

Sunday 1 November – Evening Service – Jesus’ Encounter with Nicodemus

Last week Colin spoke superbly about Phillip and Nathaniel’s journey to faith as told in John’s gospel. They saw Jesus and pretty soon got the point and became followers.

Well, this week, we see another spiritual journey, but it couldn’t be one more different!

We are looking at a man called Nicodemus, and he is a man in spiritual crisis.

As a visual person, I often think in pictures and as I prepared this sermon, one image that I thought about was a jigsaw puzzle, almost complete, but with one piece just a little out of place. Just a little not quite fitted in.

We’ve all had times like that; when we suddenly find that we have got a bit dislocated, a bit unstuck, bit not fitted in. Well, if you are feeling a little like that then tonight’s verses may help.

I want to explore Nicodemus’ story with that image in mind.

The three appearances of Nicodemus

Let’s briefly describe Nicodemus and those appearances.

Nicodemus is a Pharisee and well respected. He even belongs on the Sanhedrin (translated Ruling Council), which was the Jewish legal chamber of the time. He was well used to interpreting law and making judgements. There is also good evidence that he was rich.

So a rich, influential, clever, respected man. A big fish, who would make a real splash if he were caught!

As you probably know, Jesus and the Pharisees clashed catastrophically, so it’s very interesting to see Nicodemus coming to Jesus.

His first appearance is a night-time meeting with Jesus, where Nicodemus gets to quiz Jesus. Next he is seen having a dispute with his friends and fellow Pharisees. Finally he is directly involved in Jesus’s burial arrangements.

So he first shows up seeking out Jesus at night. This is recorded in Chapter 3. I’m only going to read the first part of that encounter, in the first 4 verses:

Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.” 3 Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.[a]” 4 “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

So here Nicodemus starts a conversation with Jesus. And already, it seems clear that he is having some difficulty! Already, Jesus’ ministry, his preaching and particularly the miracles have made a deep impression on Nicodemus.

The next appearance is in chapter 7 starting at verse 45:

45 Finally the temple guards went back to the chief priests and the Pharisees, who asked them, “Why didn’t you bring him in?” 46 “No one ever spoke the way this man does,” the guards replied.

47 “You mean he has deceived you also?” the Pharisees retorted. 48 “Have any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? 49 No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them.” 50 Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, 51 “Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?” 52 They replied, “Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.”

Here it is clear that there is some real tension between Nicodemus and the other Pharisees.

Finally, Nicodemus teams up with a secret disciple of Jesus called Joseph of Arimathea. Together they give Jesus a decent, traditional Jewish burial. That account is found in chapter 19, but I’m not going to major on that tonight so I won’t read the detail.

The three areas of conflict

To dig a little deeper into these verses, I want to draw out three areas where Nicodemus was having problems, three sources of conflict, of turmoil.

These areas are intertwined, but it will be helpful to consider them in isolation for a moment. They are:-

- conflict with the other Pharisees over scripture interpretation,
- pressure to stick to old and trusted alliances with his friends and social circle
- problems trying to square up his common sense with his legal teaching

Nicodemus was in tension with the Pharisees over interpretation of the Law. Matthew Henry describes Nicodemus as “a man of the Pharisees, bred to learning, a scholar”. Nicodemus knew his scriptures intimately.

But, it seems, he is beginning to interpret those writings differently to his colleagues in the Sanhedrin. Look at 7v51 – Nicodemus reminds the Pharisees that “Our Law does not judge people without a hearing.” The others snap back: “Search and you will see....prophets are not from Galilee.” So it is scripture versus scripture.

Notice the heart of the conflict;

Nicodemus’ natural response is for Jesus and he focusses upon a fair application of the Jewish Law – he wants Jesus’ voice heard and understood properly.

The Pharisees are concerned with truth and error – their studies (but perhaps also prejudices) lead them to certainty that Jesus cannot be a true teacher.

Nicodemus’ cannot reconcile his friend’s interpretation of scripture with his own personal assessment of Jesus.

This is very dangerous indeed. “Are you from Galilee?” they ask – Nicodemus’ credentials as an impartial man are being questioned; there is a crack in the relationship. Will Nicodemus denounce Jesus and keep his status or will he continue on his path of deeper investigation and discovery. Will he take the easy or hard option?

The Pharisee’s think there are objective and scriptural reasons for thinking Jesus is an imposter, a charlatan. Remember the Pharisees did study, they did search, they did think. And they thought Jesus was not of God.

But are they blinded by prejudice? Perhaps we have become narrow minded....perhaps blinkered....Or is their interpretation right? How can Nicodemus be sure?

And the problem is that they are powerful. They are the social fabric Nicodemus' life.

