

JOHN 3.1-17: A NEW BIRTH

(Central Baptist Church, Chelmsford 15 July 2007 - Baptismal Service)

Some years ago one of our sons did a choir tour of the Middle East with the Christian rock musician Rick Wakeman. As I was waiting at Heathrow, to meet Timothy from the tour, I overheard one parent say somewhat disparagingly to another parent: "*Oh, that Rick Wakeman, he's one of those born-again Christians!*"

Born again Christianity sadly has had a pretty bad press - not least because President Bush claims to be a 'born again Christian'; indeed, as I understand it, almost every American politician standing for office claims to be born again.

However, in spite of the cheapening of the term by our American cousins, the fact is that *born-again Christianity* is no strange phenomenon peculiar to the modern age: it is *of the very essence of the Christian faith*.

For as we heard from our reading, Jesus himself said: "**No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again**" (v3).

What's more, this was no off-the-cuff remark.

Throughout his conversation with Nicodemus he went on and on about the necessity of being born again. "**You must all be born again**" (v7) Jesus said to Nicodemus.

What was Jesus on about? *What does it really mean to be born again?*

In the light of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus we can say the following seven things about being born again – four are negative statements, three are positive statements!

1. IT'S NOT ABOUT..... BEING GOOD

Look at Nicodemus.

John tells us that he "**belonged to the party of the Pharisees**" (v1)

The term "*Pharisee*" means a '*separated one*'.

Only 6000 of them. They set themselves apart - did their best to live a good life.

Nicodemus belonged to this crack spiritual elite - he couldn't be faulted.

He was the sort of person who

- always washes his empty milk bottles before putting them on the doorstep
- never annoys his neighbours by turning up the volume of Radio 1
- always observes the speed limits, even when the road is clear.

Yet to such a good person Jesus said: "**You must be born again**"

Goodness is not enough.

2. IT'S NOT ABOUT..... BEING RELIGIOUS

There is a difference between being religious and being good.
There are some very good people who never go to church - although without religion, I can't for the life of me see what the basis then is for morality.

But look at Nicodemus.

Like any other good Pharisee, Nicodemus must have been intensely religious.
He was undoubtedly meticulous in his observance of all the minutiae of the Jewish law.

- He knew what it was like to keep the Sabbath, even if it did mean not wearing dentures once a week.
- He fasted, he tithed, he gained all the Brownie points imaginable when it came to being religious.

In today's terms, he was a regular church-goer, always there in his pew - he gave generously to church funds as well as supported all the flag days - what's more, no church event was complete without him.

Yet to even such an intensely religious person, Jesus said: **"You must be born again"**
Religion is not enough

3. IT'S NOT ABOUT..... ADMIRING JESUS

Look again at Nicodemus

John tells us that his very first words to Jesus, were: **"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent by God. No one could perform the miracles you are doing unless God were with him"** (v2). Nicodemus undoubtedly admired Jesus.

Without hesitation he would have described Jesus as *"the best man who ever lived"*.

We see this in the way in which the conversation between Nicodemus & Jesus developed.

Nicodemus began the conversation with a compliment: **"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent by God..."** (v2).

Nicodemus must have been a gentleman - he was politeness itself.

However, I believe Nicodemus was being more than polite - he was also being sincere - he recognised that Jesus had something which others did not have.

He was deeply impressed by Jesus - indeed, who wouldn't have been?

BUT Jesus somewhat rudely broke into Nicodemus' opening remarks: **"Cut the cackle/backscratching - let's get down to brass tacks - I am telling you the truth; no one can see the Kingdom of God without being born again (v3) - you must all be born again"** (v7)

Admiration for Jesus is not enough.

4. IT'S NOT ABOUTHAVING A SPECIAL EXPERIENCE

The trouble with some 'born-again' Christians is that they give you the impression that to be a true Christian you have to have a special experience of Jesus – you have in fact to undergo a pretty tumultuous Damascus-Road type experience of new birth.

- This experience normally begins with a dramatic build-up
- There is sudden and perhaps traumatic moment of new birth
- This is then followed by tidal waves of relief, joy, exhilaration, and love.

Now for many Christians that's the way it is

They can vividly recall the hour, the day, the month, the year of that experience.

In my own case, for instance, I can remember that it was after an evening service on a Sunday, that as an eight-year old child I knelt down and opened the door of my heart to Jesus. Although it was many years ago, I can still give you all kinds of details about that evening.

But we cannot equate the new birth with this kind of special experience.

