

Jesus and his puzzling answers

5 February 2023

INTRODUCING TODAY'S THEME

Do you have any favourite or famous sayings at your house? ...

In our house we have some wise sayings including ...

- When all else fails, read the instructions
- If you want to make sure it doesn't rain, take an umbrella

Today's Bible story has a famous line in it that's known by people all over the world. It sort of sums up the whole message of Jesus and it goes like this ...

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but may have eternal life.

You might talk about this verse some more when you go out with Sue ... but what it's saying is that God loves the world – and all the people in the world – including you and me and everyone else here – and that's the reason God sent Jesus to us – that we might know God and God's love for us that comes through Jesus and gives us life.

BIBLE READINGS

Numbers 21:4-9

The Israelites travelled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea ... but the people grew impatient on the way; they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!'

Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.' So Moses prayed for the people.

The Lord said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

John 3:1-36

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the

Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.'

Jesus replied, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born from above.'

'How can someone be born when they are old?' Nicodemus asked. 'Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!'

Jesus answered, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born from above." The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.'

'How can this be?' Nicodemus asked.

'You are Israel's teacher,' said Jesus, 'and do you not understand these things? Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?'

No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. For 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. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

After this, Jesus and his disciples went out into the Judean countryside, where he spent some time with them, and baptised. Now John also was baptising at Aenon near Salim, because there was plenty of water, and people were coming and being baptised. An argument developed between some of John's disciples and a certain Jew over the matter of ceremonial washing. They came to John and said to him, 'Rabbi, that man who was with you on the other side of the Jordan – the one you testified about – look, he is baptising, and everyone is going to him.' To this John replied, 'A person can receive only what is given them from heaven. You yourselves

can testify that I said, "I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him." The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. He must become greater; I must become less.'

The one who comes from above is above all; the one who is from the earth belongs to the earth, and speaks as one from the earth. The one who comes from heaven is above all. He testifies to what he has seen and heard, but no one accepts his testimony. Whoever has accepted it has certified that God is truthful. For the one whom God has sent speaks the words of God, for God gives the Spirit without limit. The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them.

MESSAGE

I wonder if you have a favourite **verse** or favourite **passage** in the Bible?

For some people it's the comfort of Psalm 23 ... *The Lord is my shepherd.*

For others it's the simple but profound guidelines of Micah 6:8 ...

What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with your God.

Perhaps it's the so-called greatest commandment of Jesus ...

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength and love your neighbour as yourself. (Matt 22:37-39)

My personal favourite passage has a mission edge combined with compassion. It's from Luke chapter 4 ...

The Spirit of the Lord is on me for he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives ... and to announce the year of the Lord's favour. (Luke 4:18-19)

But for many Christians their favourite verse is from today's passage in John chapter 3 and is of course **John 3:16** ...

For 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.

Let's get into the marvellous chapter in John's Gospel that contains this verse and see what we might learn from it.

If you read the Introducing John paper from last week you'll know that John likes using **dualism** – opposites like light and darkness, life and death, belief and unbelief and so on – which all get a good workout in this chapter. These dualisms are distinctive of John's **style** but probably also reflect the **social situation** facing John and his community some two generations after the time of Jesus.

Christianity was starting to split away from Judaism and people had to make a **choice** ... whether to put their faith in Jesus and face exclusion from the Jewish community ... **or** ... whether to reject Jesus and remain within the synagogue. John's black and white dualisms present the choice in stark terms.

So we meet **Nicodemus**, a Jewish leader who is facing a similar choice – whether to accept or reject the message of Jesus. He comes to Jesus at night, possibly to avoid undue scrutiny, but we see already a contrast between the physical **darkness** of night and the **light** that Jesus brings.

At one level, the conversation is all very **polite**

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Nicodemus begins with ... we know you are a teacher who has come from God because no-one can do what you are doing without God's presence.

Jesus ends on a similar note ... we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen.



But at another level it's quite **puzzling** ...

Jesus seems happy to talk in riddles ... no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born from above.

Nicodemus seems only able to interpret Jesus' words literally ... surely a person can't be born a second time?!

But their understanding is **poles** apart ...

Jesus insists that no-one can enter God's kingdom apart from **God's** initiative ... born not of flesh but **born of God** in the words of the prologue. The reference to needing to be born of **water** and **spirit** probably comes from the prophet Ezekiel:

*I will sprinkle clean **water** upon you ... and I will **cleanse** you. I will give you a new heart and will put my spirit within you and make you follow my laws. (Ezek 36:25-27)*

So to be part of God's kingdom, Jesus is saying, requires God to cleanse you and put his spirit within you. This is all basic stuff, Nicodemus, that you as a leader in Israel should understand.

