

What the Spirit Does

We continue our journey in John's Gospel, and we continue from where Chris left off last week. He spoke about the encounter that Jesus had with Nicodemus, the leading Jewish teacher, and Jesus explains to Nicodemus about the need to be born again.

This week we continue that discussion, and I want to highlight two important things that Jesus instructs Nicodemus to do.

He said to him, "No-one can enter the Kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to the Spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, you must be born again. 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." V7&8

The first thing that I want to say is that a Christian is first and foremost a spiritual being. Yes, we are physical beings and Jesus acknowledged that, when he says, "Flesh gives birth to flesh" and all people are physical, we have skin, muscles and bones.

But Jesus calls us to enter the spiritual realm, for that is the realm of God. God is Spirit, he is not controlled by time, he is outside of time. He is not finite as we are, God is eternal and his Kingdom is an eternal kingdom, it is a spiritual kingdom.

Jesus invites us to enter his Kingdom, but it is not possible to enter physically, we can only enter through his Spirit.

"No-one can enter the Kingdom unless they are born of water and the spirit", he said.

So, what does it mean to be born of water.

Of course this connects to our baptism. But baptism on its own will not permit us to enter the Kingdom.

It's what baptism symbolises. Baptism is about the death and resurrection of Jesus.

When we're baptised, we take the sign of the cross on our foreheads. That's what I do with babies, when they come for baptism, I make the sign of the cross on the forehead, for we are baptised into the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The River Jordon was where people came to John the Baptist to be baptised. Jesus himself was baptised in the river – not that he needed to be, but he was pointing to his own death. Plunging into the Jordan was dying and coming out of the Jordan was rising to new life. So, when people are baptised, they are dying to their old ways, their sins, all that is wrong in their lives, they are acknowledging that they are sinners before God, and the sign of the water is a sign of dying to self and sin. But it also a sign of the resurrection, that we are raised with Christ. Baptism, is about a new beginning, a new start on the journey.

I like what Catholics do with the baptismal font at the entrance to their sanctuary. And the water is in the font, when they enter, they put the water on their foreheads and make the sign of the Cross, as a remembrance of their baptism and I hope that they realise the deep meaning of this.

Jesus tells us that we will not see the Kingdom, unless we are born of water. It begins here at the cross. This is the gateway to Heaven. The Cross is the door and Jesus has opened it for us. This where we have assurance of God's love for us. The Cross is God demonstrating how much he loves me and you.

We cannot buy God's love, all we can do is in humility enter into his love through the Cross of Jesus. So, the question for me and you today is simply this, have we entered through the right door, is our salvation depending upon our own efforts and good works, or are we entering the Kingdom through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

There is much more that I could say on this. I know for myself, at 19 years old, I came to a point where I stood at the Cross, I realised that this is what God has done for me, and only through the cross could I enter his grace, and know forgiveness and acceptance, just as Pilgrim in John Bunyan's classic book, *Pilgrim's Progress* experienced, the burden on his back was cut free and the weight of guilt and sin rolled down the hill as he experienced a new life in Christ.

Being born of water is to be born into the Kingdom of God through the cross and resurrection of Jesus.

Then he instructs Nicodemus, that we must all be born of the Spirit. As I said the Christian life is a spiritual life.

John's Gospel is a gospel where the Holy Spirit is evident. When Jesus rose from the dead and he returned to the disciples, what did he do, John recalls the story in chapter 21, he breathed his spirit on them, a significant event in the lives of the disciples, it was here in this room that Jesus physically breathed his Spirit upon them.

What a moment for them and back in chapter 3, the beginning of his ministry, he is saying to Nicodemus that 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.

There are three things that the spirit does for us.

Firstly, It energises us.

Jesus said, the wind blows wherever it pleases. We know well in Scotland the energy that comes from the wind. Part of our environmental effort comes from wind energy and wind galvanised in the right way can bring much blessing.

Jesus breathed on the disciples, and asked them to receive the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit came upon the church at Pentecost and the disciples were filled with courage and they were fearless as they knew an energy that came from outside of themselves.

One of the favourite old hymns is, "Breathe on me breath of God, fill me with life anew." That's the prayer that we need for all our churches today up and down our land of Scotland. Breathe on us Lord, your Holy Spirit.

The rhythm of life is contained in the simple biological fact that we breathe in oxygen and breathe out carbon dioxide. When something interferes with this process, we become ill and our lives may be limited.

