

One of the things I have noticed outside our church building here are the two signs. Who can tell me what they say? ... Just like our beamers here one has much less colour than the other – no doubt it has faded in the sun more. So I suppose they are more than a decade or so old. However I find it curious what they actually say – the Kingdom of God is near. I wonder what that says to a passer by? How many of them actually have any idea what the Kingdom of God is or have any concern about it being ‘near’? It is a very ‘in house’ jargon term to use on a sign outside.

So what is the Kingdom of God? I’m sure you’ve had teaching on this before. A kingdom is the realm in which a king reigns. For those of us who know God we know that where God reigns there is true and loving righteousness/justice. When God’s kingdom is near in this world God is putting things right, the way he designed them to be. Think of the way Jesus taught us to pray. Your name be hallowed, your Kingdom come, your will be done – on earth as it is in heaven – a clue that the way things are in the heavenly realm, where God’s name is Holy and God’s will is done, is the way things are on earth when God’s Kingdom is near – no sickness, no suffering, no hunger or pain, our tears wiped away, people in right relationships with God, with each other, with the earth he has given us to live on and look after for him.

All these characteristics of the Kingdom of God were well known by God’s people through the Hebrew scriptures. At the time of Jesus there were many who longed to see God’s Kingdom come. Nicodemus, about whom we heard in today’s reading from the gospel of John, was one of them. He was a Pharisee. **PPT** Now Pharisees have a rather bad reputation – Jesus called them hypocrites and criticized them heavily. However they were also among the most devout followers of God as well and not all of them were against Jesus.

Nicodemus was one of an estimated 600 Pharisees who devoted themselves to the study and teaching of the Law of Moses in the service of God and his people. They had a particular motivation for this: They longed for the coming

of God as King among His people. That was not unusual for Jews then or now. What the various Jewish parties and factions differed on was how God's reign might be brought into existence. What did God's people have to do before God began reigning on earth to bring His Peace and Justice?

This is of course still our concern today as Jesus taught us to pray for the coming of God's Kingdom. We also need to think about how we participate in this. What do we have to do. I want to look at how this conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus addresses that.

Pharisees such as Nicodemus believed that if the people of Israel would live in full and complete observance of the Law of Moses, The Torah, for just one day, God would come to reign and all would be put right. For that reason they made it their life's work to study and teach the Law of Moses as the Law of God's Kingdom.

Then, because of their deep legal knowledge, some Pharisees were invited to be part of the ruling Jewish Council. Nicodemus is described as someone like this, 'a ruler of the Jews' which made him a politician and a public figure. As Jesus was a controversial figure the night was a better time for a careful public figure to meet him than during the daytime.

Then thinking further about who Nicodemus is likely to be we could expect him to be an older man. As many of you know, as we get older we become more aware of our limitations. There comes a stage in life when an honest person cannot avoid being confronted with oneself and one's limitations.



Self-illusion melts away and pride is rightly seen as foolishness. The midlife crisis many people experience may be part of this. I see in Nicodemus a person who has come to know himself and struggles with what he cannot ignore. A few decades later another Pharisee whom we know as St Paul described this same mature self awareness when he wrote:

PPT

¹⁵ For I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. ¹⁶ Now if I do what I do not want, I agree with the law, that it is good. ¹⁷ So now it is no longer I who do it, but sin that dwells within me. ¹⁸ For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. **FOR**

I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out. ¹⁹ For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.

from Romans 7

What greater struggle can there be for a Pharisee who believes that the coming of the Kingdom of God relies on his being able to keep the Law in a way that is really impossible. I see in Nicodemus someone who had come to realize that simply keeping the Law, doing good and not doing bad, even for one day, simply did not bring about that transforming relationship with God that his heart longed for. The Kingdom of God still seemed a step away and he could not change who he was to overcome that. *Is this something you can identify with?*

Thinking about this for us today we could say;

- Religion and self-help methods can only do so much but not enough to change the heart of someone who knows them-self as they are and feels stuck there.
- Church or Bible study is good and nice but even if you get to know it all, the heart may still not be changed or satisfied.

Nicodemus had devoted himself to seeking the Reign of God in his life and for his people but it was still not evident. How come?

Then along came Jesus.

So the man who had lived with the belief and hope that if you comply with God's Word you will see and enjoy God's Kingdom sees the teaching and miracle ministry of Jesus. Nicodemus became curious. Miraculous signs indicate that God is present and at work and validate the teaching. A night-time meeting is arranged and Nicodemus opens the conversation accordingly:

"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."

Now it's great that Nicodemus has enough discernment to recognize that God is somehow in and with Jesus - he is not totally blind. Still, Jesus now does what he does so well. He disregards the considered opinion that is offered him as being a side agenda or distraction and goes for the undeclared red-hot issue of the heart in that moment. Jesus is not going to discuss his teachings nor is he going to talk about miraculous signs and wonders. He will come back to his

being from God and the rightness of believing in him as such but not until the very end of this conversation when the urgent business has been dealt with!

