

Week 2

Transforming Lives: new life in Christ



Jesus and Nicodemus – John 3:1-8

Nicodemus visits Jesus at night and struggles to understand who Jesus is and what difference following him will make.

Welcome and Icebreaker

Everyone is welcomed and this week's session is introduced.

People have been asked to bring along a photograph of themselves when they were a baby or young child. As they arrive they should hand these to the group leader without showing them to others. When all have arrived, look at and enjoy the baby photos. Guess whose picture is whose.

Divide into twos and threes and ask each person to say something about the circumstances of their birth (e.g. where they were born, what kind of family were they born into, anything interesting that they have been told about their birth, any reason for being given their particular name).

Introductory Prayer

Some verses from Psalm 139 – to be said slowly and meditatively with the group divided into A and B.

- A O Lord, you have searched me and you know me.
B You know when I sit and when I rise;
You perceive my thoughts from afar.

- A You discern my going out and my lying down;
You are familiar with all my ways.
B Before a word is on my tongue
You know it completely, O Lord.
A For you created my inmost being;
You knit me together in my mother's womb.
B I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
A Your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
B My frame was not hidden from you
When I was made in the secret place.
A When I was woven together in the depths of the earth,
Your eyes saw my unformed body.
B All the days ordained for me were written in your book
Before one of them came to be.
A How precious to me are your thoughts, O God.
B How vast is the sum of them.

Amen.

Reading – John 3:1-8⁹

This reading will work well with three voices – different people taking the roles of narrator, Jesus and Nicodemus.

Narrator: Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said,

Nicodemus: Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no-one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him.

Jesus: I tell you the truth, unless a person is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus: How can someone be born when they are old? Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born.

Jesus: I tell you the truth, unless a person is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh,

but the Spirit gives birth to 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.

Nicodemus

Discuss in your group what you think this passage tells us about Nicodemus.

- What do you imagine Nicodemus to be like?
- Do you think Nicodemus found Jesus' answer helpful?

New birth

- The phrase 'born again Christian' is often quoted in the media, and sometimes in churches. What do you understand by the phrase 'born again Christian'?
- Would you call yourself one? Jesus seems clear that this is necessary, not just desirable...

Testimonies

Here are three testimonies from people in our diocese, describing how faith was awakened in them. Three people in the group could be asked to read them out loud. Some questions follow...

Person 1

My early years were spent in a village where my father was Rector. Prayers, services and Sunday school were habitual for our family. As a child I understood in a simple way that Jesus cared for me. During my confirmation service at age fourteen I remember promising 'God, I will be good!'

I carried on going to church in my teenage years but became more and more inwardly rebellious. Aged 17 I met my future husband, a Christian who spoke of being 'born again' through a school Christian group where he had encountered Jesus. This was the one topic over which he and I argued as our relationship deepened.

I left home and through my job came face to face with suffering and death. Tired and depressed, aware of my spiritual struggle, I looked forward to weekends with my boyfriend in Oxford but not going to all the Christian meetings with him. I felt that I didn't belong. They were all so holy!

Then at one prayer breakfast, the speaker asked us to pray for our friends 'that they will have no peace or rest until they find their true rest in Christ.' Later that morning I wept knowing that I was not right with God. I was resisting his call, trying to be self-sufficient and rebelling against his love. I needed to turn back, to admit that I was wrong and to accept Jesus as my personal Saviour and Lord. I did that and knew it was the beginning of a new life.

Person 2

I've always believed in God and as a small child loved going to church with my mother each week and then to Sunday school as I got older. Aged seven, I told my teacher that I had two fathers – one at home and one in heaven! At twelve I was confirmed and that was an important step for me. Soon I became a Sunday school teacher. I met my husband-to-be in my late teens and was encouraged by his desire to come to church with me. Later he was confirmed. It was very important for us that we married in church and took Communion as part of the service.

We moved with our young family and experienced the goodness of being part of a loving supportive church family. In turn we encouraged others to take children along. I never lost my desire to pass on the faith to children and when we moved to West Yorkshire spent many years leading the Sunday school.

