

### Nicodemus: You Must Be Born Again

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the second Sunday in Lent, March 3, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

A Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you're a teacher come from God. No one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God." Jesus said to Nicodemus, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.... No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."

The kingdom of God played an important part in the beliefs of Pharisees. Pharisees longed to see God's kingdom. Pharisees believed that God is already king even though only a few recognize his authority. But they looked for a day when God's kingdom would conquer all other kingdoms and the Lord would openly show himself to be King of kings. Jesus told Nicodemus that he'd never see that day unless he was born again.

All too often the necessity of the New Birth has been preached almost exclusively in terms of personal salvation. "Do you want to go to heaven? Then you must be born again." That misses the main point of what Jesus said. Don't equate the Kingdom of God with heaven! John Calvin wrote, "They are mistaken who think the Kingdom of God means Heaven." Faithful preaching about the necessity of the New Birth will ask, not so much "do you want to go to heaven when you die?" but "do you want to see the kingdom of God?"

The Bible uses at least two metaphors for the Kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is like a city and it's like a feast. First,

it's a city. For example, in the Old Testament prophet Zechariah (chapter 8) we read:

"Thus says the LORD: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city.... Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets."

What's the kingdom of God like? It's like a city with safe streets! It's a city with a beautiful park where old people are no longer cold and lonely and ill and senile, but members of a loving community. It's a city where the elderly can sit together in the park and bask in the sun, and talk and laugh over the good old days. The kingdom of God is a city with safe streets where little children run and laugh and play without fear. It's a place where no pervert waits to lure one of them away with offers of candy. No drug pushers lurk. No drive by killings. It's a place where no child is abused or unwanted or malnourished. The kingdom of God is a city. I want to see the kingdom of God! I want to see the kingdom of God in Oxford!

Second, Jesus said that the kingdom of God is like a wedding feast. The king sends out servants to the lanes and alleys - to where hungry people rummage through garbage for food - and he invites them to the feast. There's bread. There's wine. The fatted calf is slaughtered. Laughter, joy, and song fill the hall. Rich and poor, slave and free, male and female, red and yellow, black and white - sit down together at the same table. That's what the kingdom of God is like. I want to see the Kingdom of God! I want to see the kingdom of God in Oxford!

Jesus taught that the kingdom of God is not just in the future. It's present now wherever the Gospel is preached in the

power of the Holy Spirit. The kingdom of God is present where Jesus heals the sick and binds up the brokenhearted, eats with outcasts, forgives sinners, and calls all to repent and believe the gospel. I don't want to wait until I die to see the kingdom of God! I want to see it in my lifetime! I want to see the kingdom of God in Oxford!

And I assume that Nicodemus wanted to see the kingdom of God. But Jesus said, "No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.... no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." Friends, if we want to see the kingdom of God in Oxford we need to be born again. We need to be born of water and the Spirit. If we want to see a town where the streets are safe <sup>in a sense of community.</sup> we need to be born again. If we want our town to be filled with righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit we must be born again. We need such a radical change of heart that it's like a new birth. Priorities must change radically! The way we spend our money! Our commitments to family and friends! The way we relate to our enemies! The way we relate to God's people. And above all, there must be a radical change in what delights us.

How does it happen? Throughout history the church has attempted to explain the new birth.

First, the new birth is closely associated with the work of the Holy Spirit. The Scots Confession, written by John Knox, says, "This rebirth is wrought by the power of the Holy Ghost creating in the hearts of God's chosen ones an assured faith in the promise of God revealed to us in his Word; by this faith we grasp Christ Jesus with the graces and blessings promised in him." I believe (and the

Presbyterian church has always understood the Bible to teach) that the new birth is not caused by human effort or human cooperation. The new birth is entirely the work of the Holy Spirit. That's good news because we naturally resist the power of God changing our life! But the power of the Holy Spirit is far, far, greater than our efforts to evade and resist the work God has determined to take place in our lives. Do not doubt that God wants you to be born again! God wants us all to be born again! Believe that God has already given you a new birth. By faith "grasp Christ Jesus with the graces and blessings promised in him".

Second, the New Birth is closely associated with the water of baptism. Jesus said, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." The church understands the water to refer to baptism. For example, Paul says that the Lord Jesus Christ "saved us, not because of any works of righteousness we had done, but according to his mercy through *the water of rebirth* and renewal by the Holy Spirit." In baptism God wants to assure us that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sins just as surely as the water cleanses our body. We don't equate the New Birth with baptism but it's closely related. The New Birth requires involvement in the community of faith that's entered through baptism.

Third, the New Birth is closely associated with turning away from sin and turning to Jesus Christ as a result of the New Birth. St. Paul says "clothe yourselves with the *new self*, created according to the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness." In other words, when we're born again we enter into a

new life in which we begin to root out all the old things in our lives which resist Christ and his kingdom. This is a life-long and often painful process.

Do you want to see the kingdom of God? Then, with me, take hold of the promise of Christ in the Gospel. As St Paul says, "consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." Friends, if there is no Holy Spirit, if there is no Risen Christ, then of course there's no New Birth and we'll never see the promised kingdom of God. If there is no Holy Spirit, no Risen Christ, no New Birth, then the kingdom of God is an illusion. The world is determined by the blind forces of matter, time and chance. But there is a Holy Spirit, the giver and renewer of life. There's a Risen Christ who works through us - through us! "In gratitude to God, empowered by the Spirit, we strive to serve Christ in our daily tasks and to live holy and joyful lives, even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth, praying, 'Come, Lord Jesus!'"

Let us pray: Almighty God, we thank you that by the death and resurrection of your Son Jesus Christ you have overcome sin and brought us to yourself, and that by the sealing of your Holy Spirit you have bound us to serve you freely and joyfully. Renew in us the covenant you made with us at our baptism. Send us forth in the power of your Spirit to perform the service you set before us - to be a visible experssion of the kingdom of God in Oxford; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, hwo lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.