

Sermon – John 3:1-17 – Trinity Sunday – Leroy Coote 23rd May 2021

Many of you would have heard the term “X-Factor”. The term “X-factor” means that a person has a special quality or group of qualities that makes a person stand out in their chosen field. This is often used to describe outstanding sports people in particular sports. Sports people that come to mind with an X-Factor include LeBron James, Roger Federer, Serena Williams and Ash Barty just to name a few. In AFL terms, many would say that Dustin Martin and Marcus Bontempelli would have an X-Factor as well. I’m sure that you can think of other sports people who have an X-factor. This leads me to wonder – do Christians have an X-factor? Do we have something that helps us to stand out in the world today? We certainly do and that something is the Trinity – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit.

The Trinity is the X-Factor for the Christian because of the transformative work it does in the life of the believer, and it is only because of the work of the Trinity that one can become a believer in Christ. In Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus from John Chapter 3 which was just read to us, we see Jesus discuss the work of the members of the Trinity on one’s life. Today’s sermon is not about the doctrine of the Trinity, but is about the effect of the Trinity on the life of the believer from the day they commit to personally following our Lord Jesus Christ until they leave the earth. My hope and prayer is that, at the end of our journey through the passage, we can be sure that we are born again by the Spirit and anchored in what God has done for us through Jesus and certain of our place in the kingdom— nothing more, nothing less. Let me start this by having a look at Nicodemus – who was a Pharisee. A Pharisee by definition is one of those people who characterised their belief in God by the observance of the law. But he was also member of the Jewish Ruling Council, also known as the Sanhedrin, the most influential party in the Jewish religion at the time, and so, Nicodemus was a man of importance in Pharisaic circles. The Pharisees were also in opposition to the thinking of Jesus at this time and this was displayed throughout the gospels. The reason for this was that they stuck to the letter of the law whereas Jesus was about the Spirit of the law as well.

Nicodemus decided to turn up to Jesus’s house for a night time chat. He starts in verse 2 by acknowledging that Jesus is from God and performs signs as if God was with him. Jesus responds with the words “very truly I tell you” in verse 3 which has the effect of saying “thank you for your kind words” to Nicodemus’ statement in verse 2. Then Jesus goes on to say that no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again. Jesus is implicitly indicating that another sign from God is required if Nicodemus wants to enter the Kingdom of God. Nicodemus replies in a very perplexed manner when he says the following in verse 4, *“How can someone be born when they are old?” “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”* I get what Nicodemus is asking from a human perspective because we cannot be reborn physically by being put back into our mothers’ wombs. However, Jesus is talking about another sort of birth which is entry into the kingdom of God that can only be initiated by God. That new birth is talked about in verses 5-8. This also brings in the third member of the trinity into this passage – The Spirit – as we have God mentioned in the context of the Kingdom of God in verses 2 and 3, and of course, Jesus who is in engaging with Nicodemus throughout this story. Let me read it to you. *⁵ Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. ⁶ Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. ⁷ You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ ⁸ 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 is a need to be born of water and Spirit

to enter the Kingdom of God. This means that the Spirit has to enter the life of a believer in order for them to become a believer.

Last week we looked at this briefly when we looked at Peter's speech in the Book of Acts when the believers repented and were baptised. The result of that was that they received the forgiveness of their sins and the Holy Spirit. Implied in this was the fact that they repented and turned to follow Jesus before they received the gift of the Holy Spirit – and only then were they thoroughly born again. The new believers also cemented this in a public way by getting baptised with water. But is baptism the same as being born of water? Effectively being born of water means the same as being born of the Spirit. Let me explain this. They both mean the same thing because they both have a cleansing effect on our lives. The water provides an outside cleanse on our lives through baptism and the Holy Spirit providing an inside cleanse on the sin inside of our hearts. However, we need both elements of cleansing to be born again and not one without the other. This is further emphasised by Jesus' words in verse 6 of *"Spirit gives birth to Spirit"*. This effectively means that one born of the Spirit will give birth to a life filled with God's Spirit and a life that is focussed on the things of the Spirit. This also includes the things of God and the things of Jesus. Nicodemus should not be surprised by Jesus saying that he must be born again.