When my husband was diagnosed with kidney failure and died after some years of dialysis, I turned to God in prayer in a way that I never had before. I desperately needed the strength to cope with myself and with my family. I also learnt to depend on the prayers of others. Throughout it all I never lost my faith and still depend each day on God's strength.

Person 3

My parents never went to church themselves but sent me to Sunday school as a child. I stopped going as a teenager and didn't go again until I was newly married and a neighbour invited me to his church. A group from the church were going to hear the American evangelist, Billy Graham, speak in Liverpool. I was a policeman working shifts but amazingly managed to get the time off. I can't remember what was said but all the way through it was as though a voice was telling me to 'get up and go'. I went to the front afterwards convinced that I needed to make a public and positive response. Afterwards I really felt as though I had been 'born again'! I felt on top of the world! My police colleagues could see the difference in me.

The following year I was baptised. Through the years I've backslidden at times, been divorced and remarried but God hasn't left me. It was no 'flash in the pan' experience.

Testimony questions

- Which of these stories is most similar to your own experience?
- What forms of 'new birth' do you see in these stories?
- The writer and preacher Jim Wallis has said: "New birth is neither a static nor a once-and-finished event. It is both a moment and a process of transformation that deepens and extends through the whole of our lives."

Talk with others in your group about what first awakened faith in your life, and what now helps keep your faith growing.

Before moving on, some groups might like to look at what happened later in Nicodemus' life. There are some short additional Bible readings at the end of these notes, and a question for discussion. See 'More about Nicodemus'.

Transformation

Objects and/or images are arranged round the room.

Think of the potential for change in each.

Choose one that speaks to you about the process of transformation in your Christian life.

- Share together in pairs or threes where transformation has happened because of your encounter with God. Were you aware of it at the time?

Worship

One person reads out one of the following poems.

Not an Easy Option

Stirring the easy slumbers of my consciousness,
he jolts me
from the cosy rut I'd channelled for myself.

Breaking the mould of other's expectations,
he questions once more
the status quo in me.
Prompting me to steer my route
across the uncharted ground,
he challenges me
to set my feet on pathways new.
It's not an easy option, following God.

For he calls me in directions
where I had not thought to go,
requires of me
a courage which I did not think I had,
turns on their head
my preconceived ideas and plans.
It's not an easy option,
following God.

*Pat Marsh*¹⁰

The new is born,
not out of the old;
not even out of the
best of the old, but
out of the death of
the old.

Paul Tillich

OR

Pilgrim

When your ship
long moored in harbour
gives you the illusion
of being a house;

When your ship begins to put down roots
in the stagnant water
by the quay
PUT OUT TO SEA!

Save your boat's journeying soul
and your own pilgrim soul
cost what it may.

Archbishop Helder Camara

Closing responses

Leader: From where we are
To where you need us,

All: **Jesus, now lead on.**

Leader: From the security of what we know
To the adventure of what you will reveal,

All: **Jesus, now lead on.**

Leader: To refashion the fabric of this world
Until it resembles the shape of your kingdom,

All: **Jesus, now lead on.**

Leader: Because good things have been prepared
For those who love God,

All: **Jesus now lead on.**

Take away

During the coming week, think about where and when you have experienced transformation in the past – how and why you have changed over the years, and God has helped change you.

How do you feel about the transformations God might be planning for you in the future?

Excited?

Fearful?

Challenged?

Trusting?

More about Nicodemus (or some homework!)

Some groups might find it helpful to explore what happened later to Nicodemus. He is mentioned twice more in John's gospel. Look at the readings printed below.

John 7:45-52

Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, 'Why didn't you bring him in?' 'No-one ever spoke the way this man does,' the guards declared. 'You mean he has deceived you also?' the Pharisees retorted. Has any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law – there is a curse on them.'

Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, 'Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?' They replied, 'Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.'

John 19:38-40

Later Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body.

He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who had earlier visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about 75 pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.

Question

- Do you think there is evidence in these passages to show that Nicodemus had taken Jesus' words to heart?