

SGod of life and love may we all be open to hearing what you have to say to each of us today, whether through conversation, a song, scripture, the words I am about to speak or prayer. Amen

Where is God in your life?

It would be difficult to imagine anyone more rigid, defensive, or inflexible than John Wesley in Georgia, America in 1737. He had gone there to try to find some renewal of his faith.

Wesley was a moralist and legalist. He thought the mission of the church was for improving the moral tone of society and thought that people were admitted to God's favour on the basis of rule-keeping.

When he was 34 he became infatuated with an 18 year old woman, Sophy Hopkey. She rejected him in favour of a Mr. Williamson who she later married. Wesley reacted badly to this and found excuses to withhold Holy Communion from Sophy, which suggested to others that there was some scandal attached to her. Her husband was outraged. He had the politically powerful summon a Grand Jury. The Grand Jury indicted Wesley, and he took the next ship back to England in order to escape a lawsuit.

Having returned to England, he struggled with his 'faith' for months until one Sunday evening he went to a service in London. Wesley said and I quote

"In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change, which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death."

It was 24th May, 1738, and was the day of his spiritual renewal which became a decisive day for him and many others in the future. His moralism and legalism were behind him and his preaching shifted from moral exhortation to a grace filled gospel. His inner motivation had come back having given himself to following God in a real way.

I don't know about you but there have been times when I have simply gone through the motions in various aspects of my life, the inner motivation having gone a bit like John Wesley when he was in America. A few years ago I went through a spell like that in relation to a job and also to a church. We can all go through times where we attend church on Sunday and experience the same old routines and the same old prayers and the same old liturgies, and we sit in roughly the same place with the same people... It is the same old, same old, Sunday after Sunday.

It is with these images that could be true in so many aspects of our lives...job, school, marriage, religion...that we come to the story of Nicodemus.

Nicodemus was a man who was going through the motions of religion. According to the story in the Bible, he was older in life and he was a man who had pretty much seen it all. He was a teacher of the law, but his inner enthusiasm for God wasn't there any more, his relationship with God had dissipated until it had become religion and ritual, rather than real and relational.

Anyway Nicodemus had heard Jesus preach in the temple and recognised that Jesus had something that he no longer had. So quietly, one night, Nicodemus went over to the home of Jesus about midnight, not wanting his colleagues to know. He might have said something like

"There is something missing in my life and you seem to have it, I am tired, my teaching is stale. I am interested in what advice you might have for me?"

And Jesus, knowing exactly what was wrong said, "the problem you are having Nicodemus is that you are no longer close to God. You have drifted away from God. You have put **EVERYTHING** else before God and God is no longer at the centre of your life. You have your family, your studying, your leisure activities, your religion **BUT** where is God in all of that! Nicodemus, you need to be born again."

Nicodemus replied, "Born again? Take and push me back into my mother's womb? For goodness sake I can't be born again?"

Jesus said, ""You don't understand Nicodemus. You need to be born again, to experience a new beginning in your relationship with God. You need to be born of the water, but also of the Spirit. You need to experience a new start."

Nicodemus said, "You are right I don't understand". Nicodemus then left, closed the door behind him, looked down the street both ways to make sure that nobody was in sight and disappeared into the darkness of the street.

### **So IF this is the Gospel of Christ for us today what does it mean?**

Far too often in life, we go through the same old stuff without the inner understanding or motivation. It doesn't matter who we are, sometimes we let our relationship with God become stale. We prefer to have structures and forget about the Spirit. We go through the rituals but our faith is no longer as real as it was. We go through the patterns of faith but no longer have the power of faith.

It is all too easy to let everything else get in the way of our relationship with God. Things like work, family, leisure and church - all very valuable in themselves - and yet without God we are nothing and can do nothing so why is it that our most important relationship gets put to one side? **WHOEVER** you are where **IS** God in **YOUR** life?

Consider our growth from childhood to adulthood.....When we are born we are totally dependent on our parents and other carers for a while and then as we grow up, recognise our interdependency on them. We need to be interdependent on God as we are interdependent on others, but I would suggest more so with God than others.

We are human and therefore vulnerable to failing and doing wrong and that is what it means to be born of water, of the flesh. But Jesus said 'we need to be born of water **AND** of the Spirit'. To be born of the Spirit is not just to feel spiritually high inside, so what does it mean?

To be born of the Spirit is to have the Spirit of Jesus Christ living within us. It means that we try to live the way that God wants, through loving others, through recognising our own frailties, weaknesses and lack of faith. It means opening up to God's awesome love, grace, mercy, compassion and justice and starting again with God at the centre of our lives instead of trying to fill our lives with everything and everyone else.

It means loving other people in their uniqueness; by not trying to change that person to meet **YOUR** expectations **BUT** to love them in their individuality. It means not judging others **BUT** perhaps taking a long and hard look at the speck in our own eye **BEFORE** trying to take the plank out of someone else's. If we have experienced the grace of God then we should also be showing grace to others.

**IF this is the Gospel of Christ for us today** it means being honest and saying to God, 'I don't have that inner motivation any longer. I have pushed you out for my own benefit. I have the patterns of religion but not the power of faith. I have the rituals of religion but nothing that is real and relational. I have the structures but not the Spirit, help me'. God will listen to us as long as we acknowledge our need of him, and God will not force anything on us. However we **REALLY** need to recognise how essential God is for everything, for living, for loving, for learning and growing in our faith. It means we are not condemned when we fail as long as we admit to our weaknesses and ask for help & guidance from God. It means we are loved unconditionally and therefore we need also to love without judging, **BUT** most importantly we **NEED** to keep God, the God of love, grace, mercy, compassion, and justice at the centre of our lives. Whoever you are, young or old, clergy or lay, male or female, Where **IS** God in **YOUR** life?