

## Second Sunday of Lent, Year A

Genesis 12:1-4a, Romans 4:1-5, 13-17, John 3:1-17

“Have you been born again?” That was the question in the 60s and 70s, often asked in a rather smug superior fashion of anyone considered not to be a Proper Christian. I’ll come back to the question but first let us consider the person to whom Jesus said that he must be born again, Nicodemus.

I wonder if there isn’t a little bit of Nicodemus in each of us. Although Nicodemus was a Jewish ruler and an esteemed rabbi which we are not. But, as such, he should have had confidence in the faith that he taught. After all, he was a Pharisee. Pharisees saw things in black and white. Either you obeyed the rules and would be in when the kingdom of God came or you disobeyed and were not.

But Nicodemus was a thinker, much as I suspect each of us are. He was prepared to doubt and to question – at least in his own heart. So he comes to Jesus by night under the cover of darkness. He cannot afford to expose his doubts to others. After all, he is the great teacher. He has to be crystal clear, dogmatic even.

“This is the way of the kingdom of God.” And to be part of the kingdom of God, to be favoured by God, then a person, in his view, had to follow all the Jewish laws.

So why does Nicodemus doubt? Well, he is conflicted because of what he sees. What he discerns about Jesus is in contradiction to what he believes. Here is this Jew, Jesus, with the required tassels on his garment and a phylactery on his wrist, consorting with sinners, the unclean and outcasts in society and not at all conforming to the necessary requirements for acceptability in the kingdom of God.

But nevertheless, here is clearly *a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.* I don’t think this is flattery on Nicodemus’s part before he switches tack and comes in hard putting Jesus straight. Otherwise why would he come in secret? No, I think this is fencing in to what he really wants to ask, his embarrassing question exposing his doubts.

Does Nicodemus think that there must be more to faith? More by way of a connection with God?

Because Jesus seems to have it - *no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him*. Does Nicodemus say to himself, as we do sometimes, “there must be more than this”?

If so, I think Nicodemus is right. Is he perhaps thinking back to Ezekiel (36:24-27) where God says that when exiled Israel is back in its own land and worshipping God in the way he desires, that God *will give ... a new heart, and a new spirit .... And I will remove the heart of stone ... and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you* (Ezekiel 36:26-27a).

Whatever question it is that Nicodemus comes to ask, whatever debate he intends to have with Jesus, Jesus pre-empts him with a bold statement of his own, “*Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again (or born from above)*”

The statement wrong-foots Nicodemus, as no doubt Jesus intended. “*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!*”

Perhaps Nicodemus wasn’t thinking about the God-given new heart of Ezekiel 36 after all.

Because Nicodemus doesn’t get it. At least, not on this occasion. He isn’t thinking spiritually at all.

His understanding of the kingdom of God is misguided. And here again is where we might have a little in common with him. The rabbis rightly understood that the kingdom of God would mean that God would be king, of course, ruling with righteousness and justice, ushering in a golden age. But what they wrongly assumed was that this would be a Jewish kingdom established in the physical land of Israel as it was.

Now we don’t think like that. But where we might be similar is when assume, as Nicodemus did – and I think incorrectly – that the kingdom of God is future only, a heavenly kingdom, initiated for us by Christ’s second coming.

But that doesn't accord with the Gospels. In Luke (17:21) Jesus says that the kingdom of God is "*within you*". God's kingdom rule has already begun.

Nicodemus doesn't get it. His whole paradigm of faith depends on doing, keeping the laws, staying clean. Even when confronted with the concept of being born again he is thinking in terms of physically going back into his mother's womb.

But Jesus isn't talking about doing, but about trust, about faith.

Of course, Abram had to do when he left Harran in obedience to God. But his faith came first. When he set out from the prosperous trading city of Harran he was trusting that God would do what he said and bless him. He gave up knowing and security for faith. As Paul wrote, and he's quoting Genesis 15 (6) "*Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.*" He "saw" the kingdom by faith.

We also "do" in response to faith when we partake in the Eucharist. "*Do this is remembrance of me.*" But faith comes first. Holy Communion is meaningless without it.

The danger is then, of course, that we start "doing" to secure our eternal life, rather than "doing" as an expression of our faith.

It is faith that leads into new birth. Jesus says that to have eternal life we must be born of the Spirit.

"Have you been born again?" we ask. In other words does your belief in Jesus lead you into renewal in God's Holy Spirit, with the new heart and the new spirit of Ezekiel? "*Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again (or born from above)*"

What did Nicodemus think when he heard Jesus talking about "seeing" the kingdom of God? What does it mean to see the kingdom of God? Jesus obviously equates it with eternal life. And I think there are probably three aspects.

First is indeed the future kingdom of God's rule over new heavens and a new earth of which we Christians expect to be a part. We "see" that kingdom now by faith.

What is faith? Google tells me that it is a strong, confident belief, often held without absolute, tangible proof. Or as the writer to the Hebrews put it, *faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see*. Faith is the means by which we are born again and renewed by Holy Spirit.

So the second aspect of “seeing” the kingdom of God is what we see - or should see - in our own selves. Do we have the witness of the Spirit within crying “Abba, Father” (Romans 8:16)? Are we aware of the seal of the Holy Spirit guaranteeing our inheritance in the heavenly kingdom (Ephesians 1:13-14)? Can we look at ourselves and see growth in the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23)?

And thirdly, do we see, and can others around us see, signs of the kingdom? Can our neighbours look at us and our influence and say, “Yes, there is more, more than just turning up for a service in church on a Sunday morning. More than just believing the right things. Yes, God is with them.”

May it be so, although I think, sadly, that the light is often still under a bushel.  
Amen

Chris Shaw  
1 March 2026