

*St Brandon's, Sermon for 5th March 2023.*

*Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17*

### ***Nicodemus and the mission of Jesus***

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Today's readings are about really central themes in Christianity. Sometimes we dissect very small parts of passages in sermons, today I'm going to do the opposite and simply unpack them to get an overview of what is going on, and how that continues to be relevant to us.

Nicodemus is creating an opportunity for the evangelist, John, to start opening up for us the questions about who Jesus is, what his mission is, and how this sits with the prevailing understanding of God and the Jewish teachings.

We would recognise this character, Nicodemus, he is an assured and knowledgeable Jew, a leader and Pharisee: the Pharisees were the sect that were the most pious and devoted to their religious practises. He opens confidently, perhaps a touch smugly, "Rabbi, *we know* ... ". But John has tipped us off that this is someone coming in the night: secretly, not wishing to be spotted, and in himself, coming without much illumination of understanding.

Jesus immediately challenges Nicodemus' assumption that he '*knows* Jesus is a teacher from God' by pointing to the difference between what I'm calling, 'learning and earning', and 'grace'.

Nicodemus is immensely learned: he has studied, he can quote, he can teach, he has striven to understand the requirements of scripture. He is devoted and scrupulous in his daily rounds of prayer and ensuring he has met the requirements of the Jewish practises of purification and abstinence, of living a 'good' and blameless life. Surely, therefore, he can count on God's favour and approval?

I suspect most of us are feeling ourselves drawn to saying 'Yes, yes', and applauding him, even though we may also know this is not the response Jesus has come to teach us. Perhaps its unfair to put it like that: we are right, I think, in part: Nicodemus' disciplines are to be commended and we would learn much if we imitated that commitment. However, it is not what assures of us God's approval and saves us from damnation. We cannot 'buy', 'earn', bargain with God for his approval. Why not? We do that for pretty well everything else in life, it's a tried and tested 'fair' formula.

We can't buy, earn, God's approval because it is entirely in God's gift. He gives it to those whom he chooses. Not always predictably, but as seemingly randomly as the way the wind blows in whatever direction it will. Yet, there is a pattern we can see and can take courage from. And that pattern was first recorded in Abraham.

We heard about Abraham's faith in our first reading. How Abraham did not 'earn' or 'deserve' the blessing God confers on him to be the founder of a great nation, the Jewish nation, as it comes to be known. Abraham couldn't possibly have comprehended, or understood with his intellect, the enormity of what he was hearing from God. His only option was to dismiss it as impossible, and deny God, or, believe, accepting it as impossible – because that's God's problem and with God, everything is possible. He chose the latter.

That is what Jesus is pointing Nicodemus to, when he talks about being born from above. It is the two-way transaction that starts with an awareness of God's love for us personally, and God's desire to be part of our lives, the invitation God offers every person. When that awareness is comprehended, and believed, even tentatively, we are ready to make the response Abraham made.

We are ready to say "What you are offering me, God, is impossible – how can I, me, be worthy or deserving of such recognition by God?" We cannot comprehend it with our minds, but if we can make the jump of faith, and say, 'Yes', because our hearts/souls recognise the invitation, then we are entering into that two-way transaction.

When we say 'Yes', to God's love for us, we are recognising him as Father, our Father in heaven. We are allowing ourselves to be one of His children. To be born again from above: re-born as a child of God. Re-born as one who believes through the help of the Holy Spirit, that bit of God that lives in each of us, that allows us to connect in faith without requiring our brains to understand.

It is offered freely to everyone who is able to hear it, reliant on God's initiating and the Spirit's communicating. Membership of God's family therefore is one of faith, not one of 'deserving', nor one of fleshly entitlement: being born into the right family, the birth-right of only the Jewish people.

Nicodemus' confusion on hearing Jesus' words about being born again is increased because the Hebrew word is ambiguous, it can mean 'above' or 'again'. Both work, but only when you understand it is a spiritual re-birth that is in question, not wombs and bodies.

As Abraham shows us, this is not a new message or religion that Jesus is bringing. The prophets have tried to get God's people to give up their man-made reliance on religious practises and sacrifices and see what God is really asking. But prophets were unpopular, and largely ignored or persecuted. Jesus is going the same way, to the cross, but unlike the predecessors, he is going to achieve the victory.

Jesus decides to reveal more about who he really is to Nicodemus than Nicodemus is ready to understand.

Jesus talks about the Son of Man as the only one who passes between heaven and earth; earth and heaven. That is one of the things Jesus has come to create: a new bridge, or relationship between us and God. Jesus knows our human condition, we can be confident of that; and we know what living truly God-directed lives would look like, because he modelled that as a human. So we have far more reason to be confident in our relationship with the Father, through the Son, than ever did Abraham and his descendants. This is news, good news, for Nicodemus as he comes to believe it.

Jesus illustrates the significance of his life and death by reference to the serpent Moses lifted up. This story is from the Book of Numbers 21.5-8 when the Israelites in the wilderness suffered a plague of deadly snakes. Moses was told by God to make a bronze snake on a pole, and all who looked at that bronze snake would live.

Jesus is pointing to how he will be lifted up on the cross, and just as snakes have always been associated with evil, he will both be there because of the evil in the world, 'taking it to himself' for us, and enabling us to be freed from it. Just as God worked through the bronze snake (the bronze snake had no power itself), so God works through the cross. When we gaze at Jesus raised on the cross, the part we have in us that is dark, our share in evil, can be healed, if we believe. The evil does not overcome us, instead, life is given us.

God, who is both Father, Son, and Spirit together, revealed God's love for us in this extraordinary way; God the Son, being willing to become human and suffer every aspect just as you or I would, but with a perfect faith.

Well, I'm nearly out of time and I've only scratched the surface, and it may be that I've said nothing that is new to you, though repetition is no bad thing! How does it impact on us?

Let's be encouraged to tell other people the Easter story, while it's in season, because even though Nicodemus didn't get what Jesus was on about, in due course, he did come to understand. He did come to faith in Jesus as the Son of God, became a valuable secret follower, and with Joseph of Arimathea buried Jesus' body in the tomb.

Jesus doesn't expect us to get there is a flash of light – though a few do. He talks of being born of water: that is the water of baptism, as John the Baptist initiated, which is a commitment and intention to walk with God. And born of spirit, a spiritual birth which requires that leap of faith to accept God's love for ourselves, and work intentionally with the Holy Spirit in us, to live lives more closely modelled on Jesus, as our love response to His love for each of us.

Simple? Puzzling? Yes. Also, mysterious and unfathomable, but never distant, or irrelevant or detached from every moment of our real lives.

Amen