

Born Again - 24 October 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Now, over recent weeks, we've been looking at some characters and stories in the Bible from some different perspectives. So stories which have included the parable of the Good Samaritan, the meeting between Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, and then last week, the story of Lazarus raising from the dead by Jesus.

If you haven't caught up with those talks, they're all online, both on the church website and on YouTube as well with some of the visuals. So do check those out if you haven't caught up with them. But if you have already or you've been here over recent weeks, you'll maybe have picked up a bit of a thread running through these stories, a thread that we might summarise as this, the word inclusion.

Indeed, the way of God, the way of Jesus, is all about ensuring that those who tend to be excluded in life, those often on the outside of things, are instead included and welcomed in.

So in the parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, it's the hated outsider, the Samaritan, who turns out to be the neighbour who the religious expert is called by Jesus to include, to both love and importantly, accept love from.

In the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, Ruth showed us the other week how even though this eunuch was excluded from worship at the temple, he was baptised by Philip as someone loved and welcomed and included by God.

[1 : 3 6] And then last week, Ian took us through the story of Lazarus with Mary and Martha and how Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead demonstrated Jesus' desire to gather people to himself by not allowing, I think Ian said, their fears or their tears to get in the way of them experiencing the hope which comes through knowing Jesus.

So inclusion, not exclusion, is the name of God's game. And so holding this idea of inclusion in mind, I like to spend this week and next week, so the next two weeks, looking at a story from John's Gospel in which Jesus meets a man called Nicodemus.

It's a meeting which takes place at night, so in the days before fancy LED lights and dimmer switches and so on. It was a bit of a gloomy setting, so the clip's a little bit dark, but hopefully it will convey across okay.

We're going to watch the first chunk of the story of Jesus meeting Nicodemus. This is from John chapter 3. Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover festival, many people saw the signs he was performing and believed in his name.

But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person.

[3 : 1 6] Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus, who was a member of the Jewish ruling council.

He came to Jesus at night and said, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.

Jesus replied, Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. How can someone be born when they are old?

Nicodemus asked. Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born. Jesus answered, 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. You should not be surprised at my saying, you must be born again.

[4 : 30] We'll come on to the content of their conversation in a bit, but first up, it's worth thinking perhaps, why does this event happen at night?

If you look through the Gospels, it's fairly unusual for things to happen after dark. Most stories in the Gospels take place in the day. So why is this particular event being recorded as one which happens at night?

Well, if we recall, we're told that this guy, Nicodemus, he's a member of the Jewish ruling council, a council known as the Sanhedrin.

The Sanhedrin. This council was basically the Jewish Supreme Court, an assembly of judges who would have ultimate say on religious law and practice.

And it was a hugely important court, so much so that they met every day at the temple in a particular room, a particular chamber, called the Hall of Hewn Stones.

[5 : 33] The Hall of Hewn Stones. Sounds a bit like someone at Harry Potter, doesn't it? The Hall of Hewn Stones, but we're not talking Hogwarts now. It's located right in the middle of the temple here. In fact, let's zoom in a little bit.

There we go. It was that room there, right at the heart of all the temple was about. And if you can see just above it, there's that sort of gold-fronted building. That was where the Holy of Holies was, where they reckon God's presence dwelt.

So you can see how closely to the centre of all the action this Supreme Court of the Jews was. Now, Jewish leaders like these, they would define what religious life should look like under God.

And so outside of these court sessions that they'd hold, members of this Sanhedrin would regularly come out and teach the everyday worshippers in the temple.

If we look and zoom a bit, that's the room. And then just to the right of that, just the left of that, sorry, is where the steps are, that they would come out and teach people. So they weren't simply judges, but they were teachers too, telling people how to live in obedience to God according to their understanding of how to do it at least.

[6 : 47] So if we remember, for example, when the 12-year-old Jesus is at the temple, he's described in Luke's gospel as sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.

Where did that take place? Well, it's reckoned it was here on those steps. And the teachers would have been these Jewish council members. Jesus was debating, if you like, with the Sanhedrin as a 12-year-old, that's quite a thing, really.

Years later, though, about 20 years later, this guy, Nicodemus, he's now one of these teachers, one of these judges. And with this teaching role in mind, indeed, in one verse, Jesus says to Nicodemus, you are Israel's teacher.

