

Life in the Spirit

by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 26th May 2024 at St Michael and All Angels, Sandhurst

Reading: John 3:1-17

Real Religion

What is a Christian? And are you one? If someone asked you in the street, or in a conversation at the party, what Christianity is about, I wonder what you would say?

I've heard a lot of versions of what Christianity is about, and a lot of them are way off track. Some people try to justify themselves by saying "I may not go to church as often as I should, but I am a good Christian". Going to church is another subject which I can't tackle today, but let me just say that it is not going to church that makes you a Christian: going to church is something that you do because you *are* a Christian.

So what is a real Christian? Nicodemus, a very religious man, meets Jesus, and Jesus challenges the whole basis of what he believes to be important.

Nicodemus is a leading spiritual teacher, a member of the party of the Pharisees. For the Pharisees, being a good Jew was all about keeping the Torah (the Law of Moses). In addition to the laws written in the Bible, the scribes had developed over the centuries a body of teaching about how to apply the Law in everyday life, which was known as the Oral Law. Centuries after Jesus, it was written down in the Talmud.

For the Pharisees, then, it was *what you do* that matters. But Jesus says this is not what gets you into the Kingdom of God. Or to put it another way, we are not saved by works.

Let's be fair to Nicodemus: it's true that he comes to see Jesus by night, presumably so as not to be seen. But I think he is pretty brave to be coming to Jesus at all. Jesus has no credentials, he is no graduate of a rabbinic school, but a self-taught ex-carpenter. And he has already begun to make himself unpopular with the religious authorities. So I have a lot of time for Nicodemus. In Chapter 7 we see him standing up for Jesus in the Council, and after the crucifixion he joins with Joseph of Arimathea to bury Jesus' body. He is pretty open-minded, and wants to learn what Jesus really believes. In calling Jesus "rabbi" he shows him respect. He calls him *A teacher sent from God*. (Literally *We know that you have come from God as a teacher*). Nicodemus is genuine. But it soon becomes clear that from Jesus' point of view, Nicodemus hasn't got a clue what real religion is about.

In fact, Nicodemus himself seems to be more and more confused as he listens to Jesus:

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?'...

9 Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' 10 Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?'

What we have here is a very religious man who hasn't grasped the fundamental truth about God. What is this fundamental truth? Jesus says it 3 times, each in slightly different words:

- You have to be born "from above" (Greek $\alpha\nu\omega\theta\epsilon\nu$ also translated "again") (3)
- You have to be born "of water and spirit" (5) perhaps a reference to the sacrament of baptism

- What is born ... of the Spirit is spirit¹.

Being born is a sign of new life. It also means you are a child of your parents. Being born spiritually means entering a new dimension of life - a spiritual dimension in which you are a child of God.

In other words, Jesus is saying that true religion is not fundamentally about keeping the commandments at all. Rather, it is about a new kind of life, where you have a relationship with God, brought about by the Holy Spirit.

It's not just about living an ordinary sort of life with a few do's and don'ts thrown in. A bit of "bolt-on" morality or religious practice. Let's give some money to this or that appeal, or let's go to church a bit more often. Nicodemus was used to all that. But he'd missed the point. Christianity is living life with a spiritual dimension, where everything is seen from a different perspective. Like changing from black-and-white to colour vision. Being aware of God who is around us like the wind, mysterious, invisible yet real, a powerful driving force that has a mind of its own, that blows where it wills.

What's more, there's nothing we can do to deserve this kind of life, which in other parts of John's Gospel is called *eternal life*, and nothing we can do to earn it. It's a free gift. The last part of today's Gospel reading tells us how to receive it - through faith in Jesus Christ, the one whom God sent into the world *so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life* (16). It begins when we look in faith to the one who was crucified for us, just as in Exodus the Israelites looked to the bronze snake which Moses had fixed to a pole. In Exodus the people were healed from deadly snake bites. But when we look in faith to

¹ (NB definite article here - "the Spirit") (6, cp 8)

Jesus, lifted up on the Cross, we are saved from spiritual death. In this morning's Eucharist we remember again that sacrifice which Jesus made for us, so that we could receive the forgiveness of our sins and begin a new life in the Spirit.

What about us?

So if we have received salvation and forgiveness through the grace of God, what do our lives look like now? Do we remember every day that we are children of God? Will we seek God's will for our lives and for our church? Will we ask the Spirit to inspire us and each member of this church, and especially those in leadership? Are we ready to go with the Spirit, wherever he may lead? In our daily lives, are we ready for the Spirit to prompt us to pray for a person or situation we come across, to speak to someone, to respond to someone who needs help or encouragement? Are we ready for him to guide us as we make decisions about our use of time and resources?

Jesus shows us that real Christianity is about life in the Spirit. To some that may sound airy-fairy, to others like too much uncertainty and risk. But Jesus tells Nicodemus, and he tells us, that unless we let the wind of the Spirit blow in our lives and our church, we will not see the Kingdom of God. Let us hoist our sails to the Holy Spirit, so that he can fill us, empower us and blow us where he wills.