But Nicodemus draws a complete blank ... how can this be? You don't make any sense Jesus.

And that's the end of the conversation ... at least for now. Nicodemus will return twice more later in the story as he continues to grapple with what Jesus is talking about.

The words of the writer John often blend seamlessly with the words and speaking style of Jesus. So it's sometimes hard to tell when **Jesus** is speaking and when the writer **John** is speaking. And the next part of chapter 3 offers a good example. You

might have already looked at this at home as suggested in the paper Introducing John. So if we project the text from verse 12, for instance, I'd like people to stand up when you think Jesus **stops** speaking and John **starts** speaking in this passage.

12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. 16 For 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. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. 18 Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. ...

Nearly every commentator that I've read suggests that from **verse 16 onwards** it is **John** speaking, while some commentators suggest John's voice takes over as early as verse 13. As I said, it's hard to tell.

In this passage we also get the first glimpse of what will become a major point of dispute – who of **Moses** and **Jesus** has more authority? Who speaks for God? This is not a trivial question by the way ... as there are several OT stories of Moses speaking with God and spending 40 days on Mt Sinai in the presence of God receiving the Law.



The snake being lifted up on a pole refers to the incident in Numbers that we heard earlier. To escape death when bitten, the Israelites were told to look up at the snake, believe what Moses had said and so be healed and saved.

We still use this snake symbol in several medical settings ... on ambulances and the AMA logo



In John, the Son of Man is likewise to be lifted up – a foreshadowing of the cross – so that those who believe the words of Jesus will be saved and find eternal life.

This is the essence of the good news as succinctly expressed by John.

It's good news because it's about **life**, **eternal** life, the **life** of God's kingdom. It reflects God's **love** for the whole world ... and it's **inclusive** ... it's for **everyone** who trusts in Jesus.

But the **dualism** of John also strikes a darker note. The emphasis falls on the offer of **life** ... but the flipside is that those who **reject** Jesus stand condemned and remain in darkness. There is a contrast between those who trust in the light – in Jesus – and those who are afraid of the light for what it may expose.

For John and his community, the decision's already been made.

But for those reading the Gospel, the choice is clearly articulated ...

Light or darkness?

Trust in Jesus or rejection of Jesus?

Putting confidence in God's love or being afraid of God as our just Judge?

This is where the Gospel of John seems so hard.

It's why we may prefer verses like Micah 6:8 or Matthew's call to love God and love our neighbour because they seem to offer the light without the threat of judgment.

But unfortunately if we read a little wider around these verses we find a similar message to John. Micah's main message is about the consequences of **not** following God's ways and Matthew has rather harsh parables like the sheep and the goats.

The difference in John's Gospel, is not so much that it paints a picture in fairly black and white terms – but that the decision point focuses so deliberately on **Jesus** and our **response** to Jesus. For John, everything else is secondary and ultimately for John, what is **distinctive** about the Christian community is its stance on **Jesus** and its embrace of the **message** of Jesus.

Coming back to John chapter 3, there is a brief conversation with John the Baptist and his followers where John the Baptist confirms his secondary place to Jesus. The chapter then finishes with another reflection or meditation from the writer John ... and it's all about Jesus once more.

Jesus is the one who has come from above – from heaven – and is therefore above all. Jesus testifies to what he has seen and heard – in heaven – but many don't believe. Those who **do** believe – like John and his Christian community – testify that God is true and that God speaks through the words of Jesus. Whoever trusts in Jesus has eternal life – but otherwise – and here is John's dualism once again – people must face God's wrath.

Overall the emphasis of this chapter is on *heavenly things – the light Jesus brings, the eternal life that God offers through Jesus, and the truth and love* of God that lie at the heart of everything. John's dualism suggests that the opposites are also true, including the flipside implied in John 3:16.

It's still early days in this Gospel – we're only in chapter 3 – but one **encouragement** we might take away is that people with **questions** and **doubts**– people like **Nicodemus** – are welcome to ask their questions of Jesus. We may not always get a straight-forward answer or a response that we like, but Jesus is willing to listen and encourages us to continue to grapple with our questions. Meanwhile John and his community will continue to put their case forward for Jesus through the rest of the Gospel.