You Must Be Born Again
John 3:1-15

Earlier this month, the New Statesman magazine ran a podcast called, 'Is Britain Addicted to the Monarchy?' And in it, a journalist makes the point that as the United Kingdom has declined as a world power, the number of British flags the government puts up, or people wave, has increased, and from The Great British Bakeoff, to the Coronation, union Jack bunting - those little triangular British flags, are everywhere. But, she says, the more they wave, the more it's a sign of a kingdom in decline.

Now, given most of you aren't British, you probably couldn't care less! But what if there was a kingdom that never could decline? An empire that never fell, a kingdom that never collapsed?

And what if that didn't matter for geopolitical reasons, but for you personally. And not just because it gave you some sense of security, but that your heart, and deepest desires, and ultimate future were all intimately tied up with that empire?

And I say that because, as we look at Nicodemus coming to speak to Jesus, wherever he intended their conversation to go, Jesus immediately takes it to the Kingdom of God and how you can and can't enter it.

So we're going to look at three things. Desiring the Kingdom, Entering the Kingdom, and Trusting the King of the Kingdom.

Desiring the Kingdom
Look at v3, where Jesus says to Nicodemus, "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Then v5, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God.'

And as a faithful, observant Jew, to enter God's kingdom would have been Nicodemus' ultimate hope. And not just hope, but expectation. Because for the rabbis of Jesus' day, the kingdom of God came at the end of the age, when God would defeat his enemies, establish his reign, and every Jew would enter that kingdom as his birthright.

So it's not hard to imagine how someone like Nicodemus would have been looking forward to that day.

But isn't there a sense in which we all are? Even if you don't think of it in terms of the kingdom of God. I mean, do you ever look at what's going on in the world and wish that in place of war, peace would reign? Do you ever witness the suffering of a friend or loved one and wish the days of pain could end? Do you see injustice, and feel anger, and long for the day when all wrongs will be made right?

Or think about your relationship with God. Are there times when God seems distant, even absent, and the heavens seem like brass, and you wish you could know, really know him, in a way you've never experienced?

Well, the Bible tells us that when we long for those things, what we're really longing for *is* God's kingdom. For his rule and reign. For the time when he will make everything right, and undo all that is wrong. When every good thing you've ever dreamed of will come true, and all that is true will find its ultimate fulfilment; when you will see God in all his beauty, and yet know that an endless adventure, and bottomless joy, still lie ahead of you.

But what rattles Nicodemus are the entry requirements.

Entering the Kingdom

Verse 1, 'Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.' So, we don't know much about Nicodemus, but what we do know tells us, he was likely a good man. Firstly, he's a Pharisee - so he takes the Bible and obeying God's law seriously.

Secondly, John tells us he's 'a ruler of the Jews' - so he's not just religiously observant, he's trying to live that out by being civically involved. He's giving his time to serve.

Thirdly, look at v10, where Jesus calls him, "the teacher of Israel". Not just *a* teacher, but *the* teacher. And Jesus isn't given to flattering people. And so, as a number of commentators point out, he's likely a well regarded religious authority, a senior professor, the kind of man people quote and defer to: 'Well, if that's what Nicodemus thinks it must be right.'

So by any estimation, Nicodemus is good man. The kind of man you'd be proud to call a friend or have as a neighbour.

And yet…

You see, as one writer puts it, in the New Testament, 'We are warned about being like the Pharisees, *not* because the Pharisees were the *worst* people of their day but because they *were* the best people … the best people could be *without God*.' And before Jesus says a word to Nicodemus, John has already flagged up stuff that tells us all may not be well.

Firstly, v2, 'this man came to Jesus *by night*.' Why night? Well, apparently, night time was a favourite time for rabbis to get together, chew the cud, and discuss the Bible. So maybe this is just Nicodemus the teacher, coming to meet another teacher, and engage in some healthy debate.

Except, in John's Gospel, night time always has negative connotations. And the night is either used as a metaphor for spiritual darkness, or, if it's literally night, something dark is usually going on.

So… is Nicodemus coming at night because he doesn't want to be seen? After all, he's got a reputation to lose, and is he worrying about him - *the* teacher - being seen coming to *this* untrained, unaccredited teacher? Because what would people think?

And maybe you know something of that in your own heart. Maybe the issue of faith, or sexual ethics, or politics, comes up in conversation with colleagues and you're not so keen on them knowing what you believe, because you worry what they might think. Or maybe the subject's 'what you did at the weekend', and you skirt round the bit about church, cos that would be awkward. Or maybe it's got nothing to do with any of that stuff, but what others think of you, your reputation in their eyes, matters just that bit too much to you.

You see, as you watch Nicodemus coming to Jesus under cover of darkness, it's a reminder: even the best of us are not the best, and what is going on in our hearts may not be quite so good.