It's quite a statement, you are Israel's teacher. In terms of learning, status, respect, Nicodemus is just about as high up as it's possible to get in the religious system of the day, the temple hierarchy and so on.

In terms of religious inclusion, if you like, Nicodemus must have reckoned that he was in the inner circle, a proper VIP in that sense.

[7 : 55] And yet, at some stage, as he's doing his rounds around a temple, perhaps, he's obviously clocked Jesus. He's maybe watched him from afar. He's heard the rumors about him being this radical, revolutionary preacher, teacher, a miracle worker.

Indeed, in the chapter just before this encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus, we're told in John's Gospel that Jesus overturned all the tables of the money changers in the temple.

An act of real rebellion against the way that certain people were being ripped off and excluded from worshiping in a way they should have been able to. Now, Nicodemus must have known about this episode with the table turning.

Perhaps it was that. Perhaps it was the miracles that Jesus was performing. Perhaps it was Jesus teaching. You know, whatever it was about Jesus' approach, Nicodemus, this high-up VIP, he was intrigued enough to want to visit Jesus himself.

And so the fact that he does it at night is therefore not perhaps surprising because it would have been an incredibly risky move for someone of Nicodemus' respectability to have been seen meeting privately with someone as radical as Jesus.

[9 : 15] It's also a brave move of Nicodemus too. There's obviously a willingness on Nicodemus' part to visit, to engage with, to be questioned by, even be challenged by Jesus in the conversation which was to follow.

Now, I say Nicodemus is brave because I know for me, and perhaps for you if you think about it, it's not always easy to be open to engaging with different views from those we already hold.

It's not always comfortable perhaps to meet with people who we know are likely to challenge us about why we do what we do or why we think what we think.

Instead, we can have what's called confirmation bias, which is this idea that we tend to favour information which simply confirms what we already believe or value.

So I don't know about you, but I tend to visit the websites or read the newspaper, which is most closely in line with my existing political views. Generally, perhaps, we'll follow people on social media who we already like but already agree with what we figure they're going to say.

[10 : 29] We like to hang out perhaps with like-minded people who we share values with. If we read Christian books or listen to podcasts and so on, they'll often be by people whose views or theology we already agree with.

I do it. I do it all the time. I suspect you do too. In many ways, it's natural and it certainly helps us to feel like we belong, like we found our people, that sort of tribal thing.

It helps us to feel included in life. And yet, if we look at this guy, Nicodemus, now to his credit, he intentionally seeks out someone in Jesus who he knows has a very different outlook and background to him.

Someone who he knows is likely to challenge, likely to upset, likely to disagree with his views. Equally, Jesus does, despite knowing their differences.

He's willing to welcome Nicodemus in as his guest, you know, to share openly and honestly with him. Took guts for Nicodemus to approach Jesus, yeah, but it's clear that Jesus has already had the reputation of someone who welcomed and engaged with people with completely different outlooks to him.

[11 : 49] Real inclusion, therefore, I'd say, is not necessarily about us feeling included in whatever circles we feel comfortable, but rather, it's about the way we're open to and inclusive of others, especially those who are different to us.

Which kind of begs the question, how inclusive are we? How inclusive are you? How inclusive am I? How inclusive are we as a church?

So, for example, if we think about this corporately for a moment, as we look around this morning, as we think about who's connected to St. John's midweek and so on, I wonder who we might notice is missing from our mix.

You know, if we think about our town, how well do we as a church represent and include the diversity of people who we live alongside?

So we might want to ask ourselves, how many teenagers belong to our church? How many single parents? How many young men?

[13 : 06] How many gay people? How many deaf people? How many wheelchair users? How many black or brown people? How many unemployed people?

And so on and so on. And I think these are questions which are worth considering, worth asking. Not to make us feel guilty if we can't identify perhaps many in any of those categories and more in our church, but rather just to be open to cause us perhaps to ask, okay, what can we do about those people who are missing?

How might we work with God in making St. John's more inclusive? More inclusive of young people, of gay people, of black people, of those with learning difficulties and so on.

