



4) Chapters 3 & 4

Who's talking to whom?

The first half of chapter three, which includes the story of Nicodemus' night-time visit to Jesus, is a justly-famous summary of the Christian gospel. John 3.16 has been described as the Gospel in a nutshell:

“For God so loved the **world** that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who **believes** in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” [3.16]

We've noticed the range, and depth, of meaning in 'believe', *pisteuoō*, in every session so far. Here it's the strongest form of the verb: *pisteuoō eis* – to “trust into”, *ie* commit ourselves to. And it's interesting to modern sensibilities that the 'world' here is *kosmos* – the 'cosmos', or whole created order.

Something new to notice in this chapter is the ambiguity of the word 'you' in English – so that sometimes important things are lost in translation. An example is verse eleven:

“Very truly, **I tell you**, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet **you** do not receive **our** testimony.” [3.11]

The first 'you', *soi*, is singular – Jesus is talking to one person, Nicodemus. The second, *hymin*, is plural – John is addressing a wider audience. That oscillation between singular and plural 'you' ('thee' and 'you') is matched by the 'I' and 'we' in the same verse. The whole passage seems to develop from the reporting of a conversation between Jesus and an individual Jew into the teaching of an audience by John .. with no clear dividing line between the two. In fact it's an example of what John's gospel is like as a whole: the historical memory of what Jesus did and said is used as the basis for a theologically developed piece of writing, and there are often few clear signals in the text of where one ends and the other begins.

'From the top'

Hidden in the Nicodemus story is an almost comic misunderstanding:

Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born **from above**.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a **second time** into the mother's womb and be born?' [3.3-4]

The Greek word *anōthen* literally means 'from above'; but it has another, probably more common, meaning of 'again'. (It's a bit like the instruction *da capo* in a musical score – literally meaning 'from the top', it's an instruction to play the music a second time, from the beginning.)

So Jesus is trying to talk to Nicodemus about being spiritually alive, “born from above” .. and Nicodemus is taking him more literally, and thinks he's talking about being “born again”. No wonder Jesus says exasperatedly “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you don't understand these things?” And yet from this verse (in the old King James translation) we get the common phrase for Christians as having been “born again” – because as with almost all the examples in our sessions, the Bible translators haven't actually got it wrong .. it's just that some of the range of meaning gets lost in translation: the word means either, or both.

A pneumatic double-entendre

Also in the Nicodemus story we find an interesting double-meaning that we met a couple of months ago, when Jesus 'breathed on' the disciples in the Upper Room:

The **wind** blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the **Spirit**.' [3.8]

The Greek word *pneuma* means both 'wind' and 'spirit' – so the punning analogy here is rather lost in translation.

A finicky interlude

Looking again at verse sixteen, there's a lot of buried theology in a little word:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his **only** Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” [3.16]

Like being “born from above” in verse three, this is an example of where the King James Bible falls short, and newer translations get it right. The English word ‘only’ represents the Greek *monogenē* – ‘one of a kind’. But over the centuries the word *genos* – ‘kind’ as in ‘one of a kind’ – has often been tangled up with the word *gennaō*, to ‘give birth’ or in a man’s case ‘to beget’. We’ll look again at this when we study chapter one, but (cutting a long story short) when St Jerome translated the gospels into Latin he always translated the word *monogenēs* as *unicus* (‘unique’) except when it referred to Jesus, when he translated it *unigenitus* (‘only-begotten’). It was a deliberate mistranslation to bolster his case against the Arian heretics, who claimed that Jesus was part of the created order rather than belonging to the eternal nature of God – and so the “begotten not made” phrase found its way into Christian theology .. and into the early translations of John’s gospel into English.

The woman of Samaria

The delightful story in chapter four has few big surprises in the original Greek – although as always a knowledge of Biblical languages gives deeper insight into almost every verse. Two passages may be of interest:

Jesus said to her, ‘Go, call your **husband**, and come back.’ The woman answered him, ‘I have no **husband**.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, “I have no **husband**”; for you have had five **husbands**, and the one you have now is not your **husband**. What you have said is true!’ [4.16-18]

Two separate features of husband, *anēr*, are interesting. The word literally means not a husband, but simply a man. There is a debate to be had about the Biblical understanding of marriage, and individual texts cannot be easily marshalled to promote one view above another. For example Jewish teaching of Jesus’ time held that up to three husbands (consecutively) was fine, but more than that number, although legal, was regarded as disreputable. More interesting to my mind is not the English but the Hebrew, where a husband is *ba’al* – which also means a pagan god! The historian Josephus writes that when the Assyrians colonised Samaria, they brought five pagan gods with them: is this perhaps buried somehow in the story of Jesus and the woman?

The second phrase in chapter four that may be of interest comes at the end of that same story:

The woman said to him, ‘I know that Messiah is coming’ (who is called Christ). ‘When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.’ Jesus said to her, ‘**I am he**, the one who is speaking to you.’ [4.25-26]

We looked at this in chapter eighteen: *Egō eimi* has echoes of the name of God. We’ll look at this in more detail in a few months’ time.

Next time

We’re looking at chapters five and six. Bring your questions and comments to the meeting!