

St. