

The moment is now

28th February 2010

Rev Brian Senior

Readings:

Acts 8:26-38
Psalm 62:1-2
John 3:1-18

Picture the scene ... Nicodemus, coming to see Jesus at night.

Why come at night?

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, and a member of the Sanhedrin ... the Jewish ruling council. Respected ... Orthodox ... Someone people looked up to.

Perhaps he was too busy to come in the daytime ... or perhaps he thought at night he might just get the opportunity to see Jesus alone ... or perhaps he just didn't want to be seen?

The Pharisees as a group had pretty much made up their mind about Jesus, as soon as the miracles began. They objected to his teaching. They would have stopped the miracles if they could. They were jealous of the attention Jesus was getting, and being anxious not to upset their delicate relationship with the Romans ... fearful of where it all might lead.

But Nicodemus wasn't so sure ... so he came to see for himself.

Was he speaking *just* for himself, or for others too, when he said?:

"Rabbi, we know you are teacher who has come from God. For no-one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

The conversation that follows includes one of the most controversial bits of Christian teaching, and also one of the most well-known verses in the Bible.

The Controversial bit first: Jesus said to Nicodemus (v3):

"I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

Why controversial? ... because over the years people have taken this idea of being 'born again', and put their own interpretations on it ... and one particular line of thinking has been that being 'born again' was somehow different to simply becoming a Christian.

This has led some to believe that there can be such a thing as 'ordinary Christians' and 'born again Christians' ... and that they are different ... that the really spiritual Christians are the ones who are 'born again'. The truth is that no-one can be a Christian at all without being 'born again'. It's just that not everyone uses language the same way.

In fact, this is the only time in the Bible that we find this term used, apart from in 1 Peter (v23) where it says:

"You have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the

living and enduring word of God."

What does it mean, to be 'born again'?

Jesus talked much more often about receiving eternal life, in terms of 'entering life' ... 'inheriting eternal life' ... 'gaining life' ... and 'crossing from death to life' - and Paul wrote much more about being 'saved'.

In either case, the point is that we are rescued from death through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and guaranteed eternal life with him through believing in him and putting our trust in him. Once we have done this ... once we have accepted Jesus ... or as Steve put it yesterday at the men's breakfast:

- admitted our need of him
- committed our lives to him
- submitted our wills to him

... then we are saved and we have new life in him ... we *are* born again ... and the Holy Spirit of God will enter into our lives and guide us as we seek to live our lives for Jesus.

Paul writes in Romans 5 (v1f):

*"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, **through whom we have gained access by faith** into this grace in which we stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God."*

So don't be taken in if someone tells you 'you are not a proper Christian' because they think you have not been 'born again'. The truth is that **if** you *are* a Christian - by which I mean that you have asked Jesus into your life and have committed yourself to him - then you **have** been born again ...and if you haven't done that, then you're not a Christian at all.

John writes elsewhere, in his first letter, about being '*born of God*', in terms of lives changed ... that being '*born of God*' leads to doing what is right, not continuing to sin, loving one-another, and overcoming the world. Re-birth is evidenced by right living ... and how we live is often a much more accurate barometer of our relationship with Jesus than any number of spiritual experiences we may have enjoyed.

Paul, again, in Ephesians 2 (v8ff) writes:

"For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no-one can boast. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."

There may be many subsequent experiences of God ... and many occasions on which we make a deeper commitment to following Jesus, and experience a further outpouring of his Holy Spirit ... but from the moment we make the decision, God is faithful to his promise and makes us his own ... we are saved by grace.

Nicodemus found all this hard to grasp. He had in mind a picture of a man re-entering his mother's womb, and it was not a pretty one! He was putting a literal interpretation on a powerful metaphor. Physical re-birth is obviously impossible ... but through Jesus, anyone can have a new beginning ... the slate wiped clean and a fresh start with God.

The most well-known verse I mentioned earlier is, of course, verse 16:

"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."

In a way this sums up all that has gone before. *Whoever* believes in him has eternal life ... are born again ... are saved ... have entered into life with a capital **L**. But a word of caution is necessary. In this context, *believing* must mean much more than mere intellectual assent. James writes in his epistle (2:19):

"You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that – and shudder."

It isn't enough to simply believe that Jesus exists, or even believe what he said or what he did. The believing Jesus talks about is the believing that leads to a decision and to action ... the believing that leads to trust. To believe in Jesus means to acknowledge him not only as Saviour but also as Lord, to commit our lives to him, and submit our wills to him.

