

“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!”

Good point, you may well say.

Or perhaps, deliberately missing the point, is a better reaction.

At first sight the reading that we have just heard seems like a rather bizarre conversation which it is actually quite difficult to make any sense out of. So let’s have a look at it and see what is going on.

First we have Nicodemus. All we are told about him here is that he is a Pharisee. But actually Nicodemus appears twice more in John’s gospel, the second of which tells us he must have been a wealthy man – he was there at the burial of Jesus bringing large amounts of spices to wrap with the body – the sort of quantity only a wealthy person could supply.

But exactly what was a Pharisee? To understand that we need to go back the origins of the Jewish laws. These were passed by God to Moses and they are recorded in the first books of the Old Testament – those books which were the scriptures in Jesus’ time. To the Jew the law was the most sacred thing in all the world, but they also believed that if those laws were to be kept then the principles laid down needed interpreting so that the average Jew could follow them properly. The job of interpreting those laws belonged to the scribes, and they produced huge numbers of interpretations of these laws. I mean, seriously huge numbers, and if I was to start telling you some of them, taking those interpretations out of context which I would have to be doing you would think I was being seriously disrespectful to those Old Testament Jews, and I am not being that. But the point is, Jesus made it very clear that he hated all those interpretations – he said that they were getting in the way of people building a proper relationship with his father God.

But these interpretations were at the centre of Jewish life, and some people had to show how these interpretations were to be used, and it was the Pharisees who dedicated their lives to keeping all these rules. The name Pharisee means the Separated One, and the Pharisees were those who had separated themselves from all ordinary life in order to keep every detail of the law of the scribes.

And Nicodemus was one of those Pharisees. Which is probably why his line of questioning of Jesus was, well a little unusual, and actually quite literal - or even picky. I mean surely to suggest that Jesus was saying that an adult should re-enter their mother’s womb was just being ridiculous wasn’t it? But from that questioning came Jesus telling us the fundamentals of living a Christian life.

A certain number of years ago I was born. I know that because my birth certificate tells me. Well, actually I know that because I am here. Quite a few years later I couldn’t find my birth certificate but I knew I was still living. I didn’t need a birth certificate to prove that – all I needed that for was to prove when and where I was born. So I now have two birth certificates – the duplicate I purchased in 1997, and the original that turned up a few days after I got the duplicate. But all they prove is what happened in Northampton on a certain date. And quite often we get quite fixated by that date.

And if we are not careful as Christians we can similarly get fixated by the date we became a Christian. Many Christians can tell you the exact date, if not time, on which they became a Christian – something happened to them on a certain date which they will remember for their rest of their lives. And that is what Jesus meant when he said, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again.’ Or is that what he meant? What about all those people who didn’t have a date like that to describe when they became a Christian? People like me.

I was born into a Christian family. I grew up in a Christian family where the most important day of the week was Sunday because that is the day we went to church and I went to Sunday school. I had no day when I can say, that is when I became a Christian because I always have been a Christian, so does that mean I have not been born again, and so I won't see the Kingdom of God? No, of course not. Otherwise would I be standing here today talking to you?

In the same way that the date that the very young and small David Lee entered this world is an interesting day once a year, but what really matters is that I am living a life, what matters in our Christian lives is not any date if it exists when we can say that we became a Christian but how we live our Christian lives. If you like the ongoing process of being born again.

To that question we started with Jesus answered: "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit."

Foxton [Two weeks ago here I baptised Theo – and in an hour or so I will be baptising a 10-month-old girl called Piper in Fowlmere. Theo and Piper's baptisms use water as one of our baptismal symbols. Theo could make some decisions for himself, but Piper is clearly too young to understand the significance of those decisions, and so for both of them parents and godparents make promises on their behalf. But the significance of those baptisms is that it is the beginning of their Christian journey, and at whatever age someone is baptised, that Christian journey starts with a clean slate].

Fowlmere [Piper today has been baptised using water as one of our baptismal symbols. She is clearly too young to understand the significance of this today which is why her parents and godparents made those promises on her behalf. But the significance of her baptism is that it is the beginning of her Christian journey, and at whatever age someone is baptised, that Christian journey starts with a clean slate.]

Water is the symbol of cleansing. When Jesus takes possession of our lives, when we love him with all our heart, the sins of the past are forgiven and forgotten. We are given a clean start when we are born again.

The Spirit is the symbol of power. Last week at Pentecost when we remembered the coming of the Holy Spirit to those first disciples, and indeed to anyone who knows and loves the Lord Jesus, we talked about the importance of that power that the Holy Spirit brings. When Jesus takes possession of our lives it is not only that the past is forgotten and forgiven; if that were all, we might proceed to make the same mess of life all over again; but into life enters a new power which enables us to be what by ourselves we could never be, and to do what by ourselves we could never do. The power to be born again. Water and the Spirit stand for the cleansing and strengthening power of Christ, which wipes out the past and gives victory in the future.

I love reading biographies of Christians – I am fascinated to read how people became a Christian, how they lead, or led, a Christian life, often just out of curiosity, but I guess I am also frequently looking for some inspiration for my own life.

People like Alan Mortlock who was a martial arts expert who always wanted a reputation on the streets of London's East End, and he got what he was looking for when a brutal fight outside a night club led to him being imprisoned. After his life spiralled downwards on his release, it all changed when a friend, an ex-drug smuggler, visited and something extraordinary happened and he came to know Jesus. However badly we mess up we can start again with God.

People like the Rev Richard Coles who went from living the life of sex and drugs and rock and roll as keyboard player with the 1980s band The Communards to being a Church of England vicar. A story of how life can suddenly change direction, but often such a change of direction is not without its challenges.

People like David Wilbourne, who grew up in a Christian family, son of a vicar, who himself became a vicar and wrote a book about his time as Vicar of Helmsley in Yorkshire, a place where Kate and I love to go and stay. It might sound like quite a dull book, but it spoke to me when I was exploring what God was calling me to do next and it was left on my bedside table in the room we were staying at in Helmsley.

And I could go on – but actually more important than, if you like, celebrity Christians, is hearing about how the water and the Spirit lead people like you and me into and through our Christian lives. When I spoke at our annual church meeting on Monday night I talked a lot about the future of our churches, but what about the future of our individual Christian lives. Where are you with Jesus? Are you comfortable in your journey through your Christian life? Are you too comfortable? Has your journey not started yet? In our busyness in our lives it is often all too easy to not have time to think about, or to talk about our faith, our journeys, our lives. We must find the time to do that.

Let me finish by taking us back to our reading from John's gospel and those last two verses.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.'

Those are my go-to verses in the bible. The first one, the infamous John 3:16 just gives me a tremble every time I read it. That God loves me so much, God loves you so much, that he wants us to have eternal life – eternal life being the life that God has had: God has been around, with his Son, since the beginning of time and he wants us to join him. And then that second verse – the answer to those who ask, where is God when so and so happens? He is with us, suffering with us, because he sent his Son into the world, not to condemn it, although there must be times when God wonders what it is that we are doing to the world, but to save the world.

Water and Spirit – at the centre of being born again. Water and Spirit – at the centre of a life with Jesus. Water and Spirit – are they at your centre?

Amen