



QUESTIONS FOR CONVERSATIONS WITH JESUS #1 - John 3:1-21

1. In your own life experience what have been the most challenging conversations you've had? Were they with people of a different culture and language? Or of a different social class? Or of a different age group? What does it suggest about Jesus that he could converse across every social divide?
2. Have you ever imagined a conversation you'd like to have with Jesus face to face? Even now, think of something you'd want to ask him about. How do you think he would most likely respond? And, how far do you want to go to make that happen?
3. What is surprising to you as you consider Nicodemus visiting Jesus by night? What do you think he was risking? And do you think he went away clearer about what he was seeking?
4. Consider the contrast of Nicodemus and RM Williams in their approach to Jesus. How would you characterise their strategies? Why do you think one of them "gets it" and the other does not?
5. Jesus explains that Nicodemus (and everyone else) needs to be born anew and uses the metaphor of water and spirit (wind) - What have you understood from the sermon about what that seems to mean? Discuss together.
6. How willing is Jesus to give people this experience and how does John allude to his willingness and the way it will happen further into chapter 3?
7. It's normal for people (like Nicodemus and RM Williams) to imagine that if they only do enough good deeds, public service, or attend church enough, or take Holy Communion regularly, that they'll be right with God when it comes to their deaths. How does Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus turn that on its head?

What did it mean for Jesus to be lifted up? So, describe the difference in our lives it makes to believe in the lifted-up Son of Man versus earning our way to heaven.

“Jesus Talks with Nicodemus”
Jo Kadlecck-Gilbert – 1 July 2018

Many of you know Chris and I moved here from the U.S. about 3 1/2 years ago. One of the big surprises for me is that even though we all speak English, I can't tell you how many times I've had to ask people to interpret their "Aussie-isms." When a church friend asked me, for instance, to "source some snags for the Barbie this arvo", I had no idea what to do. Another told me she never wanted to work in Woop Woop, to which I naively asked, "IS Woop Woop a town like Bli Bli or Kin Kin?"

Communication can be tricky. But imagine the New Testament days when conversations were riddled with social, cultural and religious biases and constraints. Jews didn't talk to Gentiles. Women didn't talk publicly with men who weren't their husbands. And the poor *never* spoke with the rich or elite.

Now imagine if every conversation you had in your entire time on Earth broke all those rules, and not only affected each person you talked to, but went on to literally change the world. That's what happened with Jesus. And that's what we'll be exploring in this new sermon series, *Conversations with Jesus*.

Think about it: every time Jesus had a chat with someone, his words had a ripple effect around the Middle East. Those words, along with his actions, won him followers, curious crowds and lots of enemies. They still do. Thankfully, the gist of those conversations was recorded in the Gospels. They're confronting, personal yet full of grace. They can turn your whole world upside down – as we'll see in each of the five interactions this month, all found in John's Gospel. (The reading notes will give you a preview on these.) Every Sunday, we'll explore three questions:

1. Who are the characters in *this* conversation?
2. What does Jesus claim about himself?
3. And why does it matter for us today?

In other words, what do these conversations reveal to us about God's character in the Person of Jesus? Because Jesus makes some radical claims about himself, claims no other leader made before or since, that still mean the difference between life and death.

First, a little context on our Gospel writer: John was a Palestinian Jew and close friend of Jesus. The primary point of his gospel was to invite all people to believe in Jesus, to receive the gift of eternal life. His original audience was Jews and Gentiles living in the larger Greco-Roman world toward the end of the first century A.D. so he recorded conversations with Jesus reflecting that diversity.

Let's look at the conversation we just heard in John 3. **First question: Who are the characters in this interaction?** We have an older "rabbi of Israel" named Nicodemus who seeks out Jesus, the younger teacher from Galilee. Jesus has already created a stir; he's turned water into wine, performed other miracles, and confronted the self-indulgent local authorities. Here comes Nicodemus – at night to talk with Jesus. At first glance it seems like a theological discussion between two spiritual leaders. But look closer and you'll see a teacher who's hungry to learn from a man he can't figure out.

Who is Nicodemus? John tells us he is a Pharisee (or religious leader), and member of the Sanhedrin, which was the highest and most powerful religious and political body within Judaism. That means Nicodemus has status and position – he's set. He's an elite. He doesn't need anything. Like so many in Noosa, Nicodemus is comfortable; he's a good guy, observes the moral codes of his religion and does all the things he thinks will secure his place in God's kingdom. He helps at morning tea, leads a Connect group. Yet, he and his colleagues are concerned that this charismatic spiritual leader from Galilee, with no training or qualifications, is attracting some of their people.