I find it a bit frustrating that we are not told the outcome of this conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. John doesn't tell us that Nicodemus believed and was born again ... or that he began to follow Jesus. The rest of the story is left untold ...

... but it is interesting to note that after Jesus was crucified, when Joseph of Arimathea ... a secret disciple of Jesus ... gained Pilate's permission to remove the body from the cross and place it in his own tomb, it was Nicodemus who came with him, bringing myrrh and aloes to anoint Jesus' body, and the two of them prepared him for burial.

Maybe Nicodemus believed from the time of that night-time encounter ... or maybe he came to believe as he saw more of what Jesus was doing, and heard what he was teaching ... or maybe the penny only dropped for him when he saw Jesus unjustly tried and sentenced before the kangaroo court in Caiaphas' house. We can draw our own conclusions ... but there seems little doubt that he came to believe that Jesus was who he said he was, and to become a disciple of sorts.

Experience teaches us that people come to faith in many different ways:

- Some people grow up in Christian homes, knowing Jesus from their childhood, and need only to confirm that faith for themselves as they grow in understanding.
- Some hear the truth of the gospel for the first time, and that's all they need ... they respond to Jesus and invite him into their lives there and then.
- Some hear a little about Jesus at a time over days, or week, or months ... until finally everything falls into place for them and they believe.
- Some people come actively searching because they know they have a need, perhaps because something has happened to them, or they feel something is missing in their lives ... and they come to discover that Jesus is the only one who can fill their need.
- Some think they are self-sufficient, and don't need anything, including God ... until they suddenly realise there is a God-shaped hole that has always been there, which they have tried to ignore.
- Some people argue and fight their way into the kingdom of God, putting up every imaginable objection until finally they give in, and give themselves to Jesus.

It doesn't much matter how we come to Jesus ... although some ways are long and painful, especially when we put up a fight. All that matters is that we *do* come to Jesus. It matters more than anything else we will ever do, or any other decision we will ever make ... because it shapes our lives for eternity.

The problem with some people is that they just keep putting it off until, in the end, it is too late.

- Gradually learning about Jesus bit by bit is fine, if we are genuinely open to learn, rather than just putting off the moment of decision.
- Searching out Jesus because we feel a need is far from unusual, and because he is a loving Father, God delights in meeting our needs.
- Thinking you don't need God is reasonable, as long as you are willing to consider the possibility that he might be real and that you might be wrong!
- Arguing the toss and raising intellectual objections is fine, as long as you have a genuinely open mind, and are prepared to listen and consider the arguments.

What doesn't make sense is when people recognise that what the Bible has to say about Jesus might be true, and could be important, and would definitely make a difference to their lives if it was ... but they won't do anything about it. That's crazy!

If there is even an outside chance that Jesus really is the son of God who came to save us, then it is intellectual suicide and stupid arrogance to not give him a hearing. The hard truth is that we can only put it off and decide to think about it later for so long ... one day we will be dead, or Jesus will return, and the opportunity will have passed.

Those of us who heard Steve Burnett at the men's breakfast yesterday will have been struck by the way in which Steve described the years of putting God 'on hold' ... how, following one crisis after another, he made a bit of a move towards God, and then turned away again. It was only when he was staring death in the face that he began to take Jesus seriously ... and God graciously gave him another chance.

But there isn't always going to be another chance. The time will come when it's 'now or never', and the only sensible response to that is to decide that 'the Moment is Now!'

So consider this account in Acts 8 of Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian Eunuch.

Philip, you may recall, was one of the seven men chosen in Acts 6 to oversee the daily distribution of food among the widows who were part of the early Christian community in Jerusalem. It is worth noticing there that the Apostles told the community to choose:

"Choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." (Acts 6:3f)

Let's pause for a moment to consider this:

- First, that this is the beginning of establishing roles and ministries within the Church ... with these seven being the forerunners of what were later named Deacons.
- Second, that although we might see sorting out the food rations as a fairly mundane task, the Church recognised it as a spiritual role. These men were to be 'full of the Spirit and wisdom'. We need to think about that not only in valuing those who do the practical tasks in the Church, but also in praying about who should be appointed to

various jobs.

- Third, that taking on any one responsibility in the Church under God may lead to further responsibilities in due course, as we shall soon see ... and that we each ought to consider how much we are prepared to offer our God-given gifts and skills and resources to the work of the Kingdom here at St Philip's ... and to ask God: "What are you calling me to?"

