

(John 1: 1-14; John 3: 1-19)

Some years ago when I was in Sydney for the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of Australia, I woke up in the middle of the night to find a strange figure at the foot of my bed. It was dark and I was half asleep - so I was initially startled and couldn't work out who it was or what they were doing there. Gradually the light dawned - it was my Moderator's gown, which I'd hung up the night before.

In chapter 3 of John's Gospel, a man comes to Jesus at night and wonders why he can't see! That man's name is Nicodemus. Nicodemus comes to Jesus because he is concerned with spiritual insight, rather than physical sight. But John plays on the fact that the meeting is taking place during the darkness of night to highlight Nicodemus' real problem. Nicodemus begins by suggesting that Jesus must be from God (3: 2). But behind this statement is a question: "Is Jesus God's promised King? Is he the Messiah?"

If this were a world of light, it would be easy to see the truth about Jesus. But this is a world in darkness, into which Jesus steps as the true light. We need light because we live in darkness. To "see" God's kingdom - to understand its nature and welcome its coming - we need to be able to see in the dark. And for that, we need help - we need the Spirit of God to make us a new person with new insight. As Jesus says to Nicodemus, we need to be "born again" (3: 3).

In his conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus goes on to talk about snakes in the wilderness, which at first sight seems rather random (3: 14). He is asking Nicodemus to think of the episode recorded in Numbers 21. The people of Israel, on their way to the promised land, had rebelled against God, and so God had sent a plague of poisonous snakes as an act of judgment. The people repented, so God told Moses to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole and lift it high among the people. Anyone who looked to the serpent would be saved. Jesus says that this was not only a means of rescue for those Israelites in that time - it was also a picture of what he would do at the cross: "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" (3: 14-15). And why is Jesus lifted up on a cross? Jesus tells us in one of the greatest verses in the Bible: "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" (3: 16). God's King, Jesus, would die in the place of his people - for their rebellion - so that they could be forgiven.

Finally, in his night-time conversation, Jesus comes back to the issue of darkness: "Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil" (3:19). People love darkness. They don't want to let go of their sin - they don't want to recognise the living Word, and they don't want to receive their King: "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognise him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (1: 10-11). Why? Because people fear exposure. They don't want to admit their sin or give up their self-rule. Jesus is diagnosing what Nicodemus has done by coming furtively at night. Nicodemus is his own parable. He has come at night, asking, "Why can't I see?"

Jesus offers eternal life to rebellious subjects. But we prefer darkness and death to life in the light. We don't want to admit we need the King on the cross, dying for our sins. As a result, the cross looks like the epitome of shame to us rather than the epitome of glory. We call darkness light and light darkness. We don't recognise the light that has come to us. Only the Spirit of God can open our eyes to the true light. Only the Spirit of God can enable us to recognise and receive the truth of these words with joy: "The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world" (1: 9).

And why did Jesus, the true light, come into the world? John says in verse 12 of chapter 1, "Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God". This is what his advent, his arrival, the first Christmas is all about: giving us the right to become children of God. How do we lay hold of that right?

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Well, John says we need to receive Jesus, to believe in his name - that is, we need to accept Jesus and what he claims to be - the one and only Son of God and the only true Saviour - and dedicate our life to him. Sometimes, when we think of God accepting us in Christ, we perhaps think of him as just tolerating us. At best, he puts up with our weaknesses, our sin and our ugliness for the sake of Christ. We think his acceptance is reluctant. But John tells us that God's view of us is nothing like that: "To those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God". In his first letter, John says, "See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (1 John 3:1). There is no sense here that Christ has twisted the arm of a reluctant God. Salvation begins with the Father's love. And his love is lavish. He has given us the right to become his children. 1 John 3: 1 is literally, "See what kind of love the Father has given us" or "See from what country the love of the Father has come". In other words, John is saying, "Where did this love come from? It's like nothing we've ever seen before. It's literally out of this world!" That is why one of the Christmas carols tells us,

"Love came down at Christmas,  
Love all lovely, Love divine;  
Love was born at Christmas,  
Star and angels gave the sign".

John was a merchant seaman who grew up without any knowledge of God. Then his father died, and that sent him into a spin. He and his wife started to attend the church where she had been to Sunday School as a child. John began to read his Bible. One day he read John 5: 24: "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life". "That's me", he thought. "I believe in Jesus so I must have crossed over from death to life!" And do you know what John's first thought was? He was annoyed that God hadn't involved him in the decision. God had made him a Christian without consulting him first. He hadn't chosen God - God had chosen him. God had given him faith without him asking for it. John had been born again "not.....of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God" (1: 13).

The apostle Paul uses the idea of adoption to show that we are children of God. John uses the idea of rebirth. We are born again as children of God. And this is all of God. It's not based on human ability ("natural descent"). It's not based on human will ("human decision"). We believe in Christ's name because we have first been born of God. "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" (3: 8). Just as human beings are born as children with a father, so Christians are born anew as children of our heavenly Father. Our new birth is what makes us God's children - not our own efforts.

Our role is to believe in Jesus and believe we have become children of God through him. And with this, everything else falls into place. As John reflects in his first letter on what it means to be born of God, he shows how it transforms our lives in 5 different ways:

1. Being children of God transforms our behaviour

"No-one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God" (1 John 3: 9). God's DNA is in us. So we are being changed into the family likeness - conformed to the image of Christ - until eventually we become like him. "But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure." (1 John 3: 2-3).

2. Being children of God transforms our relationships

"Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God" (1 John 4: 7). Other Christians are also God's children, and so they're our brothers and sisters. We love our church family with the love we've received from God.

3. Being children of God transforms our fears

“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment” (1 John 4: 18). We don’t fear judgment because, in his love, God has dealt with our judgment on the cross. He has sent Jesus as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (1 John 4: 10).

4. Being children of God transforms our prayers

“This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us” (1 John 5: 14). Just as a human father delights to hear the faltering words of his child, so our heavenly Father delights to hear our faltering prayers. Jesus said, “If you then, though you are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him” (Luke 11: 13).

5. Being children of God transforms our future.

“We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the One who was born of God keeps them safe, and the evil one cannot harm them” (1 John 5: 18). God may allow bad things to happen, but never more than we can bear and always to make us more like his Son. Nothing and no one can remove us from God’s family.

But always remember: we don’t start with changed behaviour, relationships, fears or prayers. We start by believing we’re the children of God through Jesus, the Son of God. This is what changes everything else.

In C S Lewis’s “The Chronicles of Narnia”, the central characters enter another world in which they are sons of Adam and daughters of Eve. They inherit humanity’s true identity as kings and queens in God’s world. But back in this world, the children are bullied for their claim to be royal. Or they are mocked by their cousin, Eustace. Yet as soon as they arrive in Narnia, the Narnians bow before them, recognising them as kings and queens of Narnia.

It’s a picture of our status as children of God. “The people who belong to this world don’t recognise that we are God’s children because they don’t know him” (1 John 3: 16 - NLT). This world doesn’t know God, and so it doesn’t understand that we are his children. But we really are! We are sons and daughters of God, made and remade in his image to reign with Christ.

The advent of Jesus, his incarnation, changes our lives because it changes our status. Jesus has come to make us children of God. It was his choice, for we would never have made that choice. And what an amazing and wonderful choice - one that we will increasingly appreciate, and thank him for, eternally.

“See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!  
And that is what we are!”

Amen

