

John 3:1 – 21: You must be born again

I'm sure that most of us have played a word game, where one person says a word, and the others have to say a word that goes with it. The words might be complementary, like Morecambe and Wise, Batman and Robin, fish and chips; or contrasting like north and south, on and off. Sometimes they might be a bit of both; day and night, for example, are both complementary to one another – they follow one another to make a period of 24 hours – and in another sense they're opposites to one another: light and dark.

In today's passage, we shall see several pairs of words – some complementary, some contrasting, some somewhere in between. Our first two words then:

The Pharisee and the Carpenter

¹Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. ²He 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."

The Pharisee and the Carpenter. So, what do we know about Nicodemus? Well, he was clearly a wealthy man. In John chapter 19, we read that he brought a large quantity of herbs and spices to embalm Jesus' body: nearly three-quarters of a hundredweight, in fact! Such an extravagant quantity would usually only be used in the burial of a king.

And in verse 1 here, we see that he was an influential man: a Pharisee – a member of the ruling council. The Pharisees believed that the first five books of the Old Testament – the Torah – constituted the perfect law of God. They contained everything you needed to know in order to live a godly life. From this law, they worked out regulations governing every aspect of life. For example, on the Sabbath, as you know, you were to do no work. Tying a knot in a rope was defined as work, and therefore forbidden on the Sabbath. But it was lawful if it was a simple knot that could be tied or untied with one hand. Also, a woman could tie the string of her girdle on the Sabbath. Suppose a man wanted to let down a bucket into a well to get some water on the Sabbath. He wasn't allowed to tie it to a rope; but he could tie it to a woman's girdle. To us, this might seem absurd, even ludicrous, but to the Pharisees, these laws were a matter of life and death.

Astonishingly, this aristocratic Pharisee, Nicodemus, seeks out an uneducated carpenter from Nazareth – an itinerant preacher with a rag-bag collection of followers – to talk about the kingdom of God. John makes a point of saying that he came to Jesus at night. Nicodemus was obviously keeping a low profile. Should we criticise him for this? Surely, it's better to come in secret than not to come at all. And later, when he came to anoint Jesus's body, Nicodemus did so quite openly.

He starts respectfully: *Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God.* But Jesus interrupts his prepared speech: ³*Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again."*

Nicodemus hadn't asked a question yet, but Jesus *replied* to him, literally he 'answered' him. Jesus knew that he wanted to know how God could become real to him. So he tells him that if he wants to see the kingdom of God, he must be born again.

Our next pair of words, a complementary pair this time:

Seeing and entering

The language of new birth runs all through the New Testament.

In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope. (1 Peter 1:3)

He chose to give us birth through the word of truth. (James 1:18)

And in his letters, Paul often referred to new birth:

He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. (Titus 3:5)

And to the church at Corinth, he wrote: *If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. (2 Corinthians 5:17)*

Unless a person experiences this new birth, Jesus says, they won't be able to see the kingdom of God.

A man once stood on a soapbox at Hyde Park Corner, pouring scorn on Christianity. 'People tell me that God exists, but I can't see him. People tell me that there is a life after death; but I can't see it. People tell me that there is a judgment to come; but I can't see it. People tell me that there is a heaven and a hell; but I can't see them.' He won cheap applause and climbed down from his makeshift pulpit.

Another man struggled onto the soapbox. 'People tell me that there is green grass all round,' he said, 'but I can't see it. People tell me that there is blue sky above; but I can't see it. People tell me that there are trees nearby; but I can't see them. You see, I'm blind.'

⁴"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!" Nicodemus asks, 'How? How can this be?' He didn't understand the kingdom of God; he just couldn't see it. Before we come to Christ, we're all spiritually blind – we just can't see the kingdom of God.

