

Sunday 05 March 2023 – Malcolm Brookbanks

'I tell you the truth; no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.' Jesus uses this expression to describe coming out of spiritual darkness into the light of his saving grace. But in order to do that a person needs to accept their rescue by Jesus from their sinful nature. It was this concept that Jesus tried to explain to Nicodemus in the interview the two men had in our gospel reading.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. First let's have a brief look at the Old Testament reading. What is it telling us? Well here we have Abraham being told by God that He will make him the 'human father of all nations'. In a pagan world of many gods Abraham was able to be open to the One Creator and came into a covenant relationship with him. And Judaism was born, to be a chosen people through whom all the world would be blessed. Later the guiding principles of the Law were given to Moses and by the time Jesus came on the scene, Judaism was well established and minutely organised. But how had the relationship with God enabled the world to be blessed? You could say God had been privatised and the bit about the world side-lined. It seems the powerful hierarchy were more interested in administering the Law, which had tended to smother the relationship with God.

Then our gospel reading brings us the interview between Jesus and Nicodemus, a Pharisee, one of the ruling elite leaders of Judaism so intent on administering the law. These leaders were aware of Jesus and they didn't like what he said or did. They were considering how best to deal with him as they already had their own pattern for the Messiah. Being one of them Nicodemus would have heard about Jesus and his curiosity was aroused. But, it wouldn't do for his friends to be aware of his visit nor did he want to give the impression that he intended to become a committed disciple. He comes therefore, under the cover of darkness so that no one would see him and which suggests that for all his theological learning he lacked spiritual insight. He politely greets Jesus but before he can get another word in Jesus brusquely upfront, sets before him the crucial lesson he wants to teach. Jesus knew Nicodemus' mind and heart and understood his motive in going to see him. Jesus says 'I tell you the truth; no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again.' In other words it's impossible, to be a true subject of God's kingdom, living under his liberating rule, without starting a radically different life, starting all over again like a physical birth emerging from darkness into light.

This knocks Nicodemus back, as being from the top drawer of Jewish society he thought he must surely be more acceptable than most in God's kingdom! But Jesus says that privilege isn't enough, religion isn't enough and morality isn't enough to enable anyone to enter God's kingdom. Only one thing will do – rebirth. Nicodemus hovers between faith and unbelief. He knows Jesus is from God but even so he hankers for the status quo and doesn't seem to understand Jesus' words about new birth. He responds with how can it be? His question may also come from the fact that as an Israelite he would consider himself born into faith but Jesus explains that the two types of birth: the physical birth of the human body and the spiritual birth as a child of God if the spirit of God comes to live in us. Jesus admits that there is a mystery in this when he speaks of not knowing where the wind comes from or where it's going, but nonetheless, being fully aware of its effects. In this he is using word play because the word for wind in Greek can also mean 'breath' or 'spirit'. In Genesis God's spirit breathes the 'breath of life' into Adam. So God now mysteriously, sovereignly, breathes life again into those who believe in his Son.

Jesus continues with describing his authority to exercise power over those whom he teaches. He reminds Nicodemus of the incident in the wilderness when the Israelites were punished by God for their grumbling and then healed only if they looked at a snake that Moses had erected on a pole. Jesus says that his role is like that of the snake. He has the authority to bring new life to all who look at him. But, like the snake, he can only do so if he's 'lifted up' – not on a pole but a cross. His is a costly authority to exercise, an authority that brings life to others at his expense.

What was the impact of this conversation on Nicodemus? For the next three years he didn't publicly acknowledge Christ but he watched and pondered Jesus teachings. To me he represents some people today who have a sneaking regard for Jesus but at the same time don't want to commit because it wouldn't be seen as 'cool'. In the Sanhedrin council Nicodemus opposed the schemes of the priests to destroy Jesus and after Jesus crucifixion he, along with Joseph of Aramatheia, came forward to give Jesus a decent burial. He emerged from darkness into light and went on to use his wealth to sustain the infant church. He was scorned for his efforts by those who had revered him. But his faith was now strong despite the decline in his worldly wealth and he was, in his way, exercising the covenant to be a blessing to the whole world.

Emerging from darkness into the light is a thread that runs through many instances of people's lives being turned round – many on the day of Pentecost were filled with the Holy Spirit and, one presumes, because they were filled with the light. But what about all the other people in different places and throughout the ages that have come to know Jesus? For most of them it wouldn't have been a big public event such as Pentecost, although some people used to say that the Billy Graham evangelism gatherings did affect many people in the same way.

For most of us though I suspect accepting Christ as our saviour comes upon us in quieter ways. Some of us were born into the church and as we've grown, God's light has grown within us, taking us over as the meaning and purpose of our lives. Others may have started out in the Church, wandered away and then had something happen that brought them back to face Jesus' message in a way that they just couldn't ignore. Others may just have stumbled into Christianity and found their lives changed forever.

St Paul stumbled on the road to Damascus as seeing the light for him was absolutely blinding and we know how he was reborn. In a gentler coming to rebirth Tony Porter had his interest in Christ piqued by a friend. In his little booklet about his conversion experience entitled 'Prince of Thieves' Tony writes that he was at university and went to a football practice session where he collided with a fellow player twice his own size. He sustained a leg injury which put paid to his hopes of a professional football career. Whilst recovering from his injury a friend visited him and suggested that he spend some time thinking about Christ by reading the gospels. Tony set to and as he read about the three people crucified at Calvary he recognised that one of the criminals who hung with Jesus hurled insults at him whilst the other criminal asked Jesus to remember him in his kingdom. Jesus responded with those well-known words 'I tell you the truth today you will be with me in Paradise'. In that moment on 10 February 1972 Tony realised that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died in his place at Calvary and he made the choice to accept the gift of God's love. How did this rebirth change his life? Well, he went on to become an Anglican Priest and in March 2006 was consecrated as the Bishop of Sherwood, in the diocese of Nottingham where I come from. Throughout his ministry he used sport as a means to reach out to people and score goals for team Christ.

The latter part of the gospel reading today reminds us that Jesus makes it possible for people to start all over again, to leave the past behind, to be rescued from hurts real or imagined, to be freed from powers that possess them or failures of which they are ashamed and to shake off the shallow existence of life without God. Jesus gift to them and to us is of new life, salvation and light and truth. Of course, we aren't all called to be religious leaders but, through our changed lives, as we live day by day loving God and our neighbours as ourselves, we can express the nature of God in kind words and deeds. We may find ourselves in a surprising conversation with a Nicodemus at any time of day or place. As we attend to them, listening with respect and responding with grace, Jesus encounters others through us. Amen