Of course, St. John's isn't just about Sundays. If I look around Little Friends or Dropping or F&F; and so on, our inclusion and diversity widens out in a good way, I'd say.

And those groups are as much church as this kind of gathering is. But if the way of Jesus is about inclusion, which I think it is, I wonder how we might be open to changing our ways perhaps so that a wider variety of people can find this to be a place of welcome and inclusion.

[14 : 34] It's a challenging thought, one which takes work in weeks and months and years to come may be. But it's the kind of thought which is prompted, I'd suggest, by this story. Now, one of the ways to open up this idea of inclusion and who we may not be welcoming into our midst is to have conversations with those we're different from or who we don't often tend to mix with.

And that's certainly a lesson to be learned from this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus as both of them are open to this meeting. Now, Jesus doesn't turn him away even though he's come at night. Even if Nicodemus does indeed come to see Jesus at night, Nicodemus is keen to meet.

And I guess whilst perhaps Nicodemus hopes that the cover of darkness may stop him from being sussed, stop him from being detected, as we'll see, I think it turns out Nicodemus is actually more in the dark than perhaps he realises.

Now, we don't know where around Jerusalem these two meet. Jesus obviously typically welcomes Nicodemus in wherever he was staying.

And we heard from the off as an opening kind of gambit, Nicodemus is pretty gushing. He says this to Jesus, Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God, for no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.

[16 : 01] It's quite the introduction, you know, Rabbi, it's a term of respect straight off the bat. We know, he says, so he's trying to speak on behalf of other people, perhaps the whole Jewish council. We know you are a teacher.

He's saying Jesus is someone who even they, you know, these established temple teachers can learn from. And not only that, he goes further, you are a teacher who has come from God.

That's pretty high praise for an ofted inspector, even at least. And Nicodemus recognises Jesus' miracles, the signs you're doing. They must be from God because no one could perform the signs you're doing if God were not with him.

It's an incredibly affirming opening introduction, if you like, a welcome of Jesus. Or so at least Nicodemus thinks. If I was being butted up with this kind of thing the first time someone met me, I'd be like, oh shucks, no, no, it's okay, no, no, keep it coming, keep it coming, but no, you know.

But no, as we see elsewhere in the Gospels, that's not Jesus' style. Jesus isn't interested in impressing people with his miracles. It's not about his status or his profile, no, instead, he wants people to recognise the God and the goodness behind these signs, these wonders.

[17 : 21] That's why they're signs, they're pointers to something deeper, not simply to the fame of Jesus or whatever. And so despite Nicodemus' best efforts to butter him up perhaps, to compliment him, Jesus replies with these words.

He says, very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again. To which Nicodemus effectively responds by saying, you what?

He says, we didn't say you what, but he says, how could someone be born when they're old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born.

Now for a clever fella, Nicodemus' response is kind of right out of the Forrest Gump school of taking things far too literally. He's obviously trying to get his head round what being born again might work out as biologically.

No wonder his mind's boggling at the thought of it all. And he can almost imagine Jesus kind of almost rolling his eyes and thinking, blimey, we've got a right Charlie here, come on, you know, but he doesn't do that, no, no.

[18 : 33] Jesus takes his time, he says, look, I'm talking about being born again as in making a new start in life, you know, taking things from the top, a blank canvas with God, being born from above as it literally means, being born from above spiritually.

Why is that the case? Because, well, as Jesus says, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they've got this new start, unless they're born again. You see, for Jesus, he knew full well that being close to God, knowing God, seeing the kingdom of God in action has nothing to do, nothing to do with the circumstances of our physical birth, our breeding, or our background.

For Jesus, someone's social status was irrelevant when considering their spiritual status. Even if you were a high flying VIP member of the Sanhedrin, even if you were one of the nation's teachers, even if you were part of the temple elite, in Jesus' eyes, actually, count it for nothing unless you were prepared to put all that social status aside and be born again, to start from scratch with God.

Yes, I guess Jesus may well long for us to all level up, as they say at the moment, but leveling up, it seems, can only begin if everyone is first prepared to level down, you know, to start as a newborn, effectively, with God and say, okay, build my life your way, God, from the bottom up.

And by way of expanding on what all this means, Jesus continues with this. He says, very truly, I tell you Nicodemus, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the spirit.

