

It's fascinating to picture in our minds those two men settling down for a good person to person discussion. "Just you and me, Jesus-ben-Joseph, away from the distractions of the crowds, your disciples, hostile elements, in the quiet and peace of the night; somewhere where we can be frank and honest with each other with no animosity, no fear of betrayal, no holds barred."

Perhaps they sat together on the flat rooftop under the stars, in the subdued light of the moon, as an American artist has depicted them; or perhaps in an upper room by candlelight or with one or two oil lamps giving off a gentle light to relax by.

But that relaxation didn't last for long! No sooner has Nicodemus tried to reassure Jesus of his admiration for him, despite his own position as a leading member of the government authority which has set out to silence him, than Jesus cuts right through the polite formalities and cuts straight to the quick. "Look, Nicodemus, you and I both know that the fact that we are born Jewish does not, in itself, necessarily mean that we are, therefore, members of God's Kingdom. No, to see that Kingdom you have to be born again!"

That must have come as quite an eye-opener to Nicodemus. It had always been a fundamental element of Jewish faith and belief that the Covenant established by God with his chosen people guaranteed that being born to any descendant of Abraham automatically made Jewish people - especially Jewish men who were circumcised and kept the Law - members of his Kingdom and in a saving relationship with Jehovah. Why would a Jewish man like him need to be 'born again' - as if it were physically possible anyway!

I do like the teasing way Jesus enjoys talking to Nicodemus, just as he does to that woman at the well in Samaria, or to the Syro-Phoenician woman whose daughter was ill.

"You find the idea of a second 'birth' unacceptable just because you don't understand it? What about the wind - do you really 'understand' that? Yet you're quite happy to accept that it is real because you can see and feel the effect it has. Isn't it the same with being 'born again'? You may not understand it but you would certainly know its effect! Come on, you're a teacher of Israel, you must be used to thinking about spiritual matters. We are talking spiritually here, metaphorically, poetically if you like, not literally. Of course you can't have a second physical birth. What I'm talking about is a completely new start in life, a deliberate, conscious re-orientation of all your thinking and behaving, one that revolves around God and all that you understand of him and his ways rather than around the needs and demands that our physical life revolves around. That's what is needed to become a member of the Kingdom of God, not some accident of birth or keeping to rules and regulations, however good they may be. It's something you can't engineer for yourself or for anyone else either. It's something that only God can do. It's a birth 'from above', not from human action."

I wonder how long the two of them went on talking that night. I wonder, too, whether Nicodemus went home a changed man and whether he and Jesus remained good friends and kept in touch with each other. We do know from the later Gospel narrative that Nicodemus was there at the end and that he and Joseph of Arimathea took care of the burial arrangements for the now crucified Jesus.

That must have taken some doing, since they were both members of that same ruling Council that had decided to silence this disturbing would-be Messiah. I imagine their lives were not particularly stress-free after that!

The term 'born-again Christian' does sometimes get bandied around as though it's something you have to achieve for yourself, rather than a God-originated function. It's also, of course, a term which gets ridiculed and lampooned whenever devout Christian disciples put on a particular kind of ultra-sincere look and adopt either a hectoring tone or a rather wheedling expression when insisting that their hearers need to be born again, preferably there and then.

My guess is that most of us here don't refer to ourselves as 'born again Christians'. Yet Jesus made it clear that unless we are 'born again', we cannot see the Kingdom of God! It wasn't just Nicodemus he was talking about. In the course of that conversation as reported by the author of the Fourth Gospel, the word 'you' addressed to Nicodemus changes from singular to plural as the conversation develops. "You – all of you – must be born again". What is true for Nicodemus is represented as being true for all of us as well.

So how can you tell whether or not you have indeed been 'born again'? According to Jesus, you can tell by the effects it has. It's like the wind, he says. You may not where or how it started or where it came from or where it's going, but you know it's there because of the effect you can sense it has. It's the same with being 'born again'.

So if, at the same time as experiencing and living all the effects of being born a human being, you are also experiencing and are aware of the reality and presence of God; and if, whether most of the time or even just from time to time, you are aware of being in a personal relationship with him; and if your relationships with the people around you echo and reflect the outlook and teachings of Jesus, God in human form – that would strongly suggest that, as well as being born physically into this world, you have also been born 'from above' or are in the process of being, in that sense, 'born again'.

In which case, welcome to the Kingdom of God.

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