down the ladder socially. He's learned, but

teachable. His discerning, but no cynic. And he recognises Jesus as a good, even a unique teacher. So Nicodemus is a good guy. In some ways, he's like any of you.

And yet, there's clearly something going on under the surface, isn't there? Because if there wasn't, why come to Jesus? And so for a man who seems to have it all together, he clearly felt some kind of need for something. And let's face it: he's not the last person whose felt that. You can have everything and be a good, kind, respectful, tolerant person, and still know something's missing.

So he comes to Jesus, v2, 'By night.' And when we meet Nicodemus again in chapter 19, John reminds us of that: 'Nicodemus… who earlier had come to Jesus *by night*' (19:39). Why point that out, twice? Because in John's gospel *the night* is used as a picture for spiritual darkness. And so while Nicodemus comes *physically* at night, for all his decent humanity, for all his learning, spiritually he's still in the dark.

Which is why, most likely, he comes under the cover of darkness. In v2 he says '*we* know that you are a teacher come from God'. So he's not alone in seeing something special about Jesus. But among the Sanhedrin - among the cultural and political elite, among his colleagues and peer group, that was definitely a minority position. And it's difficult being in a minority, isn't it? When everyone else is saying and believing and living something different, it can be hard to swim against the flow. And for Nicodemus to say what he says about Jesus in the daytime, in the Sanhedrin, might cost him dearly.

So, here is a man, attracted by Jesus, but afraid of the implications. Of what others might think. And if you're not yet a Christian, or even if you are, the implications of becoming or living or identifying as a Christian might bother you, because 'what might *they* think?' - whoever *they* are.

But whatever the underlying reason Nicodemus came, it's as if Jesus sees beneath it and he goes for Nicodemus' real need. Verse 3, 'Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."' In fact, v7, 'You *must* be born again.'

Now, for a Jewish teacher like Nicodemus, to see and enter the kingdom of God at the end of the ages was the birth-right of every Jew. You just needed to be born of Abraham's seed. Every Jew got in. And Nicodemus *far* out-reaches that requirement. I mean, even if entry to the kingdom came down to an interview and selection procedure, Nicodemus would get in. His credentials are impeccable.

And yet, here is Jesus, sat opposite him, saying, 'No. If you are to see and enter God's kingdom, something far more radical must happen to you. You must be born again. You've got to become an entirely new you.'

Now think about that. If a man as good and gracious as Nicodemus can't get in based on his ethnic background, or his moral goodness, or his tolerance, or his religious principles, what hope is there for anyone? It's why, in v7, Jesus uses the plural, 'you - you all - every Pharisee, every Israelite, every person everywhere - *must* be born again.'

And that's no less revolutionary today, is it? You see, one of the mottos of our culture is, 'be yourself'. Embrace who you are. And don't let anyone guilt trip you into trying to change. It's why

Elsa from Frozen, tired of trying to be someone else, sang, 'No right, no wrong, no rules for me / *I'm free*.' Free to be me.

But Jesus message to Nicodemus, and to us, is not, 'be yourself'. It's you need to become a radically new you.

But that begs a question. Because if we all need this new birth, how does it happen?

The Means

Well, Nicodemus doesn't get it either. Verse 4, 'Nicodemus said to him, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?"' On one level, he entirely misses the point, doesn't he? 'Come on Jesus! Be born again? Start off as a new baby and live life all over again, that's's impossible!' But at another level, he's got a point, hasn't he? 'How can a man be born *when he is old*?' 'You're seriously saying I have to start over? But I'm old, my character is fixed, this is the way I am, and even if I wanted to change, I can't.' Maybe you've found yourself using just that argument, to yourself or others: this is the way I am; I can't change the way I'm wired.

But look how Jesus responds: v5, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God."

Now, when a mother's waters break, a baby really is born though water. I've seen some babies literally come surfing out. I've seen babies born through so much water that it literally fills the obstetrician's wellington boots.

But that's not what Jesus is saying. Being born of 'water and the Spirit' is the same as being born again. And just like a baby has no control over its physical birth, Jesus is saying, Nicodemus, this is not something you do. This is something from outside you. You need to be born from above, born by water and Spirit.

