

John 3: 1-16

Introduction to 'Encounters With Jesus'.

Beginning today, and following through the summer months, we will be looking at several different encounters Jesus had with men, women and children recorded in the Gospels.

As we look at each story we will see the amazing way in which Jesus changed lives –

the way he healed people, welcomed people,

loved people, spoke truth to people

and encouraged them to follow him.

And as we do so, we'll be asking how can Jesus change our lives?

So, over the coming months we won't have 4 readings each week, rather we will just focus on the Gospel passage. Our first encounter today is the story of Nicodemus as he encounters Jesus.

Let's hear it now: John 3: 1-16

From Religion to Relationship

So, our story begins with Nicodemus... right at the start we're told that Nicodemus was a Pharisee.

Now Pharisees are mentioned many times in the Bible, but who were they?

What do we know about them?

Well the Pharisees had developed during the 400-year period between the end of the Old T
and the start of the New T.

They had grown out of an opposition to the changes across society at that time.

During this period the culture around was changing radically;

paganism and altruistic principles were taking root,

resulting in a myriad of confusing and contradictory beliefs and practices,

which meant, bit by bit,

the Jewish culture was being eroded,

the Jewish faith was being rocked and its very core.

This movement is known as the Hellenistic period.

It many ways it can be compared to the secularisation that has taken place in the UK and across the West in the last 40/50 years....

The move we're witnessing as society becomes less and less grounded in Christian principles, in Christian beliefs.

But returning to the Pharisees – the name itself meant “set apart”

which reflected their idea that the Jewish people should be set apart from the culture around them.

Now the Pharisees were also legalists – they followed ‘the rules’,

not merely when it came to the Old Testament Law,

but also,

the 600 plus oral laws that had been developed to guide its implementation.

Although the Pharisees were to be commended for their understanding of the Scriptures and their devotion to the law,

they had one fatal fault,

one that we see Jesus addressing consistently throughout His ministry.

They were so focused on the externals, the outward appearance,

that they failed to recognize the state of their own hearts.

And were told that Nicodemus was one of the leaders of this group.

Jesus refers to him as “the teacher of Israel” which indicates that he was regarded as the most accomplished teacher in all of Israel.

From a human perspective, he was much more qualified than Jesus was to teach.

It's worth saying, that while Jesus was always respectful of those in positions of authority, He was never so intimidated by them or in awe of them that it prevented Him from ministering to them.

When Jesus looked at people, He saw each person as an individual whom He loved and desired to serve rather than identifying that person by his or her status, social position, race, gender, or educational background.

So as Nicodemus comes to visit Jesus,

he begins by acknowledging that Jesus was a teacher, a special teacher,
who had to have been sent by God because of the amazing, astounding things that
He was doing.

And as Nicodemus came to Jesus that night perhaps he thought he could learn something
from Jesus that would help him in his role as a teacher.

Now much is often made of the fact that Nicodemus came to Jesus at night,
usually inferring that he was afraid to be seen with Jesus, and maybe he was.

But perhaps that was the only time when Nicodemus could stop, and slow down for a bit,
and give his full attention to Jesus.

As Jesus begins to talk with Nicodemus in the quiet of the night,

it would've been very easy to have had a quick Bible study,

and Nicodemus to have left with some more head knowledge,

never having addressed the more crucial issue of his heart.

But Jesus was not going to let that happen....

He wanted to probe Nicodemus a bit deeper...

to make him face his real point of need.

And that just what we see unfolding in this passage....

You see Jesus' aim as he talks with Nicodemus is to get him to move beyond religion to the
heart of Christianity... a relationship....a relationship with the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

***You see Jesus' goal was to go deeper, to challenge people to go beyond religion and find
relationship.... Love, healing, fullness of life.***

I've often have people say to me, "*no offence intended - but I'm not really that interested in
religion*".

And when they say that, I tell them that's good news, because neither is Jesus.

That statement usually produces a quizzical look.

But it's true.

Jesus was/is consistently more interested in helping a person develop a relationship with God than He was in their external religion, or outward appearance.

I really think that in many ways, Nicodemus was a lot like the rich young ruler.

When he came to Jesus that night -

I get the feeling he was hoping to learn that one thing he could do to make sure that his religion was adequate to get him into the kingdom of God.

But Jesus completely turns the tables on him and helps Nicodemus to focus on how to get his heart right with God, so he can have a relationship with God rather than to just get more head knowledge.