Why is that? It is because throughout the Old Testament, people were called to turn away from their idols and follow God. What was Nicodemus' idol in the context of Scripture? For Nicodemus, it was the law because he was more interested in following the law to the letter rather than be in a loving relationship with God. For Nicodemus to be born again, he needs to turn to a relationship with God and following the commands of Jesus. So what we see in this passage so far is how central the Trinity is for someone to live a life that God desires for a believer in Christ and – as many of us know, the combination of God the father, God the son and God the Holy Spirit can change the life of any human being and Jesus was working on Nicodemus through this reading with regards to the concept of being born again. This concept of being born again was something that Nicodemus was struggling with because he wonders how one can be born again when he says in verse 9, "how can this be?" Jesus appeared taken aback by his answer especially given his position in the Jewish church. Listen to what he says to Nicodemus in verse 10, *"You are Israel's teacher and do you not understand these things?"* In a way, Jesus is questioning what Nicodemus has been teaching those who follow him in the temple. Why would that be? Jesus expects followers of himself to be born again and this applies to any followers of God as Jesus has been testifying about through his early ministry in John's gospel.

However, it appears that the people Jesus is speaking to are not getting his message if verse 12 is anything to go by. What we see here is the need for the Spirit to point people towards a relationship with God. If Nicodemus and his people are finding it hard to believe in Jesus, then it is pretty obvious why we need the Spirit to help us to obey Jesus' command of being born again and as a result enter the kingdom of God. I do wonder if Nicodemus became born again. I will answer that at the end. What Jesus is describing my friends, is the way God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit help us enter the kingdom of God. Effectively this means that we cannot enter into the kingdom of God without the help of all elements of the Trinity impacting our lives. But also in the longer term, the Trinity helps us to grow in our relationship with God so that we get deeper and closer in our relationship with God. After all, God was in Christ reconciling all to himself. What does that look like? It means Jesus taking people into

heaven or giving them eternal life. This appears a new concept because it appears that no one has gone into heaven according to verse 13 except for the one who came from heaven – the Son of man. However, I believe that is about to change because the Son of Man is going to take others to be with him in heaven. Listen to what verses 14 and 15 say, *“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.”* The Son of Man is to be lifted up and as a result we are to be lifted up. But who is we? The “we” is a reference to the fact that those who believe may have eternal life with him. By definition, eternal life is life with God here on earth and then in heaven once we leave the earth. But the definition of believe in this passage bears a brief comment. Why? Because conceptually, believe means the same thing as being born again by the Spirit. Very rarely are the two terms – believe and born again – put together to mean the same thing when this passage is preached upon. However, given the discussion is still with Nicodemus until the end of verse 21 – then it would be safe to say that the two are connected. With that in mind, then you could safely say in terms of the meaning of the passage that to have eternal life – we must be born again.

However, who are we to be born again in? The end of verse 15 tells us that we are to be born in the Son of Man. This means that the Spirit leads us to being born again into a new relationship with Christ. It is not an inactive relationship because the one who is born again is transformed from following the desires of human nature to the desires of the one who created the Spirit and the Son – God. But why has God given us the Trinity to transform our lives? Look at verses 16 and 17 with me and I’m going to read it with a notable phrase change that I believe is appropriate to the meaning of the passage. *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever is born again in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”* It is because He loves us. The Trinity is a gift from God and you can see it at work in this passage especially with my little tweak to emphasise what God’s love gives us. God loved his creation that he gave us his only Son. He gave us Jesus, or, more to the point, he gave up Jesus so that whoever is born again by God’s Spirit shall not perish or end up suffering from God’s wrath but have life with God here on earth and in heaven. The trinity has the effect on our lives of saving us from God’s wrath and bringing us into a new relationship with Him. We can’t have eternal life with God unless we are born again.

I pray that we understand this concept so that we avoid hell. But God’s love goes further than that because we are told in verse 17 that Jesus was not sent into the world to condemn it but to save it. We are saved when we are born again. And yes – Nicodemus was on the path to being born again as he hung out with Joseph of Arimathea, who was a follower of Jesus, when he wrapped the dead body of Jesus from the cross. He also defended Jesus in John 7 in front of the Sanhedrin. In light of this, I believe the Spirit was transforming him but the evidence in Scripture prevents me from saying definitely that he was born again. Dear friends listening in person and online. What we have seen today is the desired transformative effect of the Trinity on the life of those who believe. To be a believer in Christ, this passage tells us that we are to be born again by the Spirit so that we are in a relationship with Christ in order to enter the kingdom of God. The trinity is not only a complex doctrine to keep theology lecturers employed but it is the power that transforms us into believers in Christ who live out the commands of the Jesus the way Scripture intended it. May we be believers impacted by the Trinity whose walk with God grows and grows and grows.