Jesus says that two things depend upon being born again: unless a person is born again, he says, they can't see the kingdom of God, and unless they are born again, they can't *enter* the kingdom of God: ⁵*Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit."*

What does Jesus mean by being *born of water*? Most commentators agree that he was referring here to being baptised in water – a symbolic cleansing, where

we die to our old life and rise to new life in Christ as we come up out of the water. If so, he was perhaps challenging Nicodemus to join all those who had publicly acknowledged their need of forgiveness, and had been baptised by John, John the Baptist, who said, *“I baptise you with water, but he will baptise you with the Holy Spirit.”* (Mark 1:7, 8)

The difficulty with this view is that some people have taken it to mean that you can't enter the kingdom of God unless you've been baptised. Important though baptism may be, we must not add anything to the gospel we preach; it is by grace alone, in Christ alone, that we are saved.

No, I believe that Jesus was following up on Nicodemus's remark about a person entering their mother's womb a second time; that he was referring to our natural birth, through the breaking of a mother's waters. Indeed, in the next verse, verse 6, he talks about flesh giving birth to flesh. A baby in the womb is in the dark, unaware of the world outside. To enter life outside the womb, a baby must be born. Its mother's waters will break, and an amazing event takes place. The new-born infant no longer relies on nourishment and oxygen through the umbilical cord, but begins to breathe air for the first time; to take in milk through its mouth; to use its eyes to see the world around, its sense of touch to experience the mother's loving caress.

Although the baby is at the centre of the birth process, it doesn't have a choice whether to be born or not. The difference is that we do – the choice is ours. We can choose to live our lives independent of God, persistently breaking the greatest commandment: to love the Lord God with all our heart, mind, soul and strength. Why, then, should we imagine that we can sail into God's presence when the moment comes? If we reject him throughout this life, then ultimately, he will underline our decision – and the kingdom of God will be closed to us. Unless a person is born again, born of water and the Spirit, Jesus says, they cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Seeing and entering. Our next pair of words:

The Flesh and the Spirit

⁶Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' ⁸The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Three times, in verse 3 and verse 5, and now here in verse 7, Jesus says: *You must be born again.*

Things of the flesh, earthly things, can only give rise to other earthly things. The flesh – our earthly self – can't bring our spirit to life. Paul, quoting from Isaiah, wrote: *No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him...* (1 Corinthians 2:9) He's saying that even if we had all the wisdom in the world, we couldn't begin to grasp what God has

done for us. But Paul goes on: *...but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit.* (1 Corinthians 2:10)

Here at Emmanuel, we have a strong emphasis on the Bible as the word of God. But unless the Holy Spirit is at work in us, the Bible is just a history book and a collection of wise sayings. My personal testimony is that when I prayed for the Holy Spirit to fill me, the Bible suddenly became alive – words leapt off the page. It was as if God was speaking to me personally. The Bible had become the *living* word of God. *Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.*

In verse 8, the Greek word *pneuma* is used twice. The first time, it's translated into English as *wind* – *the wind blows wherever it pleases*. The second time, *pneuma* is translated *Spirit* – *so it is with everyone born of the Spirit*. *Pneuma* can also mean *breath* – and, of course, it's where we get words like *pneumatic* and *pneumonia*. Jesus is saying that we may not be able to see the wind, but we can certainly see its effect. We may not be able to see the Holy Spirit – but we can see his effect on people's lives.

A story is told of a workman who had been an alcoholic. He was converted to Christ, and his workmates did their best to make him feel a fool. 'Surely, you don't believe in miracles and things like that. Surely, for instance, you don't believe that Jesus turned water into wine.' The man answered, 'I don't know whether he turned water into wine when he was in Palestine. But I do know that in my own house, he has turned beer into furniture.'

The Flesh and the Spirit. Our next pair of words:

Earthly things and Heavenly things

⁹“How can this be?” Nicodemus asked. ¹⁰“You are Israel's teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? ¹¹Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. ¹²I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?