But, did you notice what Nicodemus says? Verse 2, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him." So, firstly, he recognises Jesus as a teacher come from God.

And if you're not yet a Christian, you might think in much the same way. Jesus is someone you can learn from, whose life principles you can apply. But as John's already made clear in chapter 1, there's infinitely more to Jesus than that. And so if you approach Jesus as being 'a teacher', even a great one, then like Nicodemus, you're still in the dark.

But secondly, look at why Nicodemus has come to that conclusion: 'for no one can do *these signs* that you do unless God is with him.' And that should make you sit up, because just a couple of verses before, at the end of chapter 2, John wrote, 'Many believed in his name *when they saw the signs that he was doing.* But Jesus on his part did not entrust himself to them' (v23-24).

And now here comes Nicodemus, an example of just such a person, who's seen the signs Jesus is doing, and is impressed by them.

But what Jesus makes clear is, that's not enough. In fact, none of this is enough. Verse 3, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Verse 5, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God." And verse 7, "You *must* be born again."

Now, have you ever seen a job advert, and thought, 'wow, that looks interesting'? But you get the person spec and go, 'oh' because you realise you don't meet the requirements.

Now, that might be fine for a job - and it's a bit of a downer, but you accept it, but what about the kingdom of God? What about everything wrong being put right, and all of your dreams coming true, and your deepest desires being met, and seeing and experiencing God in ever increasing wonder? What if you're shut out of that? What if your resumé, and everything you thought would qualify you, is not enough?

Hey, look at my nationality, I'm American, I'm British. Or my ethnicity - I'm white, or black, or Jewish. Look at my heritage - my parents are religious. Or my politics, I've always voted the right way. Look at my moral record - I've kept the law. Or my religious involvement - I've joined a Bible study and studied the Bible at night! Look at my charitable work - I've given my time and my treasure. Look at my respect for people I could have looked down on but didn't. And look at my view of Jesus - I think he's a great teacher.

Because that's exactly what Nicodemus is experiencing. And Jesus is saying, none of that qualifies you. Because when he says in verse 7, "Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again'" the first *you* is singular - he's talking to Nicodemus. But the second *you* is plural, he's talking to all of us. If you want to see and enter the kingdom of God, you *must* be born again.

Now, when I was a teenager, and before I became a Christian, every house in the UK got a flyer through the door, advertising a free book on Christianity. And if you sent off the coupon they'd send you the book. So I sent off the coupon and got the book. And it was totally confusing, because it talked about being born again. And this was at the time of all the televangelist scandals in the US. And I remember thinking, 'being born again? That's what Americans do. But we're British. We don't do that. We don't get born again.We drink tea.'

Except it's not American, it's Jesus. And he's saying to Nicodemus and all of us. You're not born naturally into the kingdom of God. You have to enter it. You're not born a citizen, you have to become one. In fact, you're born an exile.

Now, I'll let you in on a secret. Deep down, the English believe that the rest of you, deep down, really wish you were English too, and that secretly you wish you too could drink tea and eat scones, and go on summer holidays in the rain, and talking endlessly about the weather. That in the words of a song, 'It's knowing your foreign that makes you so mad!'

Now, I accept that's a delusion. But what about being a foreigner, an outsider to the kingdom of God? That should bother you, shouldn't it? Because here is Jesus saying that even someone as good, as respected as Nicodemus will not enter unless he's born again. Ethnicity, family, politics, moral record, civic and charitable engagement, how much you pray, and how much you give, does not matter. What matters is, you must be born again.

Now, whatever *you* think of that, it's clear what Nicodemus thought. 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?"

Now, does he mean literally, 'Jesus, my mother can't physically give birth to me a second time!'? Or does he mean, 'Jesus, I'm an old man, I'm set in my ways, I can't possibly change'? Or is he simply amazed that anything other than being Jewish is necessary?

Whatever he means, he means, 'Jesus, this is impossible'.

So… is it?

Trusting the King

So Nicodemus is incredulous, but Jesus replies, v5-6, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." In other words, like gives birth to like. We're born naturally into the natural world. But we're also born alienated from and foreigners to God's kingdom. And that kingdom is *not* natural, it's supernatural, so we need to be reborn, supernaturally, by His Spirit, into the realm of the Spirit.

And so Jesus isn't saying, 'Nicodemus, you need to try a bit harder. You need to stop kicking the cat and yelling at the kids, and things will be ok.' No, this is about a totally new start and an inner transformation. Because the kingdom of God is not just about *the world* being made new *at the end of time*, it's about *us* being made new *in time*.

Which is why Jesus talks of us needing to be born of *water* as well as the Spirit. Because is the water bit there referring to our natural births? And you need to be born naturally and then spiritually? Maybe, because when I was a doctor and had to attend babies' births, there were times when the mum's waters broke and the baby literally came surfing out like a Californian surfer dude! And I remember once standing in the obstetric operating theatre when the obstetrician got just that bit too close, and the mum's waters broke, the baby burst out, and the amniotic fluid literally poured into the surgeon's wellington boots.

