

## Nicodemus

16 3 14

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

Our text today may be found in John's gospel, chapter 3 and verse 1:

'Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews,  
He came to Jesus by night . . .'

What have Nicodemus and Nathaniel aka Bartholomew, our patron saint, got in common? They're both Jews. They're both religious Jews who take their faith in God seriously. They are both from aristocratic families, if tradition is to be believed. And they both separately appear by name twice in John's gospel, once towards the start and once towards the end.

Nicodemus, a practising Pharisee and member of the Sanhedrin, comes to see Jesus by night. In secret? Possibly. In the dark because he is in the dark? Possibly. In order to have an undisturbed talk in private with Jesus? Probably.

And what they talk about is truly disturbing: the necessity of being born again of water and the spirit, an act of God from above which is life-changing, so much so that it is like a new beginning.

Nicodemus begins with a compliment: 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God: for no one can do these signs you do apart from the presence of God.' Nice one: he admits and accepts Jesus' status as a teacher which is what the title of Rabbi means. More importantly, Nicodemus accepts that Jesus must be from God, inspired and informed by God because only someone who is could perform such signs as he does. Sadly, we're not sure exactly to what Nicodemus is referring: water into wine at the wedding at Cana in Galilee; the cleansing of the Temple? I'm not sure. But more importantly, Jesus ignores the compliment and offers Nicodemus some challenging and surprising teaching: 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'

At this point, Nicodemus gets the wrong end of the stick, opting for the literal meaning of the Greek word that John is using though, of course, the original conversation would have been in Aramaic not in Greek. The word in Greek is  $\alpha\nu\omega\theta\epsilon\nu$  (anōthen) which in the AV is translated as 'again', in the RSV by 'anew' and in our pew Bibles, the NRSV, by 'from above'. So the phrase, being born again, could have three meanings: a new beginning; a second birth; a spiritual rebirth. Literally-minded Nicodemus shows his disbelief by asking what sounds like a reasonable question: 'How can anyone be born after having grown old?'

Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born ?' His doubt is tangible ! His incredulity overwhelming !

But, of course, Jesus is talking of a mystery: the work of the Holy Spirit. The image of new birth is powerful and deeply-rooted in our religious imagination. But to a literally-minded Pharisee, the concept of a second birth is mind-blowing. Still, what we do know is Nicodemus was there at the end for Jesus with Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph provided the tomb; Nicodemus the spices to anoint the body. So even if he didn't get it here, I think that Nicodemus did go on to believe and trust in Jesus as the Son of God.

So what do you make of the Greek word  $\alpha\nu\omega\theta\epsilon\nu$  (anóthen) – the idea of a second birth ? Personally, I come from an evangelical background and I can date the moment in July 1969 that I accepted Jesus into my life as Lord and Saviour. It marked a new beginning, a fresh start for me and over time, my life changed and here I am today your priest – good or what ? The phrase 'a born-again Christian' used to be a test and measure of someone's faith in the circles in which I used to move. But that was more than forty years ago and, as an adult, the idea has taken on a richer, more complex meaning. If you are serious about your faith, then it will change you and how you see things. It is like a new start and if you like could easily be termed a new birth. But key is the idea that a new beginning comes from and is informed by God. A fresh start comes from above and is inspired and encouraged by the presence of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

So let's not be too literally minded like poor Nicodemus but instead see our faith in Jesus as the Son of God as a spiritual regeneration of our spirit by the Holy Spirit.

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

*Preached at the Eucharist*

*St Bartholomew's, Dinard*

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G: Sermons 29 : Nicodemus