Nicodemus is impressed with the miracles. But the miracles did not impress the other Pharisees; in fact, the miracles may even have increased their anger, for how can an imposter do miracles except if he is using power given by an evil counterfeit, perhaps by Satan himself.

The risks of appearing to be 'in league' with or sympathetic to Jesus were great indeed.

Well some people are being convinced. Jesus is starting to get quite a following amongst the outcast, the unpopular, the unclean, the poor, the sick.

But in 7v49 the Pharisees call those in Jerusalem listening to Jesus a 'mob', revealing contempt for people they should be serving.

I wonder if the Pharisees actually did much to convince Nicodemus that Jesus was of God; the more viciously they put Jesus [and his followers] down, the more he might be secretly ashamed to be identified with them. For he could see little wrong with Jesus.

Nicodemus can't just toss the miracles aside as a deception and he see them as evidence that Jesus is drawing power from Satan. That doesn't make sense to him.

The evidence of Nicodemus' own eyes suggest that Jesus is some kind of prophet or Godly teacher. He doesn't think the miracles and healings look very much like the work of Satan. He doesn't think Jesus sounds much like Satan when he speaks.

A troubling moment for Nicodemus. What will it mean if these cracks split into real separation? What will become of Nicodemus? Is there any life for Nicodemus outside the Pharisees?

The pain of crisis

And this brings us to the pain of crisis. Nicodemus cannot respond authentically to Jesus without alienating his friends. He is like the miss-fitted jigsaw piece, neither one nor the other; neither Pharisee nor Disciple.

It is perhaps in turmoil, out of all this muddle that Nicodemus meets with Jesus.

He starts by trying to summarise the truth about Jesus. Notice he doesn't actually ask a question; he presents Jesus with a theory.

"Rabbi, [says Nicodemus] we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him."

We love coming up with theories about God or bits of theology. Theories, models, laws are seductive because they offer us predictability. They offer us certainty. But in my experience, God has a troubling way of disregarding them.

It's Nicodemus' theory, you see. He is not happy with a simple rejection of Jesus. He has been doing a little reflection, watching Jesus perform miracles, hearing him speak with a depth of learning that he can only admire, and come to the awkward conclusion that this guy is actually a genuine messenger from God.

It seems that he wants to reach agreement with Jesus, to let Jesus know that he 'gets it', that he can see what Jesus is about.

But Jesus isn't for playing. No, instead Jesus says something that is at first sight utterly bewildering. "You can't see the Kingdom of God without being born from above [or again, versions differ]"

Jesus speaks of 'seeing'. Nicodemus has tried to 'pigeon-hole' Jesus into his worldview. He's happy for Jesus to be a teacher. He's even happy for him to be from God. But there it ends.

But Jesus says that Nicodemus cannot even see the Kingdom without re-birth; he is really throwing a spanner in the works. Re-birth suggests a complete new-start. A total new beginning. If Nicodemus is a miss-fitted piece then he must find a whole new puzzle to fit in. Perhaps he's been in the wrong box!

This idea is echoed in other places in others gospels (think of Matthew 9v17; new wine must be put in new wineskins – you can't have a mixture of Jesus' teaching poured into the old covenant – if you want to follow Jesus, you have to abandon the old way.)

Nicodemus cannot have Jesus on his own terms. Jesus will not be bargained with and even though Nicodemus would have been a wonderful catch, Jesus does not soften his message for a moment.

Jesus may be popular with outcasts, approachable to weak and disaffected people but he is flinty hard with Nicodemus about his message and his mission.

Jesus will not offer Nicodemus an easy compromise; either go the whole hog, be reborn spiritually, submit to Jesus and learn the ways of the spirit or stay blind. Stay stuck and confused. Stay lost.

And I wonder if there isn't a note of frustration in Nicodemus's reply – "Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb?" Nicodemus is not a silly man; he is a desperate and troubled man. He is taking a terrible risk in seeing Jesus and the comfortable resolution he was hoping for is not coming.

So what can we learn from this? What is the application? Well, there's tonnes of course but I'll just summarise a few ideas.

Application

Back to that jigsaw piece that didn't quite fit.

It's a crisis point: it may be about whether to become a Christian or not, it may be about something God is calling you to do or to change. It may be an interpretation of the bible that you have based much on, but suddenly now seems dubious. It may be a growing dissatisfaction with the opinions of your friends. Christian or otherwise.

Nicodemus shows us that we need to take time out to really consider a spiritual question in detail. He is a model of serious reflective, open-minded prayer, study and dialogue. We can't expect to get answers to really difficult and troubling questions just by luck. We need to seek out resources and helpful, mature people to help us.

Nicodemus attacks the problem. He is perfectly straight with Jesus and this attitude is exactly what we need. Prayer and honesty about doubts and difficulties are the road to clarity and freedom.