As Jesus and Nicodemus talk –

Nicodemus tries to shift the conversation from the spiritual to the physical, probably because that was what he was most comfortable with.

So, when Jesus speaks of being born again, Nicodemus tries to knock Jesus off course by asking how he can go back into his mother's womb and be born again!

Now we know Nicodemus isn't foolish, so I think he probably understood that Jesus was speaking of a spiritual rebirth.

But because he was so focused on external religion,

Nicodemus wasn't comfortable getting into a conversation that would have to deal with his heart.

Perhaps he was thinking that spiritual rebirth just wasn't possible for him.

He was so far down the road of trying to enter the kingdom of God through rules and rituals,

that He just couldn't imagine another way.

But because Jesus understood how important it was for Nicodemus to understand his need for a Saviour,

Jesus didn't allow Nicodemus to get Him off track.

Jesus tells Nicodemus exactly how he can enter the kingdom of God with these words:

Truly, truly, I say to you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.

But what did Jesus mean, what was he saying here?

Well almost certainly the best explanation comes from Scripture itself.

Nicodemus would have been quite familiar with this passage: it is taken from Ezekiel.
36:24-27

God said:

I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land.

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols.

And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you.

And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.

And I will put my Spirit within you,

and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.

This prophecy refers to the rebirth of the nation of Israel which was still to come.

But you'll notice here the reference to both being cleansed by water and having God's Spirit placed in the hearts of His people.

Jesus' message to Nicodemus was quite clear.

Just as Israel needs to be cleansed as a nation and be given God's Spirit in preparation for entering the kingdom of God,

Nicodemus as an individual needed that same thing.

He needed to be cleansed and to have God's Holy Spirit in his life.

Then, and only then, would he be ready to enter the kingdom of God.

And just as the nation Israel can't do anything to cleanse itself and is dependent upon God to do that cleansing,

Nicodemus couldn't do anything on his own to be cleansed.

He was completely dependent on God for that.

And Jesus gives Nicodemus two illustrations that confirm that idea.

The first illustration was the wind.

Although we can hear the wind and we can see what the wind does,

we can't see the wind itself.

The same is true of one born of the Spirit.

There is no outward change that we can see,

but we can discern that there has been a changed heart on the inside by how that change affects the life of that person.

The second illustration was the bronze serpent on the pole that Moses had lifted up in order to save the lives of the people who had been bitten by serpents because they had grumbled against God.

Just as the Israelites had to look upon that bronze serpent in faith, to live,

every human must look upon the crucified and risen Jesus in faith and trust to receive eternal life and be able to enter the kingdom of heaven.

Well - it's understandable why this idea was so hard for Nicodemus to swallow.

After all, he'd spent his entire life trying to observe the law the very best he could so that he could earn his way into the kingdom of heaven.

And now Jesus comes along and tells him all of that is a complete waste of time and that he needs to start over again by being reborn through faith in Jesus.

It's interesting that we don't know exactly how Nicodemus responds to Jesus that day, whether he placed his faith in Him. We do get two more quick glimpses of Nicodemus, first when we find him standing up for Jesus' as the authorities try to arrest him and then later when Nicodemus helps Joseph of Arimathea prepare Jesus' body for burial.

There's not really enough there to know for sure whether Nicodemus responded in faith to Jesus and experienced that spiritual rebirth.

And so were left with a question...an open door...as it were.

For us looking at this encounter today – we are left with a challenge.....

a searching, probing question....

It's easy for all of us, to think that somehow, we can earn or work our way into the kingdom of God

We can focus on the outward appearance,

on religion, on attendance at church,

on being nice,

on our commitment to charity and service,

the hope that we are all good person.....

It's easy to focus on head knowledge... on what we understand....

rather than ever facing that essential step of starting over spiritually by being reborn.

And even when we've been spiritually re-born – I think we all have a tendency –

it's within our nature – to slip backwards,

to think that somehow we can do something....

That somehow our faith is about head knowledge...

rather than lived, personal experience....

This encounter reminds us... that Christianity is all about relationship...

relationship with the Father, through Jesus, empowered by the Spirit.

And so, as we start this new series... hear the invitation... the call

Come afresh to God, not reliant on your own head knowledge,

or religion, or ability to be perfect...

but rather as one who will accept and trust in the new birth and the new life poured out for each of us in Jesus.

Amen.