

'A Kingdom Debate'

(John 3:1-3) "Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to 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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God with being born from above."

There are three ways of sorting out a disagreement: physical violence – knocking 'seven bells' out of your opponent; blazing argument – verbally tearing off a few strips from them; rigorous debate – where you tease out the finer points together.

The final approach is found at the heart of Jewish life, historically, culturally, theologically. The great matters of existence have been debated, from the nature of the soul to disputes between neighbours. There is a great tradition of debate among Jewish teachers (rabbis), who for thousands of years have wrestled tirelessly with theological truths.

Throughout the Gospels we read of Jesus engaging with such debates, from his childhood, during his ministry, and even at his trial. This incident recorded in John 3 is one of these occasions, when Jesus met Nicodemus, a Pharisee and Jewish leader, and they enter into 'rabbinic repartee' as they debate the Kingdom of God together.

"The truth is," says Jesus, "you can't see God's Kingdom with being born . . ." (some translations have "again", while others read "from above". The Greek word 'another' means both, so an accurate translation would be "born again from above"). To which Nicodemus retorts, "What? How can some old fellow be give birth to? Are we expected to take up residence back in the womb?" Clearly, there is great respect between these two men, they enjoy each other's company and the theological sparring between them. The question here is what it means to be 'reborn' to see God's New World.

In all faith traditions moments of personal transformation are recorded, celebrated and yearned for; from the Enlightenment of the Buddha to the calling of Isaiah, Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus and the 'strangely warmed heart' of John Wesley, each of these are stories that speak of rebirth to see a new reality.

But this debate continues, "The truth is," says Jesus, "you can't get into the Kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit, for flesh gives birth to flesh, and spirit gives birth to spirit." Here Jesus is defining the terms of the debate by identifying the 'sticking point'. For Nicodemus ethnicity, 'Jewish birth', "flesh" determined entry into God's Kingdom; this is a theology of racial, cultural and social purity which underpinned the dominant world view of that time and place, that to be the 'People of God' was a matter of human heritage. "Not so," Jesus argues, rather it is a matter of celebrating divine heritage, in other words it is not about our parentage, it is about affirming that we share the image of God.

Jo Cox, the M.P. for Batley and Spen, who was murdered last year, said in her maiden speech in the House of Commons, "We have more in common than which divides us." In her memory and to honour her convictions, on the 17th and 18th June the 'Great Get Together' will be a national event of street parties, coffee mornings and community fayres which will encourage neighbours to rejoice in one another in order to step into a new reality.

Nicodemus was confused by this talk of godly bonds beyond racial ties, "How can this be?" he asks, to which Jesus replies, "How can you be a teacher of Israel and not know this?" Then he continues, "The truth is, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen." Who is this 'we'? Jesus is saying that he represents a community, a new community of faith, the membership of which is not restricted by parentage, ethnicity or culture, but is open to all who seek a new reality. 'We' is the Christian community of John's Gospel, which lived around 90AD, a network of churches spread across Asia Minor (modern day Turkey). Many of the Christians in these churches had fled from Palestine after the destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman Empire in 70AD. So this was a time of upheaval, migration and tension, which created tensions with the settled population with the arrival of new people into their neighbourhoods. Such tensions impacted on relations between the Christian and Jewish communities, and this is reflected in how the debate between Jesus and Nicodemus is recorded. Jesus addressed Nicodemus, who symbolised established religion, by stating, "Yet you don't hear our testimony."

A number of years ago a survey was undertaken of churches in Birmingham city centre. It was expected that around twenty congregations would be found within the two mile radius, but in fact over seventy different Christian groups were identified. Here were people from across the world meeting for worship, prayer and fellowship in warehouses, offices and commercial units. Two things struck me about these findings: (i) 'we' in the mainstream churches were symbols of established religion, and (ii) the Christian Community was not dying, as we feared, but was alive, growing and vibrant, because it is open to all who seek a new reality.

"If you won't believe what I say is 'down to earth'", continues Jesus, "how will you accept matters of heaven?" The reason why this passage from John 3 is included in the lectionary at this point in Lent is because the following verses speak of (i) incarnation (that God is known in the humanity of Jesus) "the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man"; (ii) crucifixion (that suffering and death were part of Jesus' mission) "so must the Son of Man be lifted up"; (iii) transformation (that Jesus' suffering and death were signs of a new beginning) "God so loved the world that the Son was given". Suddenly you realise that the nature of the debate has changed; it is longer an intellectual exercise about the Kingdom of God, it is now a discourse on how God's New World should be lived.

Yes, to see beyond this old world of fear, hatred and sorrow to a new reality of hope, love and joy, is to know that we are born of God. To enter that new reality is to do so with others, celebrating our shared godly image. To live as signs of the new reality is to be members of open, vibrant, faithful communities that put belief into action.

I began by saying that there are three ways of sorting out a disagreement: physical violence; blazing argument; rigorous debate. Well, from the debate about the Kingdom of God between Nicodemus and Jesus I want to add a fourth: if we disagree with the direction that the world heading then we must join together to seek a new reality and offer an alternative way of life.

“Indeed, God didn’t send the Son to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved . . .”

Neil Johnson

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