And Nicodemus replies, v9, "How can these things be?" To which Jesus responds, v10, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

Now, have you ever been in a situation where you *really* should have known something, but you didn't? Like you're in a meeting or a supervision, and your boss or your supervisor asks you a question and you know you should know the answer… but it rapidly becomes embarrassingly obvious you don't?

Well, that's Nicodemus. Because Jesus, the uneducated rabbi, has just exposed the educated one. And not on a minor theological detail, like how many angels can you fit on a pin-head, but on how you can enter God's kingdom. Because the fact that Jesus expects Nicodemus to know this, means Nicodemus must have access to the answer. That he's missed something crucial. And that means it must be somewhere in the Old Testament, the very book Nicodemus is supposed to be the expert in.

Well, look what God had said hundreds of years before through Ezekiel the prophet: "I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will

remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules." (Ezek 36:25-27).

Now, when your kitchen is beginning to look a bit tired, you've got two options, haven't you. You could give it a bit of a make-over. Change the cupboard doors. Maybe paint the tiles. Or, you can gut the whole thing, and start again.

And when it comes to our lives, we face something similar. Someone might look at their life and they know something needs to change and that what they need is a bit of a spiritual or moral makeover. Maybe add a bit of spirituality to my life; practice some mindfulness; be less self-critical and more positive.

But Jesus is saying, 'Yes, but that's not enough. What you need is total transformation, not reformation. You need God to cleanse you - of your sins but also of your idols - of those things other than God that you look to for your identity, or your worth, but that end up enslaving you. And you need God to do radical heart surgery on you. Not just unblock a few arteries, or change the odd leaky valve, but by his Spirit perform a heart transplant, and give you new loves and new desires. You need the power of that future kingdom of God to fast forward into your life now and make you new. In other words, you need to be born again. And only God can do that for you.

In CS Lewis' *Voyage of the Dawn Treader*, the Pevensie children are joined by their cousin, Eustace Clarence Scrubb, who is perhaps the most irritating and self-righteous boy imaginable. But on one island he leaves the rest of the party and eventually finds himself in a dragon's cave, surrounded by the dragon's hoard of jewels. And Eustace begins to imagine all he could do with this wealth, like getting his own back on everyone else, until he falls asleep on the treasure. Except, as Lewis says, 'Sleeping on a dragon's hoard with greedy, dragonish thoughts in his heart, he had become a dragon himself.' And Eustace is trapped in the body of a dragon. Until Aslan the Lion led him to a well of water and told him to undress. So he tried: "I started scratching myself and my scales began coming off all over the place." Except, he discovered that, however many scales he pealed off, he was still a dragon underneath. "Then the Lion said… "You will have to let me undress you."… 'The very first tear he made was so deep that I thought it had gone right into my heart. And when he began pulling the skin off, it hurt worse than anything I've ever felt…. He peeled the beastly stuff right off - just as I thought I'd done it myself… only they hadn't hurt - and there it was lying on the grass: only ever so much thicker, and darker, and more knobbly-looking … and there was I as smooth and soft… and smaller than I had been. Then he caught hold of me… and threw me in the water.'

And Eustace's life was transformed. But it took Aslan's radical surgery to do it. And Jesus is saying, Nicodemus, it's that radical heart surgery you, and everyone, else needs. Try and undragon yourself, and you'll never go deep enough. You need God to do it for you.

But how do you get it? How do you put yourself in a position where God can do it? Well, look what Jesus says: v14, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, *that whoever believes in him may have eternal life*."

