

## Born again ?

20 3 11

Almighty God,  
you show those in error the light of your truth,  
that they may return to the way of righteousness:  
grant to those who are admitted into the fellowship of Christ's religion,  
that they reject those things that are contrary to their profession,  
and follow such things as are agreeable to the same.

My text today is John chapter 3 and verse 10: 'How can these things be ?'

As ever, it's good to be back and I want to thank Father Peter for giving me the opportunity to preach this morning. As I said just now in our Children's Talk, John 3 is a wonderful chapter with one of the earliest verses I ever committed to memory. Let me quote from the King James translation of the Bible: 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.' (3 v16) It is the gospel in a nutshell. It does sum up Christianity. It's what we're all about: a loving God who loves us enough to give his Son for us so that we through him may have eternal life. Powerful stuff. An attractive message. Who could fail to respond ?

And in Nicodemus we see one of the earliest people who responded positively to Jesus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling Council. With another member of that Council, Joseph of Arimathea, he took

charge of Jesus' corpse after the crucifixion, Nicodemus's contribution being a goodly quantity of myrrh and aloes to prepare Jesus' body for the tomb. Here we are told that Nicodemus comes to Jesus 'by night'. Great phrase, 'by night', which possibly suggests two things. Firstly, that Nicodemus is being cautious, that he didn't want to be seen. Perhaps as a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews, he wanted to keep his visit to Jesus a secret ? Secondly, that Nicodemus is still spiritually in the dark. Perhaps as seeker after truth, he has yet to receive the light of Christ which will lead him from the darkness of sin and death into the light of salvation and everlasting life ?

Nicodemus says two very gracious complimentary things to Jesus which amount to the same thing: first that 'you are a teacher who has come from God'; second that 'no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God'. So Nicodemus is acknowledging that Jesus comes from God and that he is very much with God. Nicodemus recognises his ability to teach and to perform miracles both of which would be impossible if he were not wholly informed by God.

Powerful words, enough to turn the head of ordinary folk, but flattery gets Nicodemus nowhere with Jesus. Instead, ignoring his intoxicating words, Jesus tosses Nicodemus a challenge to the way this educated, spiritually alert Jew finds mind-blowing. 'No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above'. 'Born from above' is translated by the King James Bible as 'born again', the words I remember from my youth. The Greek phrase is 'γενναω ανωθεν' (gennaō anōthen) and, strictly speaking, the NRSV is the more accurate if less resonant translation ! But whether the phrase is 'born from above' or 'born again'

the need for a second birth is clear and Jesus' challenge is a step too far for Nicodemus to take. So he replies with scornful incredulity: 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb, and be born?' Impossible! No way!! Jesus answers him by pointing to the mystery at the heart of becoming a Christian. 'No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.' Nicodemus is visibly 'astonished' so Jesus tries to help him understand an impossible concept by citing a parallel from ordinary life: Jesus tells him that 'The wind blows where it chooses and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' There is mystery at the heart of belief. We can see the effects even if we can't know the mechanics.

Poor literally-minded Nicodemus is left trying to make sense of what seems to him nonsense. And so he asks the question which is our text today 'How can these things be?'

That would be a great place to stop but before I do, let me ask you whether you feel comfortable with the phrase 'born again'? Is the Greek 'γενναω ανωθεν' (gennaō anōthen) something you personally can buy into? Is it a fair description of you as a Christian? I know being a 'born again' Christian was the touchstone of American Evangelists like Billy Graham, but if we strip away the gloss of such a label to penetrate to the heart of the underlying idea that Jesus is trying to convey to Nicodemus, then all of us here today are indeed 'born again'. We are 'born again' because as Christians we believe that Jesus as the Son of God who is our

Lord and Saviour; because we have been baptised; and because the Holy Spirit is working in and through our lives. And for that fact I'm thankful.

I have spoken in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,  
Amen.

*Preached at the Parade Service*

*St Mary the Virgin and All Saints, Potters Bar*

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H: Sermon 23: Born again