But that's probably not what Jesus means. Firstly, being born of water and the Spirit in v5 is Jesus expanding on what it means to be born again in v3.

Secondly, because there's actually no definite article before Spirit and the preposition 'of' governs them both; so what it actually says is we need to be born 'of water and spirit' and the two go together.

But thirdly, because if Nicodemus is incredulous that he needs to be born again, Jesus is incredulous that Nicodemus is incredulous.

Verse 10, 'Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"'

Now in my paediatric final exams I was examined by *the* professor who was *the* author of *the* paediatric text book. And it was terrifying. Worse, I was terrible, and made a total mess of examining the patient. And he sat there looking at me, and I could tell he was thinking 'is it really possible to be so ignorant?' And I was only saved by the senior lecturer, who told him 'he's not normally quite this bad!'

But here, the tables are turned. Nicodemus is *the* respected professor, who's written *the* text book on how to get into the kingdom, and Jesus is asking him, 'Nicodemus, are you *really* telling me you don't know this?'

Which means, he must have been able to know this. Which means being born again, of water and Spirit, must be somewhere in the Old Testament. And it is.

In Ezekiel 36:25-27, the Lord says to Israel, "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."

And so to be born again, of water and the Spirit, is to be totally cleansed of your sin and all those things you love more than God - like your reputation. It's to have your past, and all those things you're ashamed of, washed away and your slate wiped clean. But it's also to have your heart transformed by God's Spirit, and be made new; so that now you want to obey him from the heart. And when that happens, the apostle Paul says, the old has gone and the new has come, and it's as if your life starts over.

But the funny thing about being born is, it's got nothing to do with you, has it? You see, a baby in the womb doesn't knock on the wall, and tap out in Morse code his preferred date of delivery. Being born is something that's done to him. He or she just gets whooshed along in the process. And the same is true for being born again. Because Jesus uses the passive form of the verb. It's something done to you. It's a sovereign work of God's Spirit in your heart.

It's why Jesus says in v8, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." In other words, you can't see the wind, or control the wind, but you can see its impact. And you can't see God's Spirit, or control God's spirit, but when your heart is cleansed of guilt and shame, and you know you're forgiven; when your heart comes alive, spiritually, for the first time and you know you are loved by God and love him in response, then you know he's at work.

But doesn't that just make you passive? I mean, if being born again is a work of God's Spirit, what if anything can Nicodemus, or you and I do about it? How are you supposed to respond?

Well, let's do it in reverse order. You see, if you're already a Christian, and you know you've experienced this, you may not be able to put a date on it, but you know your sins are forgiven and you are loved and you love in response, then let it humble you. Let it fill you with thanksgiving. That God has made you alive in Christ is a work of his grace, and you do not deserve it. So let it humble you and then overflow in thankfulness.

Secondly, pray. Because if you've got someone you care about, who's not yet a Christian, their salvation is down to God, so pray that God would be as gracious to them as he has been to you.

But thirdly, when it comes to talking to them about Jesus, be confident and chilled. Ultimately, it doesn't depend on you getting the words right explaining the gospel, so you can chill out. But it also doesn't make you careless, it makes you confident: confident in the power of God's Spirit to do this.

Ok, but what if you're not yet a Christian? Are you supposed to just sit there and wait for God to do this to you? No.

Look at v14-15. Jesus says, "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 Jesus is taking Nicodemus back to another story in the Bible, when God sent a plague of serpents into the camp of Israel, in judgement for their sin. And people were dying from the bites, and so God tells Moses to make a bronze image of a serpent, stick it on a pole, lift it up, and whoever looks at it will live.

What has that got to do with being born again, and entering the kingdom, and having eternal life?!

Well, in v13, Jesus says that he's the one 'who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.' And when he descended, he became one of us. So just as Moses made a bronze image in the likeness of a serpent, so Jesus was made in our likeness. And Jesus is telling Nicodemus that just like Moses lifted that bronze image into the air, so he, Jesus, will be lifted up. And just as that bronze serpent was an image of what was killing the Israelites, so at the cross Jesus became, not an image of what's killing us, but the thing itself. As Paul writes, 'For our sake *he made him to be sin* who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God in him' (2 Cor 5:21). And 'Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law *by becoming a curse for us*' (Gal 3:13).

And so, as the Israelites looked at that bronze image and were healed, so we are to look to Jesus, lifted up on the cross, crowned with thorns, the king of the kingdom; and trust him, believe him, that he's taken our place, carried our sin, born our shame, and as we do our sin is washed away, and our dead hearts are made new. Because it's by believing in him that we have eternal life.

So, if you're not yet a Christian, look to him and trust him. And if you are a Christian, look to him, and trust him and thank him, and then go into the world and speak of him.