



Kirknewton and East Calder Parish Church of Scotland

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Sermon: Rev Dr Brenda Robson

Reading: JOHN 3: 1 – 21

Background to the reading

Nicodemus was a Pharisee. The Pharisees tend to be viewed in a very negative light. Matthew's gospel in particular records Jesus attacking the Pharisees with powerful accusations, calling them white-washed tombs, dens of vipers, pious and hypocritical.

But in some ways the aims of the Pharisees and the aims of Jesus were similar. The Pharisees wanted to help the ordinary people be better Jews. They looked at the everyday problems of the ordinary Jews, they wanted the people to be more faithful Jews, and so they created many laws, complex laws, to guide their behaviour. This placed a huge burden on the people who could not possibly adhere to all these laws; the Pharisees too failed to keep their own laws in spite of appearing to be very holy and so they were seen to be hypocrites.

Jesus came to offer people a new way to relate to God, to challenge the focus on keeping man-made rules and regulations. Jesus was not a greater observer of the rules – he ate with the wrong people, he did not see the need for fasting, his observation of the Sabbath was questioned, he did not wash properly, ritually. But some Pharisees had a genuine interest and curiosity in what Jesus was saying. They were often around Jesus. There are three recorded instances of Pharisees inviting Jesus to dine with them. Pharisees warned Jesus that his life was in danger. They came to visit him and they asked many questions. True, we are told that they sometimes asked questions to try to trap him but some were fascinated by what Jesus did and said.

One of these was Nicodemus. He was a leader of the Jews and sat in the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. He came to see Jesus at night. Perhaps night-time was the time for study and debate – but there is also a suggestion of secrecy on the part of Nicodemus. John might also be using the darkness symbolically – Nicodemus is literally but also spiritually in the dark.

The central point in Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus is his statement that a man must be born again of water and the spirit otherwise he cannot enter the kingdom of God.

Now, Nicodemus, as a devout and orthodox Jew, a leader of the people, would have found this very offensive, outrageous even. He would have assumed that he was

right with God, his place in God's kingdom was assured by his race and circumcision. He would have been very familiar with the concept of being born again. There is reference throughout the Old Testament scriptures to God telling his people that they need to have a new heart, to turn away from old ways. Gentiles could become Jews by being born again. The old life had to be completely washed away and so immersion in water was part of this rebirth process. To suggest that the pious Nicodemus needed such cleansing would have horrified him. Jesus is saying that all people, even the most orthodox and religious, need to start again.

Sermon THE WIND BLOWS WHEREVER IT PLEASES

John chapter three is full of wonderful verses, rich in Jesus' teaching and promises for our salvation, material for a dozen sermons. I am going to focus on one verse, **verse 8 : *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.***

First of all, a brief summary of the first seven verses leading up our text – Nicodemus was a religious man but not born again. Even although he can say that he knows Jesus is a teacher who has come from God, Jesus still says to him, you need to be born again. And so you can be religious and see God at work, without being born again. There are many thousands of people, in the church today who are religious but not born again.

Jesus says we must be born again, it is not an optional extra, we are not invited to take it or leave it, it is an absolute necessity if we are to be saved. Jesus said that unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Jesus is not talking about baptism here, in the New Testament sense, but he is referring to Old Testament scripture which would have been familiar to Nicodemus. In particular he is referring to Ezekiel 36 where God says I will sprinkle clean water on you and cleanse you from all your sins and I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you. We need both the cleansing and the new heart. There are many baptised people in the church today who are not born again. They have presented themselves for the symbolic cleansing by water but have not received the new spirit, the new heart that God offers through Jesus Christ. That might be a controversial statement but having been in many churches in recent years, I believe it to be true.

So how can we be born again? Nicodemus asks that very question, can a man enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born again?

And Jesus explains that being reborn is the work of the Holy Spirit. In Greek and in Hebrew the word for wind is virtually the same as the word for spirit.

And so in verse 8, Jesus tells us several things about this wind –

This wind, this spirit, **is free to go wherever it wishes**, nothing can constrain it – just picture the strong winds that blow in many parts of the world, we can do nothing to control the wind and we cannot control the wind of the spirit.

Jesus tells us **we can hear the sound of the wind** – there are effects of that invisible wind – it might be our hair blowing or leaves swirling around us or the sail of

a ship. And so it is with the spirit, we can see the changes in a person's life when the spirit comes and he or she is born again.

The teenager who said that church was boring and the bible was written by people not God and Jesus was just a good man, when the Spirit breaks through and that teenager comes to believe in Christ, what a visible effect of the invisible spirit we see – that young person quite suddenly can have a passion for Jesus, wants to tell others what he has found, wants to learn more, has a joy and a freedom in his heart.

There is such hope for those of you who have a burden for young people to know Jesus. My oldest son is 26. He devours Christian books, he has read dozens of sermons from the great preachers of the past two centuries, back to Spurgeon and Tozer. He recently handed me ten DVDs of downloaded sermons on the Book of Revelation by a preacher in his 80s, David Pawson. When he was 21 he had many long arguments with me that my faith had no foundation and the bible was a myth – only the Holy Spirit could have broken through that wall of resistance. God through his Holy Spirit blows where he wishes and the effects are visible in lives regenerated.

