

JOHN 3:1-17
SOMETHING NEW!

It is Friday afternoon; 2 men are on a grim errand. At the same time, this grim errand is a display of love and affection for someone in need, a display of loyalty to someone they've followed from a distance till now. It is Friday afternoon in Jerusalem, on the day we call Good Friday, and the person in deep need is Jesus. He has been crucified and by all accounts is dead and the grim errand on which these two men have embarked is to remove His dead body from the cross and put it somewhere safe. Because it is late and the Sabbath is about to start, they have to work quickly, but respectfully; they place the dead body in the tomb, a cave in the side of a rock in the garden. They laid Jesus' body there and the stone is put across the entrance; they would come back on Sunday morning. Till now these two men have kept their love for Jesus hidden, but now, in His death, they show their love and loyalty by treating Him well. Who are these two men? Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus!

If this was a movie, the next scene would be at night and as the camera pans across the city of Jerusalem in the dark, the caption would read "nearly 3 years earlier!". Nicodemus is one of the religious leaders of the day: he is Pharisee who loves the law and is passionate about keeping every part of that law, down to the last dot and stroke; he is a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council that takes decisions for the religious and spiritual well-being of the people of Israel in those days. He is also passionate about the kingdom of God: like many Jews, Nicodemus longed for the day when God would be king, not only in theory but also in practice and not only in Israel, but across the nations; he believed that this day would come when the Messiah appeared bringing the glory of God into the world. He knew that by being a Jew and by keeping the law, his place in God's kingdom was certain. But Nicodemus is also curious: there's a new rabbi around, a teacher who, they say, is doing some wonderful things, miracles even, and Nicodemus wants to meet Him and ask Him some questions. So he plans to meet Jesus; he comes at night because that's only time Jesus is free and, well, there is something furtive; "I'm not sure I want my friends to see!" This was a choice that was to change Nicodemus's life.

"Will real the Jesus please stand up?" That's the heading for this little series of sermons in John's gospel. Who is Jesus? That is a huge question for us. There are lots of answers that we might think we know or that other people will tell us, but we're going back to the evidence, to the sources, to John's gospel. What kind of picture does John paint of Jesus? He is writing these things down so that we might read them and believe something about Jesus, that He is the Son of God, the Messiah; and that believing makes a difference to us - 'life' is ours. We have already been brought face to face with Jesus, the One who can change water into wine, a sign of His God-ness, a sign of His power to transform lives; we have been brought face to face with Jesus passionate about the honour of God, and angry when God is not honoured. Today we are brought face to face with Jesus, the bringer of new life!

Jesus is in Jerusalem. He has had His meal and might well be settling down for a quiet evening with His friends. There is a knock on the door and someone ushers in the Pharisee, it's plain from the way he's dressed what he is. Does he introduce himself to Jesus? The two men sit down to talk, there are the issues of the day to be discussed, the small talk that is not recorded. Is Nicodemus asking Jesus "What kind of day have you had?" He calls him "Rabbi" – there's respect in the way Nicodemus addresses Jesus, even if he has a whole lot of questions. "*We know...*" (John 3:2) The work that Jesus has been doing has not gone unnoticed, but has aroused curiosity; they want to know more about this unknown rabbi who has suddenly

appeared on the scene, not from any of the rabbi schools, not with any background in the system, but out of nowhere to do these miracles and to teach the people about the kingdom of God. *"We know"* but there is so much we don't know!

We wonder whether there is some conversation missing or whether Jesus goes straight to the point. *"I tell..." (John 3:3)* Now, there is almost no saying in the Bible that causes so much discussion and even controversy in the church even today than these few words. What does Jesus mean? Nicodemus seemed not to understand either! *"How can..." (John 3:4)* "it's not possible; you're talking a language I don't understand!" The word that Jesus uses can be translated in two ways: firstly, it can mean "again" which is the way we usually take it; it can also mean "from above" and the word can clearly mean both of these. "Born again" is about the nature of the experience and we have taken it now to mean a particular type of Christian experience and if you've not had that kind of experience, you're not a true Christian; "born from above" tells us that this new life comes from God. The gift that Jesus brings to the world is "life", the "life of the age to come" when God is king, the age that is started when Jesus came, but is not yet completed and we are living in the time in-between!

