

# FRISTON BAPTIST CHURCH

## MILL ROAD, FRISTON, SAXMUNDHAM

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To the church's neighbours in and around Friston, and also our personal neighbours in and about Aldeburgh, Leiston and Saxmundham.

Dear neighbours,

It is the fashion nowadays in the media to talk about born again politicians or athletes, for example, meaning simply that they have themselves revamped their image and reinvented their techniques. "Born again" is a Bible expression from the gospel of John chapter 3. The media do occasionally talk of born again Christians, as if there were other sorts as well. According to the Bible, according to the Lord Jesus Christ who spoke the words "ye must be born again," it is the defining characteristic of a Christian; without it you cannot be one.

A man called Nicodemus approached Jesus by night, afraid to be seen in public. He was one of the chief rulers of the Jews having a place on their governing board (the Sanhedrin). His visit was in private, though he tried to maintain that his views represented the whole Sanhedrin.

He hadn't been introducing himself more than a moment when Jesus interrupted him with these words, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."

Verily, verily is, in the original language, amen, amen. We usually say these words at the end of a prayer. The words mean simply, true, true. We show that we agree with the prayer. When it comes like this at the beginning, it means that the speaker wants the hearer to give special attention. These words are true, true – of such great importance that, when taken on board, a person will never be the same again. They are designed to change Nicodemus fundamentally and Jesus knows that, once the truth sinks in, they will.

Nicodemus is a very intelligent man and also elderly. His response is, "how can a man be born when he is old?" I know you don't mean literally that I must enter again into my mother's womb – that's impossible – but what is your picture language saying to me?

With a slight variation Jesus repeats himself for Nicodemus' sake. "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." You can't enter Jesus' kingdom without a new birth; or (as he said before) you can't even see it, that is, understand it. It must be a work of the Holy Spirit, whose refreshing influences are sometimes also described in the Bible as being like water.

It shouldn't surprise you, Jesus goes on to say. Flesh begets flesh; spirit begets spirit. To be spiritual you must be born again because your natural birth is, well, natural.

Intelligent Nicodemus, quick as a flash, picks up on the point that we have nothing to do with our natural birth. It was the involvement of our parents; there was nothing we could do about it. We were too young, anyway. How then, if we **must** be born again, can we cause it; how can we be personally involved in entering into this experience, even when we're old? "How can these things happen?" he asks.

Jesus delays his answer for a few moments. Before Nicodemus will be ready to understand how it can happen, there are three things Jesus needs to do. Firstly, he needs to undermine his prejudices. Are you a teacher, he says incredulously, and you don't know these things? You teach religious knowledge and rule a religious nation and you don't know the fundamentals, the ABC of true faith. Amazing.

Secondly, he takes Nicodemus back to the point he made about representing the Sanhedrin. I, says Jesus, represent God the Father and the Spirit also, but you don't represent the Sanhedrin. I know from first-hand experience what I am talking about; you merely peddle secondhand (and misleading) religious information. If you enter into this experience you will be unrepresentative of the Sanhedrin, out on a limb, provoking the hostility of your former friends. You must be ready for that. If you enter into this experience you will know definitely that you have entered into the truth, beyond any shadow of a doubt, because the Holy Spirit will give you that certainty.

Thirdly, Jesus tells this official ruler that he (Jesus), who has no official status, is the one whom God has sent. He knows what he is talking about. He is able to say, "I say unto thee" repeatedly, and "I have told you." Everybody who enters into this experience has to do so believing in Jesus.

So now all is ready to show Nicodemus how these things happen. He refers him to a story in the Old Testament (Numbers 21. 6-9) which would have been very familiar to him. Without going into too much detail, the Lord had sent a plague of poisonous snakes which were killing many because the people of Israel were doing nothing but rebelling against God. In their suffering they asked Moses to pray for them; which he did. God instructed him to construct a brass serpent and lift it high upon a pole so that all could see it. By God's say so, all who looked were cured and lived. It was down to the individual whether he was too rebellious or too sceptical to look. If he failed to do so, he died.

Of course, it is a picture of the state of mankind. Bitten by sin and its poisonous effects, man is rebellious and bitter against God. In some cases he/she would rather not have a cure than turn to God for one.

Well, says Jesus it's like this. Just as the ancient Israelites had a way of salvation and healing provided by God for a one-off situation, so I am the way of salvation provided by God for all time and for every sin. When I am lifted up upon the cross, and have died to make an atonement for sin, each individual can have his sin atoned for and enter into that reconciliation with God by belief, by faith. His words are, "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3. 14-16).

Jesus is risen from the dead and is alive for evermore. In a sense, he is also "lifted up" whenever the gospel is preached and explained. "Faith cometh by hearing" (Romans 8.17). "Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved" (Romans 8.13).

Allow me to encourage you to read John 3 for yourself carefully (as Jesus says, verily, verily – very carefully so as to grasp the truth) and make the response which would bring you into the pardon of God and everlasting life through Christ, of which Jesus speaks so eloquently.

And, of course, we teach more about these things from the Bible at our services on Sundays at 10.45 am and 2pm and on Tuesdays at 7.30pm.

Yours sincerely,