Nicodemus appears confused, and asks, 'How can this be?' Jesus seems rather harsh in his reply. I think perhaps Nicodemus isn't lacking the *ability* to understand, but the *willingness* to understand. As Israel's teacher, he must have been familiar with the idea of new birth. He would know well the prophecy in Ezekiel, for instance: *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh* (Ezekiel 36:26) And he would also be familiar with Ezekiel's vision of a valley of dry bones – a picture of the house of Israel spiritually dead. The Lord promises to put his breath into these dry bones, his Spirit into the people of Israel, and bring them to life again.

No, the question Nicodemus really wanted to ask was: how can *I* experience this new birth? But he was afraid of what it might mean for him.

Despite Jesus's apparent harshness, he doesn't give up on Nicodemus, but continues to teach him about heavenly things using an earthly illustration. ¹³No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. ¹⁴Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, ¹⁵that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him."

Jesus reminds Nicodemus of Moses and the bronze snake. As the Israelites wandered in the desert, they were being bitten by poisonous snakes, and many died. *The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people. The Lord said to Moses, "Make a bronze snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived. (Numbers 21:7 - 9)*

No doubt Nicodemus didn't understand what Jesus meant at the time, but surely he was there on Calvary, seeing Jesus, the Son of Man, lifted up on a cross. And when he saw him, he would have remembered what Jesus had said. I feel sure that he then became a true believer and found eternal life.

Earthly things and heavenly things. Our final contrasting pair:

Life and Death

¹⁶For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. ¹⁸Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ¹⁹This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. ²⁰Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. ²¹But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

You may be familiar with the quote attributed to Bill Shankly, the legendary Liverpool manager: 'Some people believe football is a matter of life and death. I am very disappointed with that attitude. I can assure you it is much, much more important than that.'

Jesus now presents us with stark choices, and still more contrasting pairs:

- v16: perish or have eternal life
- v17: be saved or be condemned
- v19: live in the light or live in darkness
- vv 20, 21: do evil or live by the truth

Verse 16 is the greatest love verse – possibly the best-known verse – in the whole Bible. But just as it conveys the depth of God's love towards the world that

he has made and the offer of eternal life, so it carries with it the possibility of eternal death. Jesus makes it clear that his statement to Nicodemus 'You must be born again' is not just pious advice: it is a vital requirement if he is to enter the kingdom of God.

Look at the progression of these statements by Jesus:

- v15: everyone who believes may have eternal life in him
- v16: whoever believes in him shall not perish
- v18: whoever does not believe stands condemned already
- and if we look down to the end of the chapter, v36: whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them

There's an increasing urgency in these words of Jesus. One day you and I will stand before the judgement seat of God. But the wonderful news of the Gospel is that the Son of God did not come into the world to condemn, but to save. So, my dear brothers and sisters, choose life, not death.

David Watson tells of Bishop Taylor Smith, a former Chaplain-General of the British Forces, when he was once preaching in a large cathedral. In order to emphasise the necessity of this new birth, he said: 'My dear people, do not substitute anything for the new birth. You may be a member of a church, but church membership is not new birth, and unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'

On his left sat the Archdeacon in his stall. Pointing directly at him, he said: 'You might even be an archdeacon like my friend in his stall and not be born again, and unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. You might even be a bishop like myself, and not be born again, and unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'

A day or so later Taylor Smith received a letter from the Archdeacon, in which he wrote: My dear Bishop: You have found me out. I have been a clergyman for over thirty years, but I have never known anything of the joy that Christians speak of. I never could understand it. Mine has been a hard, legal service. I did not know what the matter was with me, but when you pointed directly at me, and said, 'You might even be an archdeacon and not be born again', I realised in a moment what the trouble was. I had never known anything of the new birth.

The next day the Bishop and the Archdeacon met and looked at the Bible together; and after some hours, both were on their knees, the Archdeacon taking his place before God as a sinner, and telling Christ that he would trust him as his Saviour. From that moment everything was different.

David Watson adds: It doesn't matter who you are: theologian, ordinand, lecturer, minister, bishop; 'you must be born again'. Those are the words of Christ, the Son of God.

Amen