"You are..." (John 3:10) "So Nicodemus, come back with me into Israel's history and into things that were said long ago, things that you know and remember and should understand." Jesus takes him especially to some words of the Old Testament prophet, Ezekiel, in words that were meant to breathe new hope into the hearts and minds of people in exile, reminding them that God had not forgotten them and wasn't finished with them. In Ezekiel 36, we read these words: *"I will..." (Ezekiel 36:26f)* On December 3rd 1967, Louis Washkansky, in Cape Town was the first man to receive a heart transplant; he lived 18 days afterwards and died from complications and not because his new heart failed; the operation was performed by Christian Barnard, and was radical surgery to deal with huge problems; it is more common place now, but transplant surgery is still radical treatment, to give someone a new lease of life by giving them a new heart. That's exactly the picture and promise of God for His people spiritually, a new heart and a new life.

What's wrong with the old heart? It is made of stone! Dead, cold, unresponsive – the people to whom Ezekiel speaks are people who, in the past, had forgotten God, had neglected His word and His ways, had gone their own way, had forgotten to pray or to worship and had become locked into a way of life that shut God out completely. The dark side of human nature always tends to lead us in that direction; left unattended that is where we would all be. But God doesn't leave His people like that. There's promise of a heart transplant, spiritually, a heart of flesh that will be alive, full of life, warm, loving and God will give His Spirit to bring that new heart to life so that His people will love Him with all their hearts and will be the kind of people that He wants them to be. They will be a new people, a people full of new life and love, a people ready to pray and longing to worship God with all their hearts.

"Nicodemus, you need a new heart!" It is fascinating that Jesus says this to a pillar of the religious establishment. If He'd said it to a tax-collector or a prostitute, we'd understand much more readily perhaps that this person needs a new start in life and a radical change of direction. But Jesus says this to a man who is steeped in the religion of his day, who knows the law backwards, who is a leader of his people. But this is about something quite new: "It is not just new seeing, but new being." (Newbegin) It is not just new teaching to understand, but a new love, a new passion, a new faith to embrace, to become a new person altogether. Regeneration is all about being made new. A man was in the dentist's waiting room, his son was with him and was bored; the father found a world map in one of the magazines, he tore it out and

then tore it into pieces and give to his son as a jigsaw; “make the world!” His son came back in only few minutes much to the disappointment and then astonishment of his father; his son said “on the other side of the page was a pic of a man; I put the man back together and the world was sorted.” There are all kinds of problems in the world and in our society, and we can try to sort them, but here is the one issue that Jesus came to sort: the heart of human beings is dark and needs new life. Until the darkness in our hearts is changed, many of these other issues will go untouched! Jesus does that! Jesus is the giver of new life.

“If anyone...” (2 Corinthians 5:17) The Christian life is not just a souped-up version of the old life. Jesus is not just putting a new veneer on an old lifestyle and leaving deep things untouched. Jesus is making us new people, with His grace going right to the heart and root of our being and making us new. Everything becomes new: our life has a new centre and focus, faith in Jesus; we have a new relationship with God that brings us a sense of hope, peace and forgiveness for our sins, faults, mistakes and shortcomings; we pray in a way that we never did before; we try to read the Bible; we love God and God’s people; we embrace a new set of values and priorities for life, looking to do will of God rather than putting ‘me’ at the centre of our passions and desires. Not all of this happens in an instant, but is the work of a lifetime, but this new creation begins the moment we put our faith in Jesus.

God does this for us and to us because He loves us. *“God so...” (John 3:16)* Is that the most-often quoted Bible verse ever? In a nutshell, this is what God has done for us and why. He has given us His Son and His Son has given His life for us and all because He loves us. Jesus is the key to all of this ‘new-thing’ work of God. How is Nicodemus ‘born from above’? By putting his faith in Jesus. How do we find this new life about which Jesus speaks and how do we find our way into the blessing of God and the kingdom of God? By putting our faith in Jesus. God loves us before we love Him; His Spirit is at work in us and in the world to draw us to Jesus, so that we want to believe, so that we know in our gut that faith is a good thing, so that our passion and desire is to live our life in Jesus’ way. Jesus is the “new-life giver.”

It took Nicodemus 3 years to get there! Did the fireside chat leave him with more questions than answers? It was 3 years later, on that grim errand, late on Friday afternoon, with his friend Joseph, that they made their love for Jesus and their loyalty to Jesus public; they took His body from the cross. Let me leave the last word with Bruce Milne, a Scottish Baptist pastor retired in Canada: ‘how’ this happens, he says is not important; “The primary issue (is)... that we are now living in constant dependence on Jesus as our living Lord and Saviour and growing in our spiritual life, which is God’s ever-renewed gift.” It took Nicodemus 3 years to get to that point; it has taken some people 20 years, and for some it takes them all of their life to get to the point where they acknowledge Jesus as Saviour and Lord. For some, they have never known a time in their lives when they did not believe! None of that matters. What does matter? That we love Jesus with an undying love, that we live by faith, and that live life in Jesus’ way!