Instead he arrows in on the very central concern of Nicodemus' life;

³ Jesus answered him,
"Truly, truly, I say to you,
unless one is born again
he cannot see the kingdom of God."

³ Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

The key issue Nicodemus, is you being able to see the Kingdom of God. Through your whole life you have been longing to see the living God present and active in your world. To recognize and see that, to experience that, to discern and enter into that, you must be born again from above.

While Jesus is being very focused here he also uses a word with two meanings and some intentional ambiguity. The Greek word *anōthen* can mean either 'again' or 'from above'. I resolve this by putting both meanings together to read:

ανωθεν
anōthen = again
anōthen = from above
'Born again' & 'Born from above'

"You must be born again from above."

So Jesus is saying to Nicodemus;



You have seen the miraculous signs and like all signs, they point to something greater than themselves. You see the signs of God's Kingdom but you will not see God's Reign through them until you are born again from above.

In responding Nicodemus reveals just how earth-bound and unspiritual he is in his thinking when:

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

⁴ Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" (NRSV)

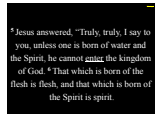
Nicodemus' earnest frustration took him to the bizarre point of asking if being renewed required a physical re-birth from one's own mother with all the bodily complications that involved.

His real question was: How can a man, or a woman, enter a new life when they have lived to being old?

Or to personalize it:

- How can someone like me who has lived long enough to see life as it is and know myself in all my messy ambiguity and confusion enter into a new life?
- How can I be transformed into a new me?
- How can I leave this me behind to become a new person living as the child of God I am called to be but can't achieve no matter how long I live?

Nicodemus is now teachable. Jesus has his attention and continues.



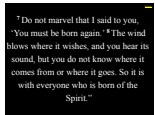
⁵ Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. ⁶ That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.

As Nicodemus is talking about entering the womb, Jesus graciously meets him there but refocuses him on entering the Kingdom of God which is the real topic of interest.

As any mother here knows, babies are born out of water. Childbirth is a very wet business. The water is a reference to our physical birth. We are not ghosts or disembodied spirits so as a first requirement to enter the Kingdom of God you must be born out of water with a body. *Everyone here ticks that box!*

However to see and enter the Kingdom of God you must also be born of the Spirit of God. God is Spirit and his reign is spiritually based so unless you have God's spiritual life as your life and are birthed into it you cannot see or enter into God's Kingdom.

I wonder if at this point Nicodemus was stunned and open mouthed because Jesus goes on to say:



⁷Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'⁸The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Living by what makes sense to your own natural water-born mind does not equip you to see or enter the Kingdom of God. Those who are born anew of the Spirit actually flow with God in away that is as mysterious as the wind in the ages before meteorology and our knowledge of high and low pressure zones. Those who move in the Spirit as citizens of God's Kingdom and children of God flow differently. They see God present and active in the world while others do not.

Nicodemus is still astonished 'How can these things be?' and Jesus points him towards what is directly before him – that Jesus himself, the 'Son of Man' has come from heaven to be the way to this new birth in the Spirit. PPT

Over the last few months we have walked through Easter, Ascension and Pentecost and can therefore understand the progression Jesus speaks of here that all points to Jesus himself as the key. Just as God's people looked at the snake – the symbol of evil and source of death – lifted high by Moses and they were healed so whoever looks at Jesus lifted up, bearing the world's evil, and believes in him has eternal life in God's Kingdom. This display of God's love in giving his Son for us shows us that we do not need to remain lost or condemned but can be saved and have eternal life, abundant life in Jesus. Jesus is the 'Son of Man' who ascends to heaven and sends God's Spirit.

Jesus is saying to Nicodemus – the answer to all your questions is standing in front of you. I am God's provision for your eternal life in God's Kingdom. What you need to do is look at me. I am the love of God sent to save you from condemnation.

Nicodemus was seeking God's kingdom and came to Jesus because he recognized in Jesus something of God's Kingdom presence. But Jesus taught him that one can only see and enter God's Kingdom by being filled with God's

presence – God’s Holy Spirit – the very presence of God within us, transforming us, bubbling up within us, blowing us where he wills, and that only comes through putting one’s faith in Jesus as God’s Son sent to save us.

So we too need to be born of the Spirit, living with the Holy Spirit within us, God’s presence within us. To see that the Kingdom of God is near, to enter into that Kingdom as it breaks through into our present world, we must know God’s presence within us and among us.

And then perhaps our sign outside could read something like:

Where is God?

Find out here on Sunday 10am.

Do we want to be filled with God’s presence – God’s Holy Spirit – to the extent that when people come here they know God is here among us? Are we prepared to welcome, to seek, God’s presence within us and among us so that people can meet God here? Then we will see the Kingdom of God is near. We will see God putting things right within us, among us, through us. We will see more people drawn to Jesus, wanting to be born again from above, born of the Spirit.

Let’s make the decision Nicodemus obviously did - to open ourselves to God’s presence – the Holy Spirit to live within us now.

Song: Be Still for the Presence of the Lord