

SERMON ON JOHN 3: 1-17 – Brian Lees

I remember leading a Lent Course discussion a few years ago that focused on what are the essential things in our faith and what are on the fringe, maybe desirable and useful but, actually, not absolutely essential. One idea put forward was that an attractive building in which to meet together and worship is desirable and useful but not essential to being a Christian. After all, the early church met in people's homes and look how successful they were in spreading the Gospel. As our discussion moved on somebody else commented how easy it is for those who were brought up in a Christian family and had attended church all their lives to take for granted their faith and all the wonderful things that God does for them.

This discussion came back into my mind as I prepared what I was going to say to you today because the reading we have just heard from John's Gospel draws our attention to the fundamentals of our faith and to God's great goodness towards us. John tells us about a man named Nicodemus coming to meet Jesus to find out more about him and what he was doing.

John's account prompts a number of questions. Why did Nicodemus come to Jesus at night? Well, Nicodemus was a Jewish religious leader and it's likely he didn't want to be seen with Jesus in case his fellow religious leaders, who opposed Jesus, heard about it. I also think that John wants us to see in Nicodemus' coming at night the darkness of his understanding about God. We might also ask "Why did Nicodemus come at all?" Verse 2 tells us it was because he had heard about Jesus' teaching and miracles and I'm sure the Holy Spirit prompted him to come to Jesus.

Clearly Nicodemus does have some insight into who Jesus is; he says "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." But in his reply Jesus suggests that Nicodemus' insight isn't very deep. Nicodemus sees the things that Jesus is **doing** but he doesn't have any deeper understanding. And that is a problem that we can all have; knowing what Jesus did but not really understanding why.

When Jesus tells Nicodemus "no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born from above," or "born again", the word used in the original Greek has both meanings Nicodemus is, perhaps understandably, baffled and can only ask how it is possible for a full-grown adult to return to his mother's womb. Jesus is talking in spiritual terms about the need to make a new start – a new life – a new relationship with God; not relying on ourselves but depending totally on God and the work of the Holy Spirit.

The implications of Jesus' words for Nicodemus were huge. All of his life Nicodemus had carefully observed the Law and the rituals of Judaism.

He had become a Pharisee and even become a member of the ruling body, the Sanhedrin. But here was Jesus telling him he must forsake everything and start

again. As a devout Jew Nicodemus believed that you earned a right relationship with God through what you did by keeping the Jewish Law.

This is something that St Paul writes about in the Letter to the Romans.

He explains that we do not **earn** a right relationship with God through our own efforts, through what we DO, We enter into a right relationship with God through having FAITH in God and that faith is a result of God's GRACE towards us. GRACE – the undeserved favour that God shows towards us.

Jesus tells Nicodemus that the only way to enter the kingdom of heaven

is through being born again. And the power behind this new birth is the Holy Spirit at work in us. The Holy Spirit opens the eyes of the spiritually blind. He makes people aware of their sins and of their need of someone to save them from the consequences of their sins. He gives the free, undeserved gift of trust in God. He helps God's people to become more like Jesus. He gives us spiritual gifts so that we can serve God and bring the kingdom of God nearer, The Holy Spirit gives new life and that involves dying to our old life the life of failing to love God and other people all of the time. It involves realizing that Jesus died in our place on the cross to receive the punishment for our sins. It involves realizing that Jesus rose from the dead and that He shares his life with his followers.

When someone trusts in Jesus they receive the Holy Spirit. Jesus likens the Holy Spirit to a wind. When the wind starts to blow we may go around the house, shutting doors and windows to prevent it from blowing things around. Do we do the same when the Holy Spirit blows into our lives? Do we shut Him out so that He doesn't disturb things too much? Or do we open wide the windows and doors of our lives to welcome Him in?

When the Holy Spirit fills our lives our lives change. We become increasingly like Jesus, not living our lives for our own benefit but for God and other people, showing the same love for others as God has shown for us. Verse 16 reminds us of the extent of God's love for each and every one of us.

“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.”

This is what lies at the very heart of being a Christian.

During Lent we would all do well to think on these things to reassess our relationship with God and to recommit our lives to him and his service.