This is also true for our Christian faith, Jesus said we need to be born of the spirit and to be born of the spirit is to receive Christ's spirit into our lives each and every day, breathe it in, as we breathe in oxygen, every morning let us in prayer say, "Come Lord Jesus and fill me anew with your life-giving spirit".

Everyone in the gospels who had a meaningful relationship with Jesus knew the power of his life giving spirit; it's infectious, it's powerful, it gives us energy to keep on going.

Has the way become hard for you in recent times, have you struggled in your Christian life, perhaps, the answer maybe, for you to sit with the Lord, and ask him to fill you anew with his spirit. The Spirit energises.

Secondly, The spirit sterilises.

Oxygen sterilises our blood, blood which passes through the lungs is sterilised by the oxygen we breathe in. The impurities are cleansed.

“Breathe on me breath of God until my heart is pure.” Wrote the hymn writer. What was he thinking of? We live in a world of sin, a world of impurity, where there is much greed and selfishness; a world of jealousy, filled with people seeking power and not bothered about who they trample over to get it.

We need a spiritual filter, and that filter is Christ's spirit, like oxygen in our lungs which purifies blood, we need the spirit of Jesus to sterilise our minds, our thoughts and our actions.

When revival came to the Hebrides in 1959, one of the main things was that people were changed. The story is told of a group of people praying for revival and someone prayed, “O God forgive us, if our hearts are not clean and our hearts are not pure”. One young man stood up and startled the congregation by saying, “It is so much nonsense to speak about our hearts and hands not being clean, we need to drop the our and replace it with my and then he prayed, “Oh God, my hands are not clean, my heart is not pure, forgive me...and he fell to his knees in repentance and others followed him and the Holy Spirit fell upon the island and revival happened, ushering in one of the greatest movements of the spirit in the 20th century.

And in the great Welsh revival of 1904, it was recorded that there was a dramatic reduction in crime and there was a cleaner and more moral society, miners who directed pit ponies with swear words, once they came to faith in Jesus and received the Holy Spirit, they had to learn a new vocabulary for the direction of ponies which didn't involve swearing.

Is that not what we need today in our society, a real and genuine movement of the breath of God, working in the lives of our political leaders, reducing sleaze and sexual immorality and giving our nation a sense of restoration and cleansing. We try to fix the problems with human strength but Jesus reminds us that we will not see the Kingdom of God unless we are born of the spirit. Spiritual revival, revival of the spirit of Jesus is what our land needs today. But let's be honest, our nation doesn't want Jesus in our schools, we don't want Jesus in our funerals, we don't want Jesus in our weddings, we don't Jesus in our country.

If we are not breathing in the clean spiritual life of Jesus, what are we polluting our lives and country with? We need the Spirit of Jesus to transform our country more than anything. Let us pray for this to happen as it has happened in generations in the past.

Thirdly, the spirit vocalises.

Breath gives birth to speech. If there is no breath in our voice box, then there is no sound. It is the breath passing through the voice box that produces the sound we call speech.

When the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit on Pentecost what was the first thing they did? They began to speak and share the good news with confidence and courage.

Someone once described Christians to be like trumpets, they are of no use until breath is blown into them. When the Welsh Revival broke out, thousands of men and women lifted their voices in praise. When the miners returned to their pits, they could be heard praying and singing for hours, as they were raised from their cages from the pits to the surface.

I remember when I came to faith when I was 19, and it was all new to me, I had entered this world of Christians and Churches but what I did know was that I was changed, not physically but spiritually and I knew that God had given me a desire to share the gospel. It started as a spark and I was involved in starting a youth fellowship which grew and I had the opportunity to speak about my new found faith; local ministers soon found out that they had a young person in their midst who could speak about his faith and in my early 20's I had the opportunity to take services on a Sunday up and down the peninsula of Kintyre. I remember when I was preaching in a large church in Campbeltown with perhaps 200 folks in the congregation and at the end of the service, a gentleman came up and spoke to me, it was a local businessman who had a large and growing business, which is still on the go today and he said to me, I have come specially to hear you, I've heard about you, and I want to encourage you, God has given you a message to preach, keep preaching.

This is what God does when we receive his spirit, the spirit of Jesus, he gives us a message to share with others, a message about his love and grace for his world. He vocalises us.

We have many needs in Scotland but I believe with all my heart our greatest need is another visitation from heaven that will stir all Christians and bring those who do not know God into a personal relationship with God through his Son Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say, no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless they are born of water and spirit".