

**THE MESSAGE OF JESUS
AND HIS KINGDOM**
The truth that could change everything



Part 5 'Jesus the Teacher'

John 3:1-17

25th October 2009

Welcome to part 5 of our series in which we are trying to get a handle on Jesus and his message about the Kingdom of God. Today we consider 'Jesus the Teacher'. As we read through the gospels we find Jesus speaking repeatedly over a period of three years about this Kingdom which had suddenly become very real and very near because of his presence. I imagine that when the crowds gathered to hear him it was more like Hyde Park Corner or Glastonbury Festival than any religious service. Usually he was speaking in the open air – on beaches, hillsides, in streets or fields. And nearly always, when Jesus did speak, it seemed to be an impromptu response to a new situation. He could talk for hours and not mention God by name. But nearly everyone knew that he was somehow speaking about God in his stories about farmers and fishermen, businessmen and kings, families and homemakers. He did sometimes show up in a religious setting like the synagogue or temple, but when he did he tended to disrupt the proceedings.

But if we are to understand Jesus' message about the kingdom we must also pay attention to his private conversations with individuals. All four gospels are studded with these personal interactions like precious jewels. Often those personal conversations were the consequence of some public proclamation. So, for example, when Nicodemus came to Jesus he was already intrigued by what he had heard and seen. He comes to Jesus after dark, almost certainly because he was a Pharisee, and being seen with Jesus in broad daylight would have caused difficulties with his fellow Pharisees who, on the whole, felt threatened by Jesus and hated him.

The conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is found in John chapter 3. Now if you are reading through Matthew, Mark or Luke you will find constant references to the Kingdom, either the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of heaven. But not in John's gospel. The only place where he uses the term '*Kingdom of God*' is in this unique conversation. Usually, John's translation of Jesus' original phrase '*Kingdom of God*' is expressed in English with the words '*eternal life*'. Unfortunately, most of the time we imagine that phrase – *eternal life* – to mean simply - *life in heaven after you die*. But does it mean 'life after death' or does it mean much more? There are places in John's gospel where Jesus reduces the phrase simply to *life* or *life to the full*. In chapter 17, in his prayer to the Father, Jesus makes this fascinating statement: ***This is eternal life; that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you sent.*** So here, eternal life means knowing and having a relationship with the Father and the Son. The life we enjoy in the Kingdom of God is – to use a phrase of Dallas Willard – *an interactive relationship* with the king and his other subjects.

In the Greek *eternal life* literally means *life of the ages*, in contrast to the life of this age as people are living it in these days. So these phrases – *eternal life*, *life to the full* or simply *life* – give us a crucial insight into what Jesus meant by the *Kingdom of God*. This is a life that is radically different from the way we used to live and from the way most people are living today. It is a life that is full and overflowing, a richer life that is focused on a relationship with the Father and with Jesus.

Now back to our conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. He begins: "**Teacher, we all know that God has sent you to teach us. Your miraculous signs are proof enough that God is with you.**" Jesus doesn't thank him for the compliment. He goes straight to the point and says, "**I assure you, unless you are born again, you can never see the Kingdom of God.**" To experience this life, this abundant life of the Kingdom of God, something pretty radical has to happen. You can't see the Kingdom, let alone enter it unless you have been born again. Life in the present age started with a birth, a physical one. Life of the age to come also starts with a birth, a spiritual one. The language of life and death, light and darkness, condemnation and salvation in this passage is very clear. There is a radical discontinuity between the old life and the new life. And we begin to experience this life, the abundant life of the kingdom when we acknowledge and welcome the King to reign over our lives. Many of us can look back with tremendous gratitude to a moment when we realised we were not living this *life* Jesus had brought. We had to repent and have a complete change of thinking. We then looked to the cross from which forgiveness and healing flowed and accepted Jesus as our Saviour, our restorer. By his Spirit the living Jesus came to us with this gift of new life, *life of the ages*. The tragedy is, and I speak from my own experience, that we try to bolt Jesus on to the old life rather than start experiencing and living the new life. It is so much more than praying a prayer at the end of a booklet and having an emotional experience at the end of a service. Then we use 'born again' as an adjective – *I'm a born-again Christian!* But it is clear that Jesus does not mean that Nicodemus just needs a new religious experience – it is much more radical than that. He is saying to him: "*Nicodemus, you're a respected teacher yourself. But if you are coming to me hoping to experience this extraordinary life to the full that I've been teaching about, you are going to have to go back to the very beginning. You are going to have to become like a baby all over again, to unlearn everything you have been so sure about, so you can be re-taught.*"

I was talking recently with someone who freely admitted to having never opened the Bible in her life and who had never received any kind of religious education. But she was open, asking great questions and really wanting to learn. I understand why Jesus sometimes said to quite unlikely people – *You are not far from the kingdom*. But then I talk with other people who have lots of knowledge, though maybe not a lot of understanding, and they are so certain about their reasons for not believing in God and so fixed in their ideas, and I want to say lovingly to them, as Jesus did to Nicodemus – *You'll never see the kingdom unless you are born again, unless you go back to square one and start again*.

Nicodemus has only been with Jesus a few minutes and he is confused. Why isn't Jesus making his message clearer? Why is his message hidden in parables, metaphors and strange language? "**What do you mean?**" exclaimed Nicodemus. "**How can an old man go back into his mother's womb and be born again?**" Jesus, you are not making any sense.

