

I have long puzzled over the third chapter of John.

I have many books, commentaries, parsing of each word in Koine Greek, and interpretations ranging from 'secret gnostic' business to accusations that I'm as equally 'in the dark' as Nicodemus.

Having performed the first sign at the Wedding Feast of Cana, Jesus' reputation certainly spread throughout the community. There, Jesus defied physics and chemistry, and created an ample supply of the best Grange Hermitage for the guests of the wedding to enjoy after the wine ran out.

Can you begin to imagine the headlines if the modern tabloid press were to report on this?

GROOM SAVES BEST FOR LAST!

PEARL WINE WASTED ON SWINE DRUNKS

45 GOON BAGS OF LIQUID GOLD SERVED AT WEDDING

MUMMY'S BOY SENT TO GET HER A DECENT DRINK

I could have come up with some more earthy examples, including a pun on the state of the guests and what was provided.

The most common interpretation was "GROOM SAVES BEST FOR LAST" as a metaphor that Jesus himself is the good wine that is to come. Strangely, this story is often used as the story of Jesus marrying Mary Magdalen^[1], allowing polygamy^[2] and a very good argument against the Temperance Movement.^[3]

Perhaps the most convoluted interpretation was that of German Catholic Bishop Justus Knecht. Mary's intervention illustrates the effectiveness of Mary's intercession; it indicates the readiness of Jesus to listen to his Mother; as marriage was already instituted in paradise, then Jesus' presence sanctified the nature of marriage; and finally, if Jesus was able to enjoy and participate in the good pleasures of life, so should we.^[4]

It's a long bow and given that this was written about the time Pope Leo XIII was declaring anything Anglican "absolutely null and totally void", it was a hot topic in the late 19th century. But what does have to do with Nicodemus and being born again? Wait, there's more.

Jesus in John's account is then reported doing what the synoptics report as happening prior to the Passion. He clears the temple of the marketplace and condemns the traders. In terms of the sequence, Jesus has moved from Cana in Galilee to the Temple in Jerusalem to observe the Passover. He is then challenged by the Pharisees to produce a 'sign' that proves that he has the authority to do what he just did. Jesus' response left them gagging on the literal.

"Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it again."^[5] The Pharisees respond that it has taken 46 years to build what is here, and it's not finished yet. How can you do that in three days?

The chapter concludes with people seeing Jesus performing many signs and believing, although, some had questions about what Jesus was up to, but he refused to engage with them because he knew evil was on their hearts.

And in comes, under the cover of night, Nicodemus, a senior and wise Pharisee. He was seeking answers from Jesus and gets a bit more than he bargained! I have a thing about names. It's called etymology. Often in the Hebrew scriptures names have meanings. Yeshuwah, as I've mentioned before, means "The one who saves", and the tetragrammaton, the sacred initials of God is hidden there in plain sight. The miracle of the wine is very similar to the Greek god Dionysius, which is the origins of the modern "Dennis". He was also famed for putting out stone jars full of water and turning them into wine overnight. Liked a good party, did Dionysius.

So, is there any significance in the name of Nicodemus that might help us unlock what is happening in this moment?

Well, yeah, nah, yeah. The name has Greek origins and is broken down into two parts: Nike and Demos. Nike was the Greek goddess of victory (and in terms of modern slogans, ‘just do it’ makes sense in how she achieved her fame), and demos is the same root word for democracy: people. The tense refers to the one coming at night has authority by victory over the people. The Pharisees exercised often more power over the people than the Romans and Herodian courts. They had ‘the law’ on their side.

Coincidence? It’s my theory, but I think not.

What follows is the most bizarre conversation that possibly will require a couple of 50-minute lectures to fully explore and unpack. I’ll spare you this time! What follows is not the Reader’s Digest version but some basic sound bites to keep you informed.

“Unless you are born from above...” To be born again in the Pharisaic understanding was akin to being asked to leave behind your household and join a new one. A bride being given to the bridegroom and entering the chamber become one, and thus, the bride is ‘born anew.’

Jesus’ teachings allude to the need for a ‘new start’ for Israel. This was very confrontational to a Pharisee.^[6] Abram was redefined in terms of family when he ascended the mountain and was shown the land of promise and a new start. He became Abraham, the father of a multitude, instead of the ‘father of many.’

In good pharisaic logic, Nicodemus cannot comprehend what Jesus is telling him and immediately begins to argue from the physical impossibility of re-entering his mother’s womb. Jesus was not talking about the physical but rather spiritual. Nike is not sure.

How do we know when the spirit is at work?

“Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit^[b] gives birth to spirit. ⁷You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You^[s] must be born again.’^[7]

This is where the reading of the letter to the Romans comes in. Paul, in explaining the need to be born of water and spirit draws upon the Exodus story. Having established that Abram was reckoned as being righteous by God before the law existed meant that people turning to Christ were not required to be subject to the law (the teachings of the Pharisees). You are not required to be Jews first to be Christians. You are born again by water and spirit.

Water, symbolically through baptism, is a reminder that the people of God during the Exodus from Egypt crossed the Sea of Reeds on their journey to the promised land. The wind blew and made the way to out of Egypt into Sinai possible. This was the place where Abram was shown the promised land, and this was to be the inheritance or new beginning for Israel. They were being freed from slavery and separation from God and given the chance to being again. Led by a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day, they began their long slow journey towards the land flowing with milk and honey.

Paul sees this as the path of conversion. By water and spirit, we undergo our own exodus out of separation from God (sin) into a new state of being (the promised land where Jesus is Lord). And to achieve this, Paul points out that Jesus had to be handed over to the councils and Romans, tried, sentenced, and crucified. And on the third day, the Temple of God’s presence on earth, Yeshowah, the Word made flesh dwelling among us, would herald a new beginning.

And for Nicodemus, this point was made perfectly clear when Jesus tells him that the Son of Man will be lifted up in the desert, just as Moses lifted up the serpent to save those who looked upon the bronze statue would live. Those who gaze upon the lifted-up Son of Man on will also live, but not just regranted life, in the land of promise to come.

And this indeed is the good news for us. Whether it is a direct quote from Jesus or an editorial by the author, John 3.16 becomes the most important point for any believer to understand.

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.^[8]

The last part of the chapter talks about darkness and light. The light has come into the world, yet people prefer the darkness. Nicodemus' journey will take him from darkness into light. Once he sees Jesus on the cross, it all makes sense. In the last light on what we call "Good Friday", Nicodemus is back. He looked upon the raised Son of Man as if the bronze serpent on the pole and believed. Nicodemus was born again, and the signs of Jesus justified.

So, how do we apply this to our everyday living as Christians?

Next week, Paul will be baptised by me and confirmed by Bishop Kate. In that ritual, two things are happening. Firstly, by water, I will be praying with Paul that he may be that process of new birth. Paul will make his own declarations of intent, and then be taken from the front of the Church to the font. Symbolically, he will be led to the water.

Once baptised in the name of the Trinitarian God, Paul then journeys to the Bishop. There, through the laying on of hands, the Bishop will pray that Paul's promises and his commitment to Jesus will be sealed through the sending down of the Holy Spirit.

And we, the people who have been promised entry into the new promised land will welcome him as a fellow inheritor of the kingdom of God, and as a child of the same heavenly Father.

In a rather complex way, John's gospel takes us on that journey to understanding who Jesus is, and what it is that is happening. Seven signs point to the fact that Jesus is the Word of God, the Light of the World, and the bringer of new life. To be born again is for each baptised person an invitation to journey with God.

A reminder to us that some parts of the world-wide Church overlook at their peril. Now of rebirth, we begin anew. For the Israelis, they wandered through the wilderness for 40 years before being taken to the land of promise. Not everyone on that journey were to see that crossing of the Jordan into Jericho. There, as of old, God used people who were the most unexpected to gain access to the land. A prostitute became the key to the entry of the land. The circling of Jericho by Joshua and his troops became the means to entry.

In good Australian larrikin logic, I hope that the big shout that brought down the walls was followed by Joshua giving a second shout, this time of the best wine that has been saved to the end.

As we pray for Paul and his journey to being born from above, may we also remind ourselves that even though we may have been reborn ourselves, it was not the end point of salvation, but the beginning of a new journey towards the promised land. Like Israel, we might be out there for a while, and the temptations to try out different things will be real and exact.

But we know, in genuiness of our faith, there is redemption when we look upon the one who was lifted up and truly believe, the gift of being in the land shown to Abram is possible. This inheritance was promised to Abraham and his seed forever. It is our own sense of duty that will enable us to truly be with Paul, Abraham, Paul and most importantly, Jesus (and his Mum) forever.

May we all have courage to support one another on this journey.

[1] JS SPONG, Born of a Woman

[2] Church of Jesus Christ and the Latter Day Saints

[3] Wikipedia, but no specific examples given.

[4] Wikipedia: The Wedding at Cana

[5] John 2.19

[6] See NT Wright, Twelve Months of Sundays

[7] John 3.5-7

[8] John 3.16 NIV