I'm sure many of you will know stories of people whose lives changed when they were born again. Willie Barclay tells the story of a workman who was a drunkard and whose family went without because he spent most of this free time in the pub, especially on pay day. The Holy Spirit blew in his direction and he was converted, quite suddenly and totally, and his workmates did their best to make a fool of him. They said "Surely you can't believe in miracles and things like that, surely you don't believe Jesus turned water into wine." To which the man replied "I don't know whether he turned water into wine when he was in Cana in Galilee but I do know that in my own house and home, he turned beer into food and furniture!"

I received a more modern version of God's regeneration power from a friend this week. It is called God's Recall Notice and goes like this –
The maker of all human beings (GOD) is recalling all units manufactured, regardless of make or year, due to a serious defect in the primary and central component of the heart.

This is due to a malfunction in the original prototype units code named Adam and Eve, resulting in the reproduction of the same defect in all subsequent units. The defect has been technically terms "Sub-sequential Internal Non-morality or more commonly known as SIN as it is primarily expressed.

Some of the symptoms of SIN include :

1. Loss of direction
2. Foul vocal emissions
3. Amnesia of origin
4. Lack of peace and joy
5. Selfish or violent behaviour
6. Confusion in the mental component
7. Fearfulness
8. Idolatry
9. Rebellion

The manufacturer, who is neither liable nor at fault for this defect, is providing factory-authorised repair and service free of charge to correct this defect. The

Repair Technician, Jesus, has most generously offered to bear the entire burden of the staggering cost of these repairs. There is no additional fee required. The number to call for repair in all areas is p-r-a-y-e-r. No matter how big or small the SIN defect, Jesus will replace it with:

1. Love
2. Joy
3. Peace
4. Patience
5. Kindness
6. Goodness
7. Faithfulness
8. Gentleness
9. Self-control

Please see the operating manual, the B.I.B.L.E. (Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth) for further details on regeneration and rebirth.

God is the Creator and he is the agent of our rebirth. We don't cause the spirit to bring about the new birth any more than we can make the wind blow. It is not our decision but it is the will of God's spirit. We then react, we move to receive Christ and believe in him but we move because the wind is blowing and not the other way round.

Perhaps a few other verses will be helpful in this regard –

- John 6:44 Jesus says “No-one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” The Father does the drawing, that is how we come to Christ
- Philippians 2:12 Paul says “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure”
- Ephesians 2:8 By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” Again, the wind blows where it wills giving life and faith.

So John 3:8 is teaching us that being born again is primarily the work of the spirit and our response or reaction is secondary.

Nicodemus responded to this teaching by saying “How can these things be?” He did not get it, it was beyond his understanding, he was mystified. But by the end of John's gospel, after Jesus' crucifixion, it was Nicodemus along with Joseph of Arimathea another member of the Sanhedrin, who risked their lives to take Jesus body and wrap it in linen and spices (75 pounds, about 34 kilogrammes of myrrh and aloes bought by Nicodemus) and place him gently in a tomb. The wind of the spirit had continued to blow and Nicodemus had come out of the darkness to show his love for Jesus - he was undoubtedly born again and now understood Jesus' words from their earlier meeting in the night.

What should our response be today?

Many here today are already born again by water and the spirit and we can rejoice that God calls us his children. Some of you might remember the day God called you to follow him and you responded with a joyful yes Lord! Some of you have known the Lord for as long as you can remember, from childhood, and there was no specific day of conversion – but you are born again just the same.

And if you have been born again then John 3 : 8 should inspire you to pray for those who are still lost. We all carry burdens for those we love, who do not love the Lord. Do you have such a burden? Then pray for them. And do not just pray that Johnny will read the book you gave him or come along to a church meeting or invite you into his home to speak to him – these are valid prayers – but focus your prayer on asking God to send his Spirit upon Johnny, to stir up a holy wind, a holy tornado, that Johnny cannot ignore. Johnny can throw away the book or refuse to come to church or come to church and not listen or keep his door firmly shut – but he cannot stop you praying for him and that is a powerful tool. The spirit blows wherever it pleases. If you have been listening to this sermon and you know that you are not born again in Christ, then John 3 : 8 is very good news indeed. It is exciting to hear that God is sovereign and free in his grace. This group of people, those not yet born again, can say that all of my helplessness and all of my deadness and all my rebellion and all my hard heartedness and all my moral weaknesses and all my years of sin are no hindrance to God's spirit when he wills to give me life through his crucified and risen Son. He blows where he wills, not where we deserve his blowing.

Perhaps you feel the wind of the spirit blowing around you right now, stirring something inside, seeking a response, demanding a response, breaking down the barriers of unbelief and years of turning away.

Turn back now, look up at the cross of Jesus, accept for yourselves that 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.

AMEN