

***May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be now and always acceptable unto You O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.***

There are several options for the sermon this morning: Trinity, both Isaiah and Romans offer plenty of scope for a good twenty minutes, and Nicodemus. On the basis that I'm quite happy with what I said about the Trinity last year, I thought I would go with Nicodemus. Ha! Now that encourages you to try to remember what I said last year! *Two - fer!* There will be a test ... *so stay awake!*

We're sometimes not sure what we should think about Nicodemus; was he a spy for the Pharisees or was he genuinely seeking a resolution for the theological conflict in his own mind. Well, opinion is divided. Some scholars think that at this stage of the narrative Nicodemus could well have been part of a larger group that was prepared to seek information by skulking around *in the dark*, secretly trying to discover for themselves who and what was going on *out of the public eye*. Some scholars think that Nicodemus was already a convert *coming out of the darkness*, genuinely confused, seeking Jesus' guidance for his *eternal* benefit.

Part of the riddle is solved in the way that Nicodemus addresses Jesus ... *Rabbi*. It's a deferential term and yes, he could have used it to curry favour with his target, but if you are seeking to deceive someone who claims to be the Son of God, you'd better have you stuff in one sock ... especially if you're not sure He isn't! There were some among the Pharisees who readily accepted that no-one could do the things that Jesus could apart from the presence of the divine ... but some thought Jesus' support may have come from the other end of the spectrum.

The tone seems perhaps a little reserved. Jesus didn't always completely reveal or *entrust* Himself to others ... He always knew who was in His court and who wasn't ... remember the Rich Young Ruler in Lk 18:18? That young man's frame of reference was all about achieving his own salvation and not about serving God. Jesus answered him gently and politely, but not to the end he found acceptable. There seems to have been a difference between what we might call *Passover believers* and true disciples ... Jesus was completely open and revealed His glory to one group, but to the other ... He did not.

Nevertheless, Nicodemus *came to Him ... out of the darkness*. There is a distinct possibility that he comes in faith ... *seeking Truth and belief*. The alternative is that he came in secrecy or in fear ... with negative connotations ... and every other use of these words in John's gospel has these negative inferences (Judas departed the table in the Upper Room, the disciples fishing on Galilee after the resurrection caught no fish, no-one can work in the dark, and we stumble in the dark because the light is not in us). But Jesus answers Nicodemus so completely and in a manner respecting his education and station, that it suggests to me that Jesus thinks he is a genuine believer.

I don't know about you, but when I first came to believe in Jesus as my Lord and personal Saviour, there were a few things that I couldn't understand ... and I remain grateful for the gentleness and patience of the Man I have since come to know more deeply.

John only uses the term *Kingdom of God* twice in his gospel: here and when Jesus is before Pilate (Jn 18: 36). Luke talks about it only once (Rich Young Ruler). On all these occasions the authors distinguish *seeing* and *entering the Kingdom of God* from *believing*, as if to recognise that there is a difference between saying that we believe and doing something about it.

It's clear that Nicodemus struggled with Jesus' allegorical references. He failed to appreciate that birth doesn't only come via a woman's womb ... Spiritual birth comes only from God our Father, via Jesus His Son. He wasn't the only one though. Jesus talked with the woman at the Samaritan well about *living water*, and with the man born blind about going to the Pool of Siloam. In both cases Jesus was talking about two completely different spheres of reality: *flesh* meaning 'human, mortal, subject to death'; and *spirit* meaning 'no longer subject to death or time.' In order to be born of the Spirit we need to leave the alternative behind. We must *choose* to be born of the Spirit, but the outcome is not an inevitability; Jesus still gets to decide on the evidence we might want to hide from the judge.

We might think that Jesus' use of the *wind* metaphor is a bit odd in this context, but ... *the wind blows where it wants ... we don't know where it comes from or where it goes to ...* in this reading we are in a privileged position compared with either Jesus' disciples or Nicodemus. We might remember other occasions like when the Pharisees brought to Jesus a woman who had been caught in adultery and He forgave her. They rejected His testimony on the basis that His evidence was invalid because He was 'on His own.' But Jesus rejected their position because "*I know where I come from and where I am going to, but you do not know ... you judge by human standards, but I judge no-one*"

(Jn 8: 14). Jesus speaks to what He knows, and testifies to what He has seen, in ways that no human can do. Jesus speaks from His unique authority because only through Him can all of these impossibilities *become possible*. Jesus knows heavenly things *and* makes them known on earth.

We come now to perhaps the best known verses in the Bible and most often recited from memory: *For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life ...* This is the first mention of Love in John's gospel, and these verses draw together God's love for the world and the love of His only Son. *They are the redemptive action!* But while God's love is universal, the guarantee it offers is not *for everyone ...* we must first *believe* and *live into* that belief. Just as *eternal life* is more than just an extension of physical life, so is *being lost*, more than just our physical death. Not everyone will be saved ... those who reject or do not wholly accept Jesus, are *self-condemned ...* is there a worse outcome?

Nicodemus ... is he genuinely seeking Jesus and His Truth, or is he something else? For me, he comes out of the darkness into the light ... he is engaged by Jesus and lives into his new Truth. Are we living into that same Truth?

**Amen.**