So Nicodemus decides to check out Jesus – undercover.

Why? What does Nicodemus lack in his cushy, religious life? Why does he come to Jesus at night? Maybe he's afraid to be seen talking with someone like Jesus, or of associating with Christ-followers. Maybe Nicodemus is concerned his position will be compromised. But he can't help it; something about Jesus draws him out, for this seemingly secretive conversation. And the first thing he says is, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher come from *God* – for no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him" (v2). Here's a smart leader who is honestly intrigued with Jesus. So Jesus does what he always does with sincere hearts; he goes *behind* their questions, straight to what they need to hear. Jesus knows Nicodemus wants a deeper, more meaningful life. That's why he's come.

We probably all know people like this: curious, hungry and intrigued about Christianity. They decide to read about Jesus, without of course telling their secular friends. And their encounter with Jesus in the Gospels begins to do something to them. They *like* Jesus, see him as a good guy, a wise teacher, who's had a great impact on the world.

That's what RM Williams thought, you know, the famous boot maker? Williams was once dirt poor, from the outback, but he built an empire on business smarts and the good words of Jesus. He taught himself how to read from the bible his mother gave him when he left home, and he became a prominent socialite because of his wealth. He knew Jesus wanted him to be a better man; In fact, Christ's words, "How hard it is for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God", pierced him to the bone.

His story, one of many in Meredith Lake's great book, "The Bible in Australia" (and I hope you'll join us for her talk 28 July), shows this tension behind admiring Jesus but not really accepting him. Lake goes on to explain that RM Williams never came to terms with Christ's teaching for him personally. In fact, he left his wealthy life and his marriage for a simple existence in rural Queensland, keenly aware that he was a poor steward of his gifts. Though he kept thinking about Jesus and the Bible, he never came to a firm conclusion about either, in his whole life.

I have a lot of friends and family like him. You probably do too. People who don't mind Jesus. They think he's got some good things to say. But they don't get him either. Son of Man, what? God in the Flesh, born of a virgin and resurrected from the grave, all that is little too much for them. And that's a big difference in *this* conversation because Nicodemus *does* recognize Jesus is no ordinary teacher – surely, Nicodemus says, God Almighty *is* with Him or he couldn't do the things he does. Yes, he's like one of the OT prophets, but more. Jesus is different.

Notice what Jesus does next in v 3: he invites Nicodemus to think beyond his Jewish training and consider that God might have a different way for coming into the Kingdom. Jesus doesn't tell him to do more good works. He doesn't tell him to clean up his act, to stop being an elite, or even to stop skimming off the offerings (as many in the Sanhedrin did). No, Jesus says he must be *born . . . again*, a funny phrase to our modern ears that's almost a Christian cliché. But to Nicodemus this is a head-scratcher. How could anyone get inside his mother's womb a second time?

Of course, Jesus is not referring to a literal new birth but a spiritual one – the kind RM Williams never fully understood. Jesus tells Nicodemus he needs a spiritual heart transplant. He knows Nicodemus is a righteous and dutiful Jew who has studied Hebrew Scriptures. So Jesus gives a nod to Ezekiel 36:26, where the Lord says, "I will give you a new heart, and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." In other words, yes, Nicodemus is a faithful member of his community, a good man – but Jesus says neither is enough. Neither is it enough simply to say that God is with Jesus and has some wise things to say.

No, Jesus wants his followers to be radically different, so different they have to be *birthed* all over again. They *do* need a new heart altogether. So Jesus tells Nicodemus—and all of us—if you want a real and abundant life, you can no longer be on the outside looking in. Jesus says, listen, the Kingdom of God is not a spectator sport. I want you to be fully involved, fully alive with the King himself, with your Creator and Lord, ME.

Nicodemus is intrigued, and puzzled—how can these things be? He asks. To which Jesus responds gently but directly: you're Israel's teacher, you're a member of the Anglican church, you're a successful business man, and yet you don't understand all I have for you? You heard the sermon series on Samuel and Kings and Ephesians, you've read the Bible and you're still an outsider?