The fact is that there are many Christians who cannot put a date and a time to their conversion, for the simple reason that their entry into the Christian faith was not marked by any drama.

They say: *"I was brought up in a Christian home – from an early age I was told of the love of God – I've no idea at what stage I began to respond to this love"*.

To which I say: So what? Do you love Jesus now? Are you following him now?

The important thing is not about being able to produce a spiritual birth certificate – the important thing is being alive in Christ now.

In this respect listen to the words of Jesus: **"The wind blows wherever it wishes; you hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. It is like that with everyone who is born of the Spirit"** (v8).

Jesus in effect is saying that we cannot dictate to God as to how he works by his Spirit in people's lives. Just as the wind does its own thing, so too does God.

There is no one way in which people come to a living faith in Jesus.

Sadly there are some Christians who like to have a tidy system of belief, where everything is labeled and sorted into neat piles. To experience the new birth, they say, you have to go through this hoop, then that hoop, and finally yet another hoop.

But the truth is that when we open up the windows of our lives to the Spirit and let the breeze in, time and again all those neat piles of thinking get disturbed.

The new birth is not about having a special experience.

5. IT'S ABOUT.... BELIEVING

OK, you say, the new birth is not about being good or religious – its not about admiring Jesus – its not about having special experience. What is it then?

Yes, perhaps with Nicodemus you feel like saying with a degree of exasperation: “**How can a grown man be born again? He certainly cannot enter his mother’s womb and be born a second time!**” (v4)

The answer is found at the end of Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus.

There we find what is the most well-known verse in the Bible: “**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**” (3.14-16).

Yes, if we want to experience the new life that God offers us all, then all we have to do is to believe – to believe that God loved us so much that God sent his only Son to die for us on the Cross. It’s as simple as that: nothing more – nothing less.

Do notice that *we are here presented with a choice*: we either believe or we don’t believe – and the consequences before us are either life or death.

The choice is ours.

The Oxbridge don, CS Lewis, put it this way: “*We're like eggs at present. And you can't go on indefinitely being just an ordinary egg. We must be hatched or go bad*”

Or to put it in the language of John 3: there are *only two categories of people* - the once-born or the twice-born - the living or the dying

Ultimately we cannot sit on the fence - we either get hatched or we go bad, we either die or we are born to eternal life.

It was with all this in mind that Jesus said to Nicodemus: “**You must be born again**”.

Or rather, he said: “**You must all be born again**”.

Jesus speaks to us all – he appeals to us all to experience the new life that God offers in him.

6. IT'S ABOUTBEING BAPTISED

First and foremost, then, the new birth, is about believing.

But it’s also about being baptized.

It’s about expressing our faith in Jesus in the waters of baptism.

So Jesus said to Nicodemus: Nicodemus, “**No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water**” (v5).

Some people regard baptism as an optional extra.

But the fact is that *baptism is faith in action*.

In the early church an unbaptised Christian would have been a contradiction.

Baptism was an integral part of the process of new birth.

In baptism we express our faith in Jesus who loved us and gave himself for us. When these five are baptized they will not just be getting wet – they will be identifying themselves with Jesus who died for them and rose for them. They will be publicly sealing their commitment to Jesus – just as a couple in a wedding publicly seal their commitment to one another.

The new birth is about believing – it's about expressing that faith in the waters of baptism.

7. IT'S ABOUT..... GOD WORKING IN OUR LIVES

But there is another vital factor belonging to new birth. The new birth is about God working through his Spirit in our lives. Jesus said: **“No one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water AND of the Spirit”** (v5).

It's significant that in the original Greek John engages in a form of word-play. For as a footnote in most Bibles makes clear, the phrase **“born again”** could equally well be translated as *“born from above”*. So Jesus said to Nicodemus: **“A person is born physically of human parents, but is born spiritually of the Spirit. Do not be surprised because I tell you that you must all be born again”** (vv6-7) – i.e. born from above – born of God's Spirit.

The new birth arises from God's Spirit at work in our lives.. When we respond to God's love in Jesus, then God through his Spirit creates the miracle of new birth.

The new birth cannot be explained in purely human terms. It involves God at work in people's lives. True, we may be unable to see God – we may be unable to put God's Spirit under a microscope and discern his DNA - but his effect in people's lives can clearly be seen, as the wind can be seen blowing through the trees.

However, *for God's Spirit to be at work in our lives, we must respond* to God's offer of life in Jesus – faith is the key – faith is the catalyst enabling God to work. The question is: will you allow him to work in your life?

“For 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”. The choice is yours.

Jesus says: **“You must ALL be born again”!**