

Genesis 12.1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4.1-5,13-17; **John 3.1-17 – Lent 2 – 8 March 2020**

In today's Gospel account of the clandestine meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus we see Jesus at his best in showing us what it means to evangelise – to be an evangelist....

I know that sometimes we can feel a little uncomfortable with that word – but it is simply about telling the good news about Jesus – through conversation.

So – if you could ask Jesus anything – what would it be? Take a minute to think about that – and tell your neighbour...

I wonder if it would have been along the lines of some of the questions Nicodemus had for Jesus...

And we should remember too, that it was Nicodemus who came to Jesus this time – because there are other times – like the encounter Jesus had with the woman at the well for example – when Jesus came to her...

Nicodemus was an intelligent man of standing – a member of the Sanhedrin, a leading Pharisee and religious teacher, but he recognised that there was something about Jesus and he wanted to find out more – there was something missing for the status assurance that God's kingdom was his for the asking – it probably didn't quite feel like that...

It must have taken some courage to approach him – albeit at night, but actually this 'dark time' might say more about the darkness of Nicodemus' spiritual awareness than the literal darkness of night.

We also know that it was the witnessing of miracles that drew him to Jesus – v2 says: 'We know that you are a teacher come from God, because no one can do these miracles which you do, unless God is with him' (3:2) And we hear how Jesus challenges this – and takes Nicodemus deeper into what it is he should be believing in – not so much the miracles that take place on earth but the amazing idea of being 'born from above' – so that the kingdom of God can be seen (v3)

The miracles are signposts that point to the fact that Jesus is nothing less than God himself – not just another preacher or prophet or healer or magic man – but God... And to know God on earth – to experience God's grace on earth – Nicodemus – or anyone for that matter – must be 'born again' – 'born from above'

In the original Greek the word used for 'again' has a double meaning and also means 'above' – so the word – 'another' – is confusing to Nicodemus – being born again? Being born from above? What could this mean – we can almost picture ourselves there, hearing this kind of spiritual revelation for the first time – do you remember the first time you heard something that challenged the idea of that way we are called to live 'in the world but not of it' .....

"I tell you the truth' Jesus tells him 'no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 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."

One thing about Nicodemus – as all religious leaders of that day – is that he would know his scriptures and would be able to think about what Jesus was saying in the light of what he knew about the coming of a new Messiah – about the spiritual dryness needing renewal and regeneration – he would have been reminded of the words from the prophet Ezekiel 36:25:

*Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean ... A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes ... and you shall be my people, and I will be your God.*

Nicodemus is beginning to realise by the way Jesus makes him question his faith and by their conversation that there is so much more – that faith that promises everlasting life is a faith worth knowing and experience.

But the new birth through faith is not going to be confined to a particular race or sect or social standing – it will be for everyone – just like the wind – the spirit of love will blow where it wills. Nicodemus' God might

have been loving, but only if you wore a particular badge – but the God from above – made flesh on the ground through Jesus – and lived out by him and all who follow him through the power of a grace-filled spirit – was inclusive – all embracing...

And then of course, we come to the crux of it all – Jesus again meets Nicodemus where he is – he speaks to him through scripture, reminding him of how Moses lifted up a bronze snake -

We have to go back to the scripture in Numbers 21 to be reminded of what happened. Basically, the people of Israel were set free and then went a-wandering for forty years but not without much moaning to God. For their lack of faith – I quote:

*Then the LORD sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. <sup>7</sup> The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the LORD and against you; pray to the LORD to take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. <sup>8</sup> And the LORD said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' <sup>9</sup> So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.*

And so Jesus is saying to Nicodemus that he – and others like him – are like the people of Israel who would get bitten. The serpent could be the world, couldn't it – with people become spiritually poisoned through their moving away from God and not trusting him with their lives and world.

But Jesus is saying to Nicodemus – 'don't worry' Just like Moses lifted up the bronze serpent for people to look at and live again so Jesus would be lifted up – on the cross – and all that turned to him would also live again – would spiritually be born again – from above – and live.

The world of Nicodemus – and all who turned to Jesus – might look the same but now – empowered by the Holy Spirit from above through Jesus – his world – their world – our world – would become spiritualised and would become a place where God's grace and spirit would infuse all in the world with his love – they kingdom come – on earth, as it is in heaven...

And going back to the beginning – where Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the dark – I ask you again – was this literally in the dark of the night or in spiritual darkness?

Because actually – when we come to that time where we have journeyed to the cross with the betrayed and alone Jesus – we will read then of a man who bravely makes a bold statement for Jesus – soon after he – and others – have lifted up their eyes to Jesus – lifted up on the cross... We pick up the story in John chapter 19:

*<sup>38</sup> After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. <sup>39</sup> Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds.*

Let's hold the story of Nicodemus close to our hearts – and open our hearts to the possibility of going deeper into the well of living water and light of God through Jesus.

Is there anyone in the dark you can begin to tell the story of the light of Jesus to?

Is there anything that you are in the dark about that you might want to mull over with someone through a Bible Study or a coffee with a friend who can pray and think about things in a spiritually deeper way?

'Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.'

Amen