Okay let me put it another way, Jesus says to Nicodemus. Let's talk about something you will understand: water and wind. Water symbolizes purity and cleansing—just as John the Baptist had first proclaimed. "I baptize with water, said John, but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, whose sandal I'm not worthy to untie. And he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

This *new life*, Jesus explains, is like the wind blowing where it will, though we don't know where it's coming from or going. It's the same with everyone born of the Spirit, with everyone who wants to be my follower, who wants to make a difference in this world, who wants to have a new, joy-filled life—forever.

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asks genuinely.

All the training, status and good deeds he's done as an elite teacher of Israel don't get Nicodemus across the line. His position and righteous living don't come close to what the wind of the Spirit can achieve. **Which brings us to our second question: How can Jesus make this extraordinary claim about being born again—a claim that would change everything for Nicodemus—and each of us?**

Jesus speaks with an authority like no one else, using earthly metaphors like wind, and yet, Nicodemus is struggling to get it. How, Jesus wonders, will Nicodemus understand when he speaks of heavenly things as v. 12 says? It won't happen if he tries really hard to get it, or if he studies his whole life—though there's nothing wrong with studying,. No matter how much you read the bible or think you're a good person, no matter how smart you are or how much community service you do, *only* God's Spirit can give you a new heart. New life is God's job!

How does that happen? Look at v. 13- 14. "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 desert"—a story central to Nicodemus's Jewish beliefs—"so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that *everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.*"

A new heart comes from the God who makes all things new through the lifted up Son. Does Jesus have the authority to tell Nicodemus to be born again? Or that everyone—not just Jews—may have eternal life? Yes! He is more than a prophet. He is the *Son of Man* who himself has gone into heaven and chose to come to earth for him, for you, for me. Imagine how this claim sounded to Jewish ears: *anyone* who believes in him can live forever with Jesus, the God-Man who *left* Heaven, came to Earth and will come again.

So let's summarize: who is Nicodemus? An honest, hungry seeker intrigued with Jesus. What does Jesus tell him? Only through my sacrifice can my Spirit give you the life you want! But third, why does this matter? What difference does it make for any of us to *again be born*?

The answer is in what Jesus tells Nicodemus, and all of us: if you want your deepest longings fulfilled, if you want true status, real meaning and perfect love, if you want conversations that are life changing, then give your whole life to the One who was far more than a wise teacher, the one who was *willingly* lifted up on the cross. See, this conversation and these claims Jesus makes to Nicodemus, point to his execution, a bloody excruciating death we each deserve, killed not in secret but so publicly it remains at the center of human history.

His gruesome death and resurrection life is the only way we can come into the Kingdom. And the great gift of eternal life, from the God who so loved the world, is one he still gives to anyone who asks.

As one theologian put it: “The descent of Jesus into the depths of our sin and death is paradoxically truly lifting up, the glorifying which leads to the victory of life over death. To enter into the kingship of God can only be by the gift of a new life, the life of God himself, and that gift can only be made available by the descent of God himself to pour out his life in death for the life of the world.”

Something about Jesus drew Nicodemus to him. Likewise, when the Spirit leads us and we see him as He is, we can't help but see our own enormous limits and distance from God. When we realize that no other thinking or lifestyle or philosophy will satisfy, only then can we enter into an eternal relationship that starts today, one that changes every thing we do.

That conversation changed Nicodemus. We know from John 7 Nicodemus goes on to publicly defend Jesus before the other Pharisees and from John 19 it's Nicodemus who goes with Joseph to ask for Christ's body after he'd been murdered. His entire life is redirected because of that one now famous nighttime conversation with Jesus. I think it's safe to say Nicodemus stopped watching and embraced this born again life, receiving a new heart and new purpose. One that gave him the courage to speak up for Jesus in front of a group of men who didn't want anything to do with him. We can too.

Maybe some of us here need to move beyond the religious duties of church 'membership' and ask God's Spirit to birth us all over again with Jesus. Maybe others need to stop thinking your good works in Noosa are enough to win God's favor. They're not. Jesus wants you, wants each of us. So much so he's willing to give you a new heart for the Kingdom of God, to be a participant, not a spectator. So that good works flow out of His new life in us.

This conversation in John 3 invites all of us to live radically different lives with our King *so that* the world may know and see and taste his sacrificial love each day of our lives on earth.

Is Jesus just a good teacher to you? Or is he the Son of Man, Lord of your life, who was lifted up on a cross to die so that you could live with certainty and confidence?

If so, that's the richest conversation you'll ever have – no matter what language you speak!