

## John 3:1-16 – Invitation to New Life

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Along with other members of Christ Church's Reading Group, I have just finished reading a remarkable story. *In Order to Live* is the story of Yeonmi Park's escape from North Korea, where she was constantly hungry and frightened of the authorities. She first 'escaped' into China where she was trafficked and sold as a wife to a Chinese Farmer. Later, with the help of Christian missionaries she made it at last to South Korea.

It's a remarkable book. When she arrived at last in South Korea she faced many challenges in trying to get to terms with the freedom and plenty she now enjoyed. It was as if her life had begun all over again; everything was so completely different from the life she had lived beforehand.

In the passage we have read this morning, Jesus invites us into a new life. He invites us to share in the life which he enjoys with Father God, a life that comes from the Holy Spirit of God.

Let's look together at this passage:

### **First, notice with me the longing of Nicodemus**

Nicodemus was a religious leader among the Jews. He was a Pharisee. Please note that this does not mean that he was a hypocrite. He was a man who was very serious about his religion. He was thoroughly familiar with the Jewish Scriptures – what we call the Old Testament.

He had a thorough knowledge of the promises that God had made to Abraham and his descendants and the way God had rescued the Children of Israel from slavery in Egypt. He knew how God had given his people the Law through Moses, had brought them to the promised land and had established them as a Kingdom under David, God's anointed king. He knew that the Jewish people had lost many of the blessings God had promised them through their disobedience to the Law – they were no longer a kingdom people governed only by God and his anointed king, but were a subject people, subject to the powers of Babylon, the Greek Empire and now to Rome.

He believed the words of the prophets and looked for the day when God would come again to save his people. He reasoned that if the kingdom had been lost through disobedience to the Law, then if the Jewish people would only obey the Law in all its minute demands then perhaps God would visit them again.

These were his beliefs as a Pharisee and he sought to be obedient to every demand of the Law in his own life and to persuade others to similarly serious obedience.

But what he had seen and heard of the Lord Jesus had shaken him. He recognised there was something different about Jesus; Jesus had something that he, Nicodemus did not have. God was evidently with Jesus and God's power was at work in and through him.

Nicodemus wants to know more – "we know that you are a teacher who has come from God." Nicodemus wants Jesus to become his teacher – he wants to be his disciple.

Nicodemus wants more than his present careful lawkeeping. He wants what Jesus has got.

### **Jesus speaks to Nicodemus of the Kingdom**

Jesus answered Nicodemus saying, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." At first sight, Jesus' answer seems no answer at all, but think for a moment.

Nicodemus is looking for the day when God, according to his promise, will restore the kingdom to Israel. That's what he longs for. But he thinks that this will come about only

through the careful lawkeeping of Jews like him. So his life has become one of slavery to the Law and he seeks to bring others under this same heavy burden of lawkeeping.

Jesus is saying to him that he has got it all wrong. He has not begun to understand the first thing about the kingdom of God.

He had not understood the promise of New Covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34 where God says:

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord,  
“when I will make a new covenant  
with the people of Israel  
and with the people of Judah.  
It will not be like the covenant  
I made with their ancestors  
when I took them by the hand  
to lead them out of Egypt,  
because they broke my covenant,  
though I was a husband to them,”  
declares the Lord.  
“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel  
after that time,” declares the Lord.  
“I will put my law in their minds  
and write it on their hearts.  
I will be their God,  
and they will be my people.  
No longer will they teach their neighbour,  
or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’  
because they will all know me,  
from the least of them to the greatest,”  
declares the Lord.  
“For I will forgive their wickedness  
and will remember their sins no more.”

He had not understood what God had said through the prophet Ezekiel as to how this New Covenant would be established:

I will take you out of the nations; I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land. 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 36:24-27)

Jesus is telling Nicodemus that the Kingdom he longs for, the Kingdom promised in the Scriptures is here – this age of fulfilment has arrived. But for him to live in this Kingdom or even to see clearly the nature of this kingdom, he must be born again – radically renewed in heart and mind by the Spirit of God. New wine requires new wineskins.

### **But Nicodemus remains confused**

"How can someone be born when they are old" he asks. He thinks it's quite absurd. Jesus answers, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit."

Even we may have difficulty in understanding what Jesus says here – certainly his words have caused much debate down the years. When Jesus speaks of being born of "water and the Spirit" he may be contrasting natural human birth with the new life of the Kingdom given by the Spirit – as may be implied in the following phrase. In human birth, the medium in

which the child grows and out of which it is born is water. I well remember the birth of our first child and how the process of her birth began when my wife's waters broke and was complete when our child came into the world breathing and protesting – very much alive. That's how natural human life begins. But life within the Kingdom of God begins when the Spirit of God opens our eyes to see the glory of Christ and that we are held within the embrace of the love of God. The Spirit is the medium in which this new life grows and from which it is born. The Spirit is the one who sets our hearts beating with love for God.

On the other hand, in speaking of being born of water and the Spirit Jesus may be talking entirely of the spiritual life of those who belong to his kingdom – just as Ezekiel spoke of God's new covenant with his people being marked by him sprinkling them with water to cleanse them from their sin and putting a new heart and mind within them by his Spirit acting on their hearts. He may be speaking of the cleansing which is part of the blessing of the New Covenant and which is symbolised in water baptism.

Whatever the case, Jesus is speaking of the way in which the presence and life of the Kingdom is the result of the Spirit of God working in the hearts of people and giving them a new love for God and determination to please him.

Maybe some of you have enjoyed watching *The World's Strongest Man*. Have you seen those men harnessed to an enormous articulated lorry and being required to haul it over a course, maybe slightly uphill? It's quite mad and exhausting just to watch. Compare that with a Ferrari racing around a track. The difference is dramatic. The Ferrari has power within it; it does not need to be hauled around but moves quickly by its own power. Poor Nicodemus is like the man trying to tug an articulated lorry. He is weighed down by the detailed demands of the law and makes very little progress. You need, says Jesus in effect, to be like the Ferrari. You need the power within you that will free you, motivate you and drive you joyfully on in pleasing God. You need the Spirit to give you new life.

And, says Jesus to Nicodemus, that this is happening now. His longing that God would come and visit his people afresh and save them from slavery is being fulfilled. Just as the Spirit hovered over the chaos at the beginning of creation, giving life and blessing, so now the Spirit of God is on the move bringing new creation to birth.

Nicodemus still confused asks, "How can this be?" Jesus responds with a rebuke, "You are an eminent teacher among the Jews, learned in the Jewish Scripture, you should understand these things!"

### **So how can people have this new life?**

Jesus has unique authority to speak of these things because he is the one who has come down from heaven with all the authority of the Living God. And here is what he says:

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.' 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.

Jesus is speaking here of an incident that Nicodemus would have known of well from the book of Numbers 21:4-9. The Israelites, rescued from slavery in Egypt and led through the wilderness by Moses, were continually grumbling against Moses and rebelling against God. So God sent snakes to bite them and many died.

But God told Moses to make an image of a snake from bronze and mount it on a pole and promised that all who looked at this image would live.

Jesus says that this is a picture of what is going to happen to him. All of us are, by nature, rebels against God and deserving of judgement. But God sent his Son into the world to bear that judgment for us when he was lifted up and hung upon the cross. As we look to him dying there for us and trust in him as the one who bore our condemnation we know that all of our sin is forgiven. As we look to him who was raised from the dead for us we know that we

also share in his new life; by the Spirit of God we share in the life of the new creation – we are born again.

This is why the Lord Jesus came into the world: "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life." By looking to Jesus and trusting in him and his atoning death and risen life, we enter into the embrace of the love of God. We know that we are loved with a love that will never let us go, not in life nor in death.

## **Conclusion**

Jesus' invitation to new life is a universal invitation, it is as wide as God's love that spans the whole world.

If you have not yet accepted that invitation into forgiveness and new life then let me urge you to accept it today. Look to the Lord Jesus Christ and trust in him and experience and live the life that he has to give you: taste and see that the Lord is good.

And then, since this invitation into life is for all, pass the invitation on. Encourage others to come to know God and to experience the love of God in Jesus Christ and to live in that love.

Peter Misselbrook, September 19<sup>th</sup> 2021

Christ Church Downend