

John 3 Nicodemus

It's trendy these days to call yourself an atheist, to say you believe there is no god. Still, lots of people want to believe in *something*, so beyond the idols of this world we profess to hope in a benevolent 'higher power' of some kind and this gives us comfort, especially in the face of illness, death or bereavement.

But how real is our 'god' and how close to him, or her or it do we want to be?

Listen to some words from C S Lewis:

An 'impersonal God' – well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads – better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap – best of all. But *God Himself*, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband – that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when the children who have been playing burglars hush suddenly; was that a real footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion ('Man's search for God') suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to that! Worse still, supposing He had found us?'

Now let's consider Nicodemus. He came seeking a little enlightenment about God and got a lot more than he bargained for!

He would have professed without hesitation to believe in God the Maker and Ruler of all, the God of his forefathers, the God of the OT Scriptures. He was already a religious man who lived by a strict moral code. In fact he was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. But while all the other references to Pharisees in John's Gospel are negative, recording their murderous opposition to Jesus Christ, Nicodemus seems to have been an exception.

Perhaps he was by nature a fairer man than most. We later read of him as a minority of one, urging his fellow Sanhedrin members to caution, to not condemn someone without giving them a fair hearing. That courage and decency are seen again later when he goes with Joseph of Arimathea to ask Pilate for Jesus' body to give the Nazarene preacher as respectful a burial as possible.

But something else was stirring this man, and it was to do with this Jesus. Nicodemus couldn't help but be impressed by His preaching and the dramatic miracles he was performing. He was uneasy. Was the kind of faith he had practised up to now not enough? He sensed that in this Jesus God was

somehow closer and more real than ever before and he felt drawn to cautiously, discreetly explore further.

Jesus' very first sentence is a devastatingly enlightening declaration of spiritual truth: 'I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.' He repeats and develops this theme just two verses later, 'No-one can *enter* the kingdom of God unless he is born of water *and of the Spirit*.'

Apparently God has a kingdom and to really perceive it or be part of it involves a new beginning for people, as fundamental as the day of our physical birth when we first came from darkness into the light of a new day.

Like Nicodemus, questions come flooding to our minds. What is this 'kingdom of God' and why might anyone want to be part of it? According to Jesus not everyone sees or enters this kingdom. Is it that important, and, if it is, how can we make sure we're 'in' and not 'out'?

The Bible teaches God created a perfect world which has been compromised and spoiled by our human disobedience. We live for now in a 'fallen' world, still beautiful but spoiled by greed, injustice, pollution to name just a few. Worse, we are living under sentence of God's righteous judgement. A day is coming when all must answer before our Maker for our choices and accept the eternal consequences.

The 'Kingdom of God', put simply, is Almighty God reasserting His authority in His world, through His Son. Three things we might say about this 'kingdom' from our reading in John 3:

God's kingdom is Positive in Impact
Spiritual in Nature
Generous in Scope

The coming of God's kingdom through Jesus has been and still is positive in impact. It brings new life and heavenly light into this lost, gloomy world. The Lord Jesus brings forgiveness and salvation, reconciliation and peace with God. The effects of sin and evil are reversed as many are healed and delivered from harmful bondage and given assurance to overcome the dread of dying. Realising God's love for us has a positive impact on our other relationships, prompting us to live in love, practise justice and integrity and seek the wellbeing of the whole community.

But we must understand secondly that God's Kingdom is spiritual in nature. 'My Kingdom is not of this world' said Jesus on one occasion, and on another to His followers, 'the Kingdom is within you.'

Christian faith can be demonstrated, modelled, taught and recommended but it cannot be artificially or mechanically imposed on people. Not by religious ritual nor by political force. A spiritual kingdom requires spiritual subjects who are renewed and motivated on the inside by the Spirit of God.

Jesus speaks here and later in this Gospel of the invisible work of the Holy Spirit in human hearts, convicting us that things need to change, persuading us of the better way that is trusting and following Christ, leading and equipping us in such a lifestyle.

Some people experience a dramatic, overnight change or memorable moment of decision, for others it is a more gradual but no less definite dawning of realisation, but the results are the same. A sincere turning away from pride and wrongdoing, a grateful trust in Jesus as Son of God and Saviour, and a loving desire to serve Him, to identify ourselves publically as his followers and recommend Him to others.

Positive in impact, spiritual in nature, let's note thirdly God's Kingdom is wide in scope. It's not restricted to one group or type of person but open to all. 'For God so loved the *world*,' says v16, 'that He gave His one and only Son, that *whoever believes* in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.'

'Whoever' is the widest possible invitation. No matter our background or circumstances, the door of God's kingdom is open to all who will submit to trust and obey His Son.

Well, have *we* got it? Can we see it? Do we want to be part of it? Are we willing to be led by the Spirit from our darkness into the light of the truth of Jesus?

Sad are those who hear this truth but determine to try and hide in the semi-darkness! Why stay entrenched in night longer than we have to? Better surely to come confessing our need and look to Him Who was lifted up on a cross for our sake! Look to Jesus and welcome this bright new life that is dawning worldwide to eternal day!