

RADICAL COMMITMENT TO JESUS CHRIST

Jesus teaches Nicodemus about 'being born again'

SPRINGLINE PARISH / TRINITY SUNDAY / 27.5.18

Readings: Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17; John 3: 1-17

It is clear that many people are attracted to Jesus on account of his miraculous signs (2.23). Yet this could be little more than a superficial attraction, based on passing interest. Jesus demands a far more radical commitment than this on the part of those who wish to be his followers, as the meeting with Nicodemus makes clear. This meeting deserves careful study.

Nicodemus, like so many others is attracted to Jesus, on account of his senior status within Judaism, he visits Jesus by night, so that his interest will not compromise his position within the Sanhedrin, the 71 member supreme Jewish court, consisting of the chief priests, elders and teachers of the law. He declares that he, and others, *know that there is something special about Jesus, only someone with a special relationship with God could perform such miraculous signs.*

Jesus' response clearly mystifies Nicodemus. Only someone who is 'born again' can see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus assumes that this refers to a physical rebirth, in which it is necessary to re-enter his mother's womb. Yet Jesus' words have a deeper significance.

As becomes clear, he is referring to a spiritual rebirth, in which someone who already possesses life at the physical level comes to birth at the spiritual level. They are alive already, in the sense that they physically exist. Yet they have yet to discover life in all its fullness which comes only through being born again. The references to the flesh and spirit (3.6) make this point clear. Yet there is more to the idea than this.

The Greek word translated as 'again' (*ano*) can also mean 'from above' (we find it used in this sense in Matthew's account of the curtain of the temple being torn from 'top to bottom' – literally, from above to beneath – at Mt 27.51). This rebirth does not take place from below, but from God himself. *To see the kingdom of God, it is necessary to be born of both water and the Spirit (3.5), a reference to both the physical and spiritual side of life.* It is also possible that Jesus intends to distinguish between the external cleansing of water, and the internal renewal brought by the Holy Spirit.

So what authority does Jesus have to make such statements? This question is dealt with by Jesus, who makes the point that only someone who has descended from heaven – and will ascend there again – has the authority and the ability to speak

about heavenly things (3.13). Here we see a clear statement of the importance of the resurrection in establishing Jesus' authority. In the incarnation, Jesus comes down to earth, already in full possession of the authority to speak about God. The resurrection demonstrates this authority publicly, as well as being the means by which 'the one who came from heaven' will return there.

Jesus then proclaims the crucial link between his own forthcoming death and the full benefits of the gospel/ in a reference to Moses delivering Israel from a plague of snakes (Numbers 21. 8-9), *Jesus speaks of the deliverance of believers from death through the gift of eternal life that will become possible through his death.*

The 'eternal life' in question must not be thought of as if it were some kind of infinite extension of everyday existence. Rather, *it refers to a new quality of life, begun here and now through faith, which is consummated and fulfilled through resurrection. This eternal life is only made possible through the love of God, which is shown in the astonishing fact that he loves his world so much that his only Son should die for it* (3.16).

There are important echoes here of the trauma experienced by Abraham, when he was asked to give up his only son Issac (Genesis 22.1-14). What Abraham was not, in the end, required to do, *God willingly did in order that sinful humanity might have the hope of eternal life. The death of the Son of God is thus the price of eternal life.* Yet, despite the wonderful gift that God offers, the world will not want anything to do with it (3. 19-21). It prefers darkness to light, and the gloomy prospect of death to the glorious hope of eternal life, *a tragic flaw that we can avoid by being born again in Jesus Christ¹, "the way, the truth and the life."* (John 14.6)

Silence followed by prayer.

[ST Mattapally]

¹ (cf. Alister McGrath, *NIV Bible Handbook* (Hodder 2014 London), pp368-369)