And in response to one of Israel's numerous rebellions in the Wilderness, God sent a plague of snakes among them. And the only way they could be saved was by looking at a bronze snake that Moses held in the air on a pole - an image of the thing that was killing them. And Jesus is saying, 'like that bronze snake I too will be lifted up. And I'll become the very thing that's killing you. I'll

become the very thing that cuts you off from the life and the goodness of the kingdom.' Because as Paul says, at the cross, 'For our sake he [God] made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin' (2 Cor 5:21). And he became our sin-bearer. And he endured the punishment of God that was ours to bear. And he became accursed. So that just as the Israelites were saved by looking at that bronze serpent, so by looking at Christ, with faith, knowing 'he's doing that for me', we'll be saved. Not from the poison of snakes but the paralysing poison of sin. And when someone does that for the first time, it's because the future life of the kingdom has flooded into their hearts, and they're reborn, and they're eyes are opened, and they see and trust Jesus. As Paul says, 'If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come' (2 Cor 5:17). And life can never be the same again.

As John says in v16, 'For God so loved the world' - Nicodemus, Israel, you and me - 'that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish *but have eternal life*.'

But is this just religious mumbo jumbo? Does it really change your life? And if you're already a Christian - should it still?

The Life-Changing Difference

Now, of course, there's a sense in which Nicodemus can't be born again - born of the Spirit - yet, because the Spirit wasn't given until Pentecost. But look at the two other occasions we meet him and it's clear this encounter changed him profoundly.

Firstly, it gives him a new moral courage. In chapter 7, John tells us how the Sanhedrin sent out guards to arrest Jesus, but they came back saying, 'no one ever spoke like this man Jesus!' At which the Pharisees - Nicodemus' colleagues - say: 'have you also been deceived by him? Because none of us have!' And Nicodemus is there in the room. What's he going to do? Does the man who came at night keep his head down, or does he speak up? John 7:50-51: 'Nicodemus said to them… "Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing?"' So, in a hostile environment, in the cold light of day, with the council's eyes on him, Nicodemus stands up for Jesus and for justice.

But that's not the last time we meet him. We meet him again at the foot of the cross. And Nicodemus was there, watching as Christ was lifted up. And with Joseph of Arimathea, he takes Jesus' dead body, and he cares for it, and anoints it, and wraps it, and lays it in the tomb. Think about that. The Sanhedrin has been proved right. Jesus has died as one accursed by God - crucified, the death of slaves and outcasts. He's been proven to be nothing more than a defeated and shamed false teacher. And yet, at that moment, when Nicodemus has absolutely nothing to gain from siding with Jesus, and absolutely everything to lose, Nicodemus openly identifies with him. In all the failure and defeat of the cross he says, 'I'm on his side.'

And it's at the cross that he steps out of the darkness and into the light.

Where does that kind of courage come from? From looking with faith at the Son of Man lifted up and dying for you. Because when it sinks in that Christ would do that for me, that he loves me so much that he would die for me, even though I could never deserve it, what other people think of you begins to matter much less. And you find the courage to stand up for what's right and true. And it undermines the indifference or self-consciousness or passivity that stops us identifying publicly as Christians.

But as well as courage, seeing Christ die for him deeply humbled Nicodemus. Because in caring for Christ's body, in cleaning it, and anointing it, and wrapping it, he's doing the work of a slave, or a woman. And he's one of *the* most respected men in Israel, and he's doing it for a mocked and scorned criminal. That doesn't just take courage, it takes deep humility.

And it's that combination of courage and humility that explains why John can say what he says in his first letter about the impact being born again has on our lives. In 1 John 3:9 he says, 'No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God.'

I once heard of a teacher - an ex-army man - who found one of his pupils chewing gum in his class. And the teacher said, 'no one chews gum in my class.' At which the boy goes 'sorry sir' and rapidly swallowed the gum. But, of course, someone was chewing gum! So, was the teacher wrong to say 'no one chews gum in my class'? And was John wrong to say someone's been born again doesn't keep on sinning, when obviously they do? No! It just required the boy chewing gum to learn what it meant to be in that man's class, and become aware he *was* chewing gum, and no one does that in here. And when you know you've been born again, and you see Christ lifted up and dying for you, like Nicodemus it humbles you. Humbles you enough that when you become aware of sin in your life you admit it. But it also gives you the courage to repent, and new desires to want and choose the right instead.

So, if you're not yet a Christian - look to Christ dying for you, and allow God to make you new. And if you are already a Christian - live in the goodness and power of the new birth. Let it give you the humility and the courage you need to live for him.