Something similar happens in the next chapter of John in a conversation Jesus has with a half-breed **Samaritan woman**. She's never heard of Jesus, and she is rather surprised when this Jewish man engages her, a Samaritan woman, in conversation by a well. He asks for a drink, which she gives him. Then he says, '**If you knew who I am you'd ask me for living water.**' *Living water* – an evocative image that sounds like another metaphor for this extraordinary, abundant life – another metaphor for *the kingdom of God*. But she is confused. What is that meant to mean? Again, we are left wondering why Jesus would be so unclear? Why is he hiding his message in metaphors?

Luke tells of a conversation Jesus had with **a rich, young man**, some sort of political official. The man asks Jesus how he can experience *eternal life*. This is not about life after

you die. He is not seeking a ticket to heaven. He is rich, young and influential, but his life is empty. He is searching for more. Jesus spars with him for a few minutes, questioning the way he phrased his question. He implies that the man already knows the answer, and then offers the conventional answer anyone would expect; **obey the commandments**. The man seems confused. He has been keeping the commandments since childhood. Then Jesus drops the bombshell! *Sell your shares and give all your wealth to the poor. Then come and be my disciple.* The man goes away sad. And so does Jesus.

In conversation after conversation, Jesus seems to resist being clear and direct. He hardly ever answers a question with a simple answer. Instead he asks his own questions or tells a story that raises even more questions. What's going on? What could possibly be the benefit of Jesus' hiddenness, intrigue, metaphor and questions? Why risk being misunderstood or not understood at all? If the message is so important why not use unambiguous technical language?

I hope these questions will make you curious, and encourage you to hang in there with our teaching series on Jesus and the message of his kingdom.

But let me finish with the three personal reflections:

1. Remember, Jesus said – ***eternal life, life of the kingdom, is knowing you and Jesus Christ whom you sent.*** In other words, this abundant life of the new age is a relationship with the Father and the Son through the work of the Spirit. The next most important relationship in my life is my relationship with my wife. And over 40 years of experience tells me that this relationship does not depend on unambiguous, technical language! Thankfully, there's still lots of mystery and intrigue, and language that is evocative, even poetic. We are still on a journey of drawing closer and becoming one on this journey of life. Don't you imagine that is what Jesus wants with us?

2. I realise that with my tidy theological categories and preconceived ideas, I've had Jesus pretty well tamed. But now, as I look at Scripture through a kingdom lens, I find Jesus is loose and wild, and challenging me deeply. We have our gospel readings on Sunday and end with the response - *This is the gospel of the Lord.* And while everyone else is saying *Praise to you, O Christ,* I'm thinking – *Help, I found that deeply disturbing.* When were you last disturbed by the words of Jesus? Don't you think we should be?

3. I've tried to put myself in Nicodemus's place and imagine myself going to Jesus at night (at night I add, because I am a vicar!). What would or rather what *does* Jesus want to say to me? Might it be something like this:

Tim, you are a vicar and still you don't understand these things. You've called yourself a 'born-again' Christian for 45 years. All that time you've known you were a sinner deserving condemnation and you have been trusting in my death on the cross in your place for your forgiveness. You let me take away the fear of judgment and death. Over the years you have come to experience more of my Father's love for you as his adopted son. And you have opened yourself to more of the work of my Spirit in your life. But if you want to see the Kingdom, if you really want to experience the full life of the kingdom, then you have to be born again. You are going to have to unlearn a lot of things you've taken for granted and start again. Only then will you begin to see the bigger picture of my purposes for this world.

I think what I am trying to say is that I fear that a lot of Christians, yes, *born-again Christians*, have had the religious experience. They've got the T-shirt! They have understood grace and the wonder of the cross. They know their spiritual debts are

cancelled and they have a visa that will get them into heaven. But they are not living the abundant life of the kingdom. Their Christianity is a bolt-on accessory, a compartment that competes with the old life we are still living.

Jesus calls us to repent, to change the way we think, because the kingdom is close enough for us to enter. The life of this kingdom, eternal life, abundant life, living water, whatever, is so radically different that we need to be born again. We need to die to self and take up our cross. And we hear Jesus invite us to follow him into the world he loves and longs to heal. The whole of life is a gift in which we experience the many blessings of God so that we can join him in blessing all the people he has made and this beautiful world he wants us to look after.

The more I glimpse this tantalising message of Jesus and his Kingdom the more I realise I need to be *'born again'*.

PS I remember well getting very angry when I heard a preacher many years ago inviting people to be *born again* again! I apologise if you are feeling the same anger. I do not believe that you can or need to repeat that once and for all experience of coming to Christ in repentance and faith and being transferred from the kingdom of death to the kingdom of life. But I am less convinced than I was that Jesus is talking here about that once and for all religious experience. Rather he is speaking about an attitude of heart, a humility of spirit and a life-long process. This is so radical that it is like a baby bursting from its mother's womb and seeing the whole world with new eyes. Born again Christians (and they are really the only kind there are!) are kingdom Christians. They are able to see the kingdom and how it operates. They have entered into that kingdom and started living the full and abundant life.

For use in your

Cell, Accountability Group or on your own

John 3:1-17 John 4:1-26 Luke 18: 18-25

- ❑ Which of the private encounters with Jesus impacts you most and why?
- ❑ How do you understand Jesus' phrase *'eternal life'*? Are you convinced by this rather unconventional interpretation?
- ❑ How do you begin to answer the questions about why the message of Jesus seems to be hidden?
- ❑ How does your answer relate to where you are now on your spiritual journey?
- ❑ Might you begin to use the phrase *'born again'* more cautiously and differently from now on?
- ❑ What might change in my life this week to demonstrate not just that I am a *born again Christian* but that I am a citizen and agent of God's kingdom?
- ❑ Pray for each other that you might long for the 'more' of the kingdom and experience it.