

# St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

## ENTRY INTO GOD'S KINGDOM

**Rev. Catherine Buchan**

**Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> August 2010**

Numbers 21:1-9

John 3:1-16

Over the past few weeks we have learned a lot about the Kingdom of God as we have listened to some of what Jesus had to say about it.

From Jesus' parables of the Kingdom we have seen that it is gradual in its spread, beginning with small things but becoming large and dependable. We have seen that the kingdom's presence is shown by the way that people and situations change. We have been shown that it draws on the old but is concerned, not with preserving that, but with going forward to the new. We have seen that it is precious, worth giving everything for, and that it belongs to those who know that, and are prepared to give up their own lives. And finally we have seen that it is born and grows and works in community; communities which are made up of individual changed lives, yes, but the work of God's kingdom can only be achieved when we work together.

Today we hear Jesus talk about how to enter God's kingdom; how to become a citizen. He tells us that it can only happen one way: we must be born again. Jesus was talking to Nicodemus when he came out with this remarkable statement. Nicodemus was a leader, a religious leader, a teacher of Israel. As such, Nicodemus would expect that the Kingdom of God was to be found within the land of Israel, and he would know that to consider yourself one of God's chosen people, a Jew, you had to have had a Jewish mother. Jewishness was defined matrilineally, probably because, before DNA testing, it was easier to prove who the mother of a child was than the father. So Nicodemus knew all about being born into God's chosen people. He knew already that being part of God's people was not a matter of choice but a matter of God's gift. He would think he had the birth thing covered. No wonder when Jesus told him he had to be born again or from above his thought was about returning to his mother's womb. That was the best way he knew of being one of God's people

But now Jesus is saying that your Jewish mother is not enough, is not even important, not if you want to be part of God's kingdom. You have to be born again, or born from above. Now the person of importance isn't your earthly mother, but your heavenly Father. Reading this passage, we hear echoes of John's introduction to this Gospel. It may well be that he had these words of Jesus in mind when he wrote it. We often read it at Christmas time. Remember chapter 1 verses 12 and 13: *"But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."* Entry into God's kingdom depends on God's initiative. Just as a baby really has very little to do with its own conception, gestation and birth, so we don't have any of the real work to do with our being born again. The complete new start implied in the idea of being born again, from above, is given us by God.

Jesus says that we are born by water and the Spirit. Water is easy: it's obviously a reference to baptism. The baptism which Nicodemus knew best would be the washing rite which accompanied the conversion of non-Jews to Judaism - a washing ceremony which involved turning from past ways of life and repenting of breaking God's Law. The baptism which John offered by the river Jordan, asking people who were already Jews to turn away from their wrong-doing, was based on this conversion ritual: that was why it was just a little controversial - since it implied that people born into the chosen race were no better off than Gentiles.

Coming for baptism in water is our part of the new birth. Just coming. And coming shows that we know that we need to be made new, that we have failed, that we cannot do it on our own, and that the very things which

we have prided ourselves on - our birth, our up-bringing, our ethical standards are of no use in bringing us close to God. Coming for baptism is an act of humility, and asking baptism for our own children is also that: it says that without God's help we cannot bring up our children to know him. It says that we know that no matter how great we think our children are, we know that they will not be perfect, but will make mistakes and do wrong and need God's help. So there is birth through water.

And then there is being born by the Spirit. This is entirely God's work. He only does it when we do the coming in repentance and humility which the birth of baptism implies. God pours his Spirit into our hearts, with the transforming new life which follows our new birth. Both the humility of the water and the gift of the Spirit are needed if we are to be born again, from above and enter the kingdom of God.

"How can these things be?" asks Nicodemus, not surprisingly. This is all a bit radical. So Jesus tells him how it can be. He refers back to a story which Nicodemus would know very well, the story of the bronze snake.

A few weeks ago, our family saw an adder, which is, of course our only poisonous snake. It was between the A9 and the river a few miles south of Dalwhinnie, and probably was as astonished to see humans in that place as we were to see it. We had intended to make our way down to play at the river, but the sight of that snake made us radically adjust our plans. You don't mess with poisonous snakes. The people of Israel knew that, and they learned it in practice, not just in theory, when because of their lack of faith their camp in the wilderness was infested by biting snakes. The cure for the bites was that Moses made a bronze snake so that when people were affected by the bites of the poisonous snakes, they could look at it and be healed. It's an odd story, and not the way you would usually cure snake-bite, but the point was not the snake, but the faith of the person who made the effort to look at it believing that God would heal him. You looked at the bronze snake and God knew that you trusted him, so he did the work of healing. (In fact the snake itself was to become a snare to the Israelites over the years, because it was kept and became for a while an object of worship in its own right, until King Hezekiah had it destroyed when he renewed the worship at the temple. That part of the snake's story should be a warning to us about how we treat our religious artefacts!)

Jesus was saying that in being born into the kingdom of God his suffering and death are the birth pangs. We are called to have faith enough to look at him hung on the cross and say "For me." Then God does the rest. And we are born anew. It's a wonderful truth.

Mind you, being born is just the beginning. When a child is born, almost at once people begin to speculate about what he or she will be like, look like, do with life when they are grown up. Birth is the entry into life, not an end in itself. So with our rebirth. It's wonderful, and we should never stop thanking God for it, but just as the best way to thank your parents for giving you life and birth is to live your life to the full, so the best way to thank God for your new life is to live it and grow up in it and use it. You don't enter God's kingdom just to stand at the door. You enter it to be a part of it and explore it and live in it.

We look at Jesus' death and we say "For me" and so we join the family of God, the community of God. So we allow God's Spirit to baptise us and be born in us, and so we give up our own control of our lives. That's what Jesus meant by the Spirit being like the wind, blowing where it will, and out of our control.

Think of a tidy office (not mine) with piles of paper neatly stacked so that you know just where everything is and can lay your hands on whatever you might need. It's a good environment for getting on with your work. It's a warm sunny day (OK, this is a fantasy!) and the window is open to let in the air and the bird-song. This is your nice, self-ordered life. If you keep it just so, you can just about cope with it, and even feel you have accomplished something at the end of the day. But then, from nowhere, a wind gets up and rushes in at the window. Your neatly stacked papers blow everywhere, and suddenly your neat patterns are disarranged. But as you rush about trying to recover things and replace them, you discover that there is a better way of doing things, that your neat system wasn't achieving as much as it seemed to. That's like the work of God's Spirit.

When we are born again we give up control to God. After all, we have admitted that our own way wasn't the best, was allowing us to do wrong; we have admitted that we have prided ourselves on things which can't save us: our families, our politics, being nice, whatever. So we give up control to God, who can and does save us and who knows better than us, and we learn to live his way - even if at first it seems strange and difficult.

The kingdom of God is entered by our being born again, born of God, born of water and the Spirit. The kingdom of God is something God very much wants us to enter: wants it because he loves the world he has made and loves the people he has made. The kingdom of God is thrown open to us in Jesus' death simply because God loves us: loves you and me, loves what we can be in his community; loves the world and what it can become when his people live his way in it. That there is a kingdom of God does not mean that God has given up on this world. For from it. He has opened his kingdom to us to prove how much he loves this world. He has done all the hard, painful work of bringing his kingdom to birth for us. We are invited to turn from our old failed selves and come to him.

Amen.