So they chose seven men ... beginning with Stephen, a man "*full of faith and of the Holy Spirit*", who within a short time was used by God to do "*great wonders and miraculous signs*" (Acts 6:8) ... and who was to become the first Christian martyr, stoned to death outside Jerusalem, crying "*Lord, do not hold this sin against them*" (Acts 7:60) ...

... and then Philip ... after whom this Church is named ... who became an Evangelist. Philip was sent by God to Samaria, where he preached about Jesus and performed miracles in the name of Jesus. Evil spirits were cast out ... paralytics and cripples were healed ... and Luke tells us (Acts 8:8) "*there was great joy in that city.*"

The next we hear of Philip is in the second half of Acts 8 ... our reading this morning ... and there are some significant things to notice about this story straight away:

[1] Philip was Obedient.

Philip had been engaged in a fruitful ministry in Samaria, but now God called him away from there. Not only that, but he sent him out to a lonely desert road, which must have seemed an unlikely place for effective mission work. Philip didn't argue.

It is very easy for us to think we know what's best, only to discover that God has a different idea. Sometimes we find God sending us into unlikely situations in unlikely places. He wants to know that we are ready to trust him.

Philip had learned by now that God was to be trusted ... and obeyed ... and so he went.

[2] This was a God-appointment.

God told Philip to go south, to the road from Jerusalem to Gaza, because he had arranged an appointment for him. The Ethiopian eunuch was an important official of the Ethiopian Queen, travelling home from Jerusalem, and he was just in the right place at the right time.

Why had this man come from Ethiopia to Jerusalem? We are not told whether he was a convert to Judaism or simply a God-fearing Gentile, but whichever he was; he was prepared to make a long journey on dusty desert roads in order to come to worship. His 'chariot' was probably a covered wagon ... something like an ox-cart ... with space for the Eunuch and his driver, and probably another servant to attend him – but still with room for Philip.

[3] The Eunuch was waiting to know the truth.

This man was reading the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 53 ... a passage we regularly read on Good Friday, which points ahead to Jesus the suffering servant ... led like a lamb to the slaughter to be sacrificed for our sake. He was reading it, but he couldn't understand it ... how could he? He needed someone to interpret and explain the Scriptures for him.

[4] Philip was responsive to the situation, and to the Holy Spirit's prompting.

The Holy Spirit said to Philip: "*Go to that chariot and stay near it.*" So Philip ran and

caught up with the chariot. He overheard what the Eunuch was reading, and asked him if he understood what he was reading. We know the answer.

The Eunuch invited Philip to join him in his chariot and sit with him.

[5] Philip began where the Eunuch was.

Philip could have launched into telling this man all about his own experience of God ... or about Jesus and his life, his death and his resurrection. Instead, he listened and took note of what he already knew, and working from the passage in Isaiah which the Eunuch was reading, he told him the Good News about Jesus.

[6] The time was right, and the Kingdom grew!

They came to some water, and the Eunuch got his driver to stop the chariot. He said:

"Look, here is water. Why shouldn't I be baptised?"

The answer was that there was no reason.

We have a right concern that people know what they are doing, and that they are doing it for the right reason. When people come, especially those from outside the Church, and ask for baptism for themselves or for their children, we have a responsibility to make sure that they understand what the gospel is all about, and that they take it seriously.

But this Ethiopian Eunuch was taking it very seriously. He had been searching for the truth, and through Philip, God had answered his heart's desire. He was ready to admit his need, to commit himself to God, and to submit to his will. Why shouldn't he be baptised? No reason!

Too often people procrastinate when it comes to matters of faith.

They hear the truth about Jesus, and they are willing to believe that it is true. They choose to get involved in Church ... at least a bit ... but often only dipping their toes in the water of the Christian faith, not really throwing themselves in wholeheartedly. They like the *idea* of being a Christian, but are not quite willing to jump in with both feet.

Well, you need to be sure. There's no point saying what you don't mean, or committing yourself to something you're not sure of ... but if that's where you are, then what are you doing about really being sure? We are more than willing to help you.

But if you have heard the truth about Jesus, and believed it ... if you recognise that you have not lived a perfect life and you need God's forgiveness ... if you know that you need God in your life ... if you believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that he died for your sins ... if you want the assurance of eternal life with God – then "The Moment is Now!"

If you have not yet made that final step, what are you waiting for?

Now is the time to commit your life to him as your Saviour, and to submit to him as your Lord ... to be 'born again'. Don't keep putting it off ... The Moment is Now!