[20 : 36] Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the spirit gives birth to spirit. You shouldn't be surprised at my saying, you must be born again. And so being born again means being born of water and spirit.

What does that mean? Well, there are various interpretations, but because Jesus is talking to this member of the Sanhedrin who knows the scriptures inside out, it's likely, I think, that Jesus has a famous passage from the book of Ezekiel in mind, which Nicodemus would have known, but in which water and spirit are mentioned together.

says this, I, God, 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 and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.

God's being born of water therefore means being cleansed by God of everything that's impure, being washed clean of the stuff, the baggage, the sin, which hinders us from being the people God would long for us to be.

[21 : 58] But then having been cleansed, we're then given a new spirit in us, the Holy Spirit of God, the presence of God, who lives in us and with us, helping us. It says here moving us, I like that phrase, moving us to live in God's altogether better ways.

This water and spirit stuff from Ezekiel, it's exactly what baptism is all about. Being cleansed of the dodgy stuff that needs washing away before being filled with a life-shaping presence of God's Spirit, giving us the desire and the ability to live in God's ways.

That's what I'd suggest Jesus is saying to Nicodemus. He's like, come on, look, Nicodemus, you know, can I call you Nick? You know, let's be friends here.

You think you're in with God because of your position in life, because of your status, your learning, your religious affiliation and so on. But I've got to tell you, all that's irrelevant because even someone of your standing needs to be born again, to come before God and be cleansed of all your cock-ups and instead be filled with the love, the joy, the peace, the patience, the kindness, which comes from God's Spirit living in you.

That, says Jesus almost, is what I want you Nicodemus to teach the people. Not that they need some hierarchical, sacrificial temple system to know God. Rather, they simply need to be born again, to humble themselves, to start afresh.

[23 : 37] Born again of water and of the Spirit and then follow me and my ways. Now, Jesus said that 2,000 years ago. That's a truth which remains at the heart of our faith to this day, this call from Jesus to repent and be baptized, to be cleansed by God in order to be filled afresh with God's Spirit, to be born again.

I appreciate this word, born again. If you're my kind of age, it was a big thing in the 70s and 80s like, you're born again Christian. What does that mean? Every Christian's born again. It doesn't mean we sort of throw it out as a term though, because there's good use in it.

And if that's a calling, I guess, which you suspect, perhaps over these past 18 months, perhaps for these last few years, that you suspect God might be placing on your heart, you know, a step God is encouraging you to take in your own journey of faith, to start again with God, this blank canvas, to be born again.

Then come and see me, come and speak to Ruth. We'll happily not only pray for you, but I don't know if you know, if you're not part of St. John's for a little while, you won't know. We've got a baptistry, we've got a pool under the floor here, which Kathy and Sue are balancing on as we speak.

We can baptise you, we can baptise you, get your water in the spirit thing going on. We can do that soon and we can do that safely. If you feel that's something for you, then come and have a chat.

[25 : 09] And I look around and I can see various people who have been in that pool over the years, who we've baptised, who we've dunked and have come out again. I got baptised at the age of 16, back in London.

30 years ago this year it was. Got baptised and best decision ever made in my life. Best decision, second best marrying Gemma, but best decision was being baptised.

And I think that's why Jesus chooses to talk about being born again, with Nicodemus in particular. Because Nicodemus represented the most exclusive of clubs.

The religious elite who stood apart and above everyone else in order to, so they thought, remain pure. people. But Jesus says, nah, you got it all wrong, Nicodemus.

You don't see the kingdom of God at work by being exclusive, by keeping apart from people. Nah. You see God in action by being inclusive, by being willing to shun whatever status you have and join alongside everyone else from all walks of life in starting again as newborn children of the same heavenly parent.

[26 : 27] And you know what? The beauty of this is that Jesus is asking nothing of us that he hasn't already done himself. Being born again, literally, as a newborn baby in the lowliest of circumstances.

Giving up his heavenly status and all that entailed to take on this most down to earth of roles with us. And so I guess if being born again, if being inclusive means that we're being like Jesus, then that, I would say, is all the encouragement we need to embrace for ourselves that inclusive, born again life.