

Sermon for Sunday 5 March 2023 – The Second Sunday of Lent

Pete Postle, Reader

Genesis 12.1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4.1-5,13-17; John 3.1-17

May all I say and think be always acceptable to thee, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

I got through the Word section safely this time. Last time, I was told I did everything, I did all the bits, but not necessarily in the right order. Doing my Morcambe and Wise bit!

In one of the more optimistic of theological theories, it is suggested that John's gospel was written by Jesus himself. We have no proof of such a proposal, but I do feel that John's gospel conveys Jesus's intentions behind what he says rather better than the others, mainly because of its intense spirituality. But it's also interesting to reflect on from where the detailed information on the Gospels does come; to my mind, there can be little doubt that the source of today's gospel is Nicodemus himself, probably in a later conversation with John. Now, Nicodemus is one of my unsung heroes of the New Testament. He's mentioned three times in John's Gospel, not at all in the other three.

Nicodemus is a leader of the Jews, a member, that is, of the Sanhedrin, the most important council, and a Pharisee, that is to say, a teacher, a rabbi too. In some translations, Jesus says to him, you are **the** leader of the Jews, suggesting even greater eminence for Nicodemus. Later in the gospel, Nicodemus is there at a meeting of the Sanhedrin, when the temple police want to arrest Jesus. Nicodemus demands that Jesus should be given a fair hearing. And there he is, after the crucifixion, bringing a lavish gift of myrrh and aloes from which to embalm Jesus's body.

So it is clear that Nicodemus was profoundly moved and influenced by this first clandestine meeting you've heard today. He came by night. Privately, he seems convinced of Jesus's message. In public, however, he cannot say, because of his position of importance of holding up the traditions of Jewish belief.

It is clear that he came to this meeting with a fairly open mind and with a great feeling of respect. Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who comes from God. Well, no one can do these signs that you do, apart from God. Jesus answers him in a surprising manner. It doesn't sound like a direct answer at all, but it is, because Jesus realises that Nicodemus is really asking how he too can follow and understand Jesus's new teaching.

You must be born of water, says Jesus, indicating, of course, that by now to those people well known manner of John's baptism as a sign of a cleansing of the soul, a repentance of one's old ways and a desire to start again, to be born again and to be born of the Spirit, adds Jesus, echoing John's promise that one would come who would be greater than he, baptising with fire, the Holy Spirit, and with water. And to explain that concept, Jesus then gives that lovely metaphor of the wind that you find in your

reading there. The Greek word used rock means wind, or breath, or spirit; blowing where it chooses; the breath of God, in other words, which we can hear and feel but not know from whence it came or to where it goes. So we too can feel that breath on our faces, if only we determine to go out and stand in its path.

That's how we can be born of the Spirit. But then, once it has touched us, we mustn't fret about where it comes from before we let it refresh us. We mustn't worry about where it will take us. But we just must haul aloft our sails, let it blow us through life where it will, and just learn to trust it to take us in the right direction. And that really takes us to what today's readings are really about - complete trust in God, which is what we mean by faith; a complete, unquestioning, trust in God, just as we heard that Abraham possessed. And Paul underlines and develops further in that reading from Roberts. Paul of course calls it justification by faith. Justification in the sense of an acquittal from one's past sins simply by faith. And not such an acquittal because of the good deeds that you might have done or are about to do. And that in turn underlines the idea that you can't win God's favour by doing good deeds. You should do those anyway, because they are the right thing to do for your fellows, and not with any expectation of reward.

Nicodemus doesn't understand all this born of the Spirit bit. How can these things be he asks? Perhaps it would be a more charitable to suggest that he seeks further explanation. His words certainly continues to assess a continuing desire to understand. Jesus assures him that he speaks with complete authority from his own direct experience with his Father. But only he, the Son of man, who descended from heaven, has that full knowledge. So Nicodemus and all of us must believe and trust in Him, Jesus. Jesus goes on to say that he must be crucified before people will gain that unquestioning trust.

Nicodemus is one such and hasn't gained that trust. Read the Gospels carefully and you will see that it's true for most, if not all, of Jesus's disciples too. None of them believe because of the crucifixion either. There they sat, huddled together, minds numbed by disappointment and fear that they might suffer the same fate. And not until after the resurrection does belief and faith come to them.

But when it does come, it is with complete and glorious certainty. It is to the disciples that we finally owe the relating of our faith in Jesus and His Gospel. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish, but may have eternal life. That sublime statement would seem to come from John rather than Jesus himself. It shows how the resurrection affected John onto a life of evangelism and into recording that most spiritual of the Gospels.

Amen.