

Over the next seven weeks, we shall examine seven encounters with Jesus, which changed the lives of those who met Him.

The Gospels are full with accounts of peoples' encounters with Jesus. The conversations during these encounters were not about personal sins or specific religious views and practices, nor were they about making a political statement.

In each encounter, Jesus addresses people at the point of their need. Behind each personal need, are unspoken questions: from the broad, *Who am I? Why am I here? Why am I in this condition, if there is a God?*, to more specific ones, *Why be a good person; why love instead of hate? What's wrong with the world? and what, if anything, can I do to make it right?*

Nicodemus¹ comes to Jesus with questions bubbling at the back of his mind. Nicodemus is a respected Pharisee, a brotherhood of 6,000 entrusted with studying **The Law**. He is also a senior aristocratic member of the Sanhedrin, a religious court of seventy members, whose job it was to make sure **The Law** was applied properly and all Jews lived by it. If Nicodemus lived among us today, he might be a senior member the Council of Bishops in the Church of England, or among the select few from the College of Cardinals who meet with the Pope.

The visit of such an important official is certainly noteworthy. Nicodemus opens the meeting. *Rabbi (Teacher). We know you are a teacher come from God...* Was Nicodemus sent by the Council to find out more about this person Jesus? If this was an official visit, why did he visit in the darkness of night? And if he was sent by the Council who were suspicious of Jesus and His motives, why did he address Jesus as *Teacher*, knowing Jesus did not have formal training as a Rabbi?

The conversation leads us to believe that Nicodemus was in the background witnessing Jesus' miracles. His professional knowledge of the Old Testament and the texts announcing the arrival of the Messiah, played at the back of his mind. Nicodemus was curious and eager to meet Jesus. He came in a spirit of "honestly seeking God."

Rabbi, we know you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs (miracles)² that you do, unless God is with him.

¹ John 3:1-21

² John 2:23

It seems, Nicodemus was struggling to find a balance between the “official” opening line, and his personal belief. *Teacher ... come from God* would place Jesus above the High Priest, who was elected by his peers, not *come from God*.

There then seems to be a contradiction: *no one can do the miracles you do, unless God is **with** him*. Only God can do the miracles of healing every sickness and disease³, and Jesus the Son of God sitting before him, was doing just that! The learned and wise Nicodemus cannot seem to phrase his words properly: *come from God* and *God is with Him*; it cannot be both, which one then, is it?

Jesus senses Nicodemus’ struggle for words. He had not yet posed a question; he had just blurted out a confused statement.

Jesus interjects. *The only one who can see the Kingdom of God at work, and understand the miracles God is doing, is the person who is re-born spiritually (born again) as a child of God*.

It is strange that Nicodemus misunderstood. The Jew knew about *re-birth*. When a person from another faith became a Jew, and been accepted into Judaism by prayer and sacrifice and baptism, he was regarded as *re-born*.

So radical was this change, that the convert was pardoned and freed from all the *sins* he had committed in his past life. To make a *theoretical* point, the person “*born again*” was so changed, he could *theoretically* marry his own mother or sister!⁴

The Jew knew well the idea of *re-birth!*

So it seems strange for a respected Pharisee, an esteemed member of the Sanhedrin to take a literal meaning of being born again: *How can my mother give birth to me again, an adult man? How can an adult man like me be “born again”?* Nicodemus might well have been shocked to hear the *not-formally-trained-Rabbi* Jesus talk about *re-birth*, which only the official priests could perform.

Nicodemus’ response seem to convey a combination of incredulity, stating the obvious literal meaning, coupled with a tinge of sarcasm: *How can my mother give birth to me again?*

This is our dilemma. When we do not understand, instead of seeking insight, we resort to the light-hearted relief of a literal meaning. Listening to 7 weeks

³ Matthew 4

⁴ William Barclay - John Vol 1 p. 126

of banter between all political parties during the recent elections, is proof in point. Each quotes another party's statement literally, then makes farce of what it might mean, not dissimilar to what hear Nicodemus saying.

This phrase, *born again* has been grossly misunderstood. It has been reduced in its meaning, to an act of "simple conversion": read this, do this, repeat after me, and you will be saved, almost a parody of what Jesus explained to Nicodemus.

Jesus explains. *Nicodemus, you are not listening. Let me repeat it. Unless a person submits to his original creation—the 'wind-hovering-over-the-water' creation, the invisible moving the visible, a baptism into a new life—it's not possible to enter God's kingdom. When you look at a baby, it's just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the new person who takes shape within, is formed by something you can't see and touch—the Spirit—and becomes a living spirit. So don't be so surprised when I tell you that you have to be 'born from above'— from out of this world, so to speak. You know well enough how the wind blows this way and that. You hear it rustling through the trees, but you have no idea where it comes from or where it's headed next. That's the way it is with everyone 'born from above' by the Spirit of God.*⁵

This Baptism Jesus talks about, is a two-fold declaration of intent, a public proclamation of separation from the past, and acceptance of a new identity in Christ and consenting to the leadership of the Holy Spirit. This Baptism is not just becoming a new person, rather transforms into a new creation, fit to be reunited with our family in heaven.

A person who identifies themselves as a follower of Christ (that is, to be a Christian) needs then to do two things: 1) to be baptised in water, which is a visible act of separating ourselves from our past, and allow Jesus Christ to make us a new creation, ready to be reunited with our family in Heaven, and 2) to be baptised in the Holy Spirit, which is an act of surrendering our will, and accept the leadership of the Holy Spirit, allowing Him to re-orient our mind to accept the way of God.

Nicodemus replies, "*How can this be?*"

Jesus' reply is almost in the same tone as Nicodemus': *Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Are you a Jewish priest and yet you claim not to understand re-birth and being born again? ... If I you have difficulty believing what is practiced here on earth, how will you believe if I shared with you matters of Heaven?!*

⁵ John 3:5-8 (MSG)

Jesus shares an insight from God, and I believe this changed Nicodemus' life. John 3:16, the most famous verse in all the Bible which when you consider it carefully, explains every question about God and life we live: *God SO loved the world that he sent His Son, that whoever believes in Him, will not perish, but enjoy eternal life.*

God is going to destroy evil. When He does, this destruction will be more terrible than anything the world has ever known.

But God so loves the whole world, everyone who has ever lived, will be kept safe in Christ, to be reunited with the Father in Heaven.

Anyone who believes this plan of God the Father, and accepts Me (Jesus) as His Son, will not be condemned, nor judged.

I believe Nicodemus' life changed when he heard Jesus say, ***“Anybody who is living by the Truth, will come to God’s light, which makes it plain for all to see, God at work in that person.”***

At the time of Jesus's death, Nicodemus was bold enough to publicly reveal his faith in Christ. In the sight of all in Jerusalem, Nicodemus joins Joseph of Arimethea to take down Jesus's body from the cross, prepare it for burial with a mixture of myrrh and aloes, both very expensive spices, and lay His body in a cave close by⁶.

It amazes me how God transforms people in high places, leaders of government, leaders of countries, leaders of global corporations to do His work. Many of them acknowledge Him and openly give God the credit for their lives and their success.

Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus changed his life. He had many questions, but he chose to find answers from the One who is Creator and Life-Giver.

You have the opportunity to do that too. The answers to your questions are found in the life of God's Son, Jesus the Christ. From my own life, I commend you to embark on the journey into God's Word and discover these answers for yourself. As you do, make your commitment, this baptism we talked about - a separation from the past, and journey into the future with the Holy Spirit as your Guide and Counsellor.

AMEN

⁶ John 19:39