

Born Again From Above

John 3.1-17

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life

John 3.16.

There's a story about a theatre goer emerging back out onto the street after seeing a production of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and commenting to a companion, "Well I didn't think much of that play; it was nothing but a string of quotations."

The Gospel according to St John can sometimes strike the reader similarly. It is extraordinarily quotable; and, like most quotable documents, it is extremely prone to having its words repeated out context, as though John 3.16 (and many other verses) were slogans or mottoes or proverbs, rather than sentences uprooted from particular incidents or stories within an overarching narrative.

Many Christians will happily quote you John 3.16 at the drop of a mitre, but if you ask them about the context of that well-known verse, far fewer will be able to tell you that it comes from John's first story about Nicodemus. Even the fact that there are not one, not two, but three stories about Nicodemus in John's gospel comes as a surprise to many who reckon that they know the Bible well enough to quote it at people.

Read against the backdrop of Nicodemus' night-time visit, John 3.16 becomes the culmination of the response to him and people like him, and perhaps like us, who believe they know Jesus and who come to him not to be turned upside down by his holy newness, but to have their existing understanding affirmed and settled. Read in its entirety, however, we can see that the passage is not primarily about our knowledge and love of God in Christ, or our belief in the words of John 3.16, but about realising that it is we who are known and loved by God, and so drawn into a mystery far beyond our understanding and our wisdom.

So why this verse and, just as importantly, why this story?

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life

John 3.16.

The connection between Nicodemus and John 3.16 may not seem immediately evident. In part, this is because Nicodemus finds his conversation with Jesus so confusing that we, as readers,

end up experiencing some of that same confusion. But let's step back for a moment and look at the whole exchange; then ask ourselves, is it really so strange that a conversation about birth, to which there are no fewer than eight references in just six verses, should culminate in a statement about life?

In fact, let's take another step back, and look at what comes immediately before today's reading:

When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone

John 2.23-25.

Who are those to whom Jesus "would not entrust himself" and what was that he knew about them?

Let's take a third step back, and look one more time. This time let's include the Prologue to John's gospel in our view of this story's context, where we read that Jesus is the incarnate Word, and that

In him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it

John 1.4-5.

In a gospel in which true life is light and, later, night will fall as the betrayer leaves the table (13.30), Nicodemus comes to Jesus under cover of darkness. The night-time setting of Nicodemus' appearance helps to suggest that he, for one, is among those to whom Jesus does not entrust himself, for he comes in darkness. Not only that, but rather than ask Jesus who he is, he tells him:

"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God"

John 3.2.

This confirms our suspicions. Nicodemus is indeed one of those many, mentioned at the end of chapter 2, who

believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing

John 2.24,

and therefore thinks he knows who Jesus is. But what "we know" – or think we know – is not at all a firm foundation for faith in Jesus Christ.

And so Jesus immediately begins to undo Nicodemus' certainty:

Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.

John 3.3,

And now we can see that this is not in fact the *non sequitur* it appears to be. Rather, Jesus has cut straight to the heart of the matter, and told this Pharisee that he cannot rely on his merely human knowledge. True knowledge of Jesus is not a matter of empirical observation and inference, but of receiving a wholly new world view: a new birth into an alternative life. Unless Nicodemus is born again into this new life, with its new view of the world, he can neither see the Kingdom of God, nor enter into it.

The light shines in the darkness

John 1.3,

and if Nicodemus wants to see clearly, he must come out of the darkness of night and into the light of God's day.

As their conversation proceeds, Jesus picks up on the words and ideas introduced by Nicodemus and repeats them, but each time with more profound meaning; and so we see the repetition of words such as "God" and "enter", and repeated references to being born. With each repetition Jesus expands the scope of the conversation, from the smallness of Nicodemus' world view to the breadth of his – God's – world view, from the signs on which Nicodemus and others base their hope, to the invisible mystery of the Spirit/wind (the two words are the same in Greek), which can give him birth into God's new life. And slowly... slowly... slowly... light begins to dawn!

Jesus tells Nicodemus that he must be born "from above". The phrase "from above" is a translation of the single Greek word (ἀνωθεν, *anóthen*) which recurs in John's gospel when Jesus says,

The one who comes from above is above all.

3.31,

when he tells Pontius Pilate,

You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above

19.11

and in the description of Jesus' robe being

woven in one piece from the top

19.23.

But ἀνωθεν can also mean simply "again", and this is the meaning that Nicodemus hears, which so baffles him:

"How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

John 3.4

So Jesus elaborates on this birth from above for Nicodemus' benefit – and, of course, for ours. This rebirth is not a physical birth at all, but a birth of water and Spirit. It is the birth “from above”, and it represents, not a literal being “born again” but a complete paradigm shift from the earthly, human perspective of those who, like Nicodemus, base their faith on signs and wonder, to the heavenly, divine perspective of God who loves everyone, whether they have received signs and wonders or not.

The phrase “with water and the spirit”, reminds us of Jesus' own baptism, which John has already alluded to in his prologue, when John the Baptist testifies:

“I myself did not know him; but I came baptizing with water for this reason, that he might be revealed to Israel. I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and it remained on him. I myself did not know him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water said to me, ‘He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ And I myself have seen and have testified that this is the Son of God”

John 1.31-34.

It's important to note that that when Jesus says,

What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit

John 3.6,

he is not talking about two parts of the human person – this is not body versus soul - but about the two perspectives, earthly and heavenly, from which the complete person, body and soul, can live. Birth “from above” into a life in which God's kingdom is visible and accessible, places the whole person in a new light. Nicodemus, who has not experienced it, has only seen Jesus' signs from the earthly perspective, What he – and we – need to do is to see, not just the signs, but the whole of human life from the heavenly perspective. Only then will we recognise Jesus for who he is, the light that shines in the darkness.

This brings us to the climax of the conversation. First, Jesus says,

Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life

John 3.14-15.

This is John's first use of the term “lifted up” to refer to Jesus' death. In John, the crucifixion forms part of Jesus' glorification and so is both his exaltation and his lifting up to death.

And finally, Jesus says,

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life

John 3.16.

In John 3.16, eternal life is linked inextricably with God's love. It is not our faith that brings us eternal life, but God's love for the world: not just for the followers of Jesus, but for the whole world.

In the Prologue to John's gospel, the world is shrouded in darkness and the light shines alone. But God's intention for this dark world is not condemnation, even when it lifts up and kills the Son. On the contrary, in that moment especially, the Son will be revealed as the Saviour of this dark world.

When we become too sure of what we know about Jesus, when we believe that we have grasped him at last, we can expect our certainties to be undone, just as Nicodemus had his certainties undone. That undoing – that overturning of our certainty -- may be a very good thing if it allows us to experience anew belief in the miracle of our birth from above into eternal life, which has nothing to do with what we know or what we are (any more than our birth from our mother's womb did).

Believing in Jesus Christ is not a matter of being convinced, or convincing ourselves, that Jesus is God, but of adopting that heavenly perspective on life that Jesus came to bring us, and which, through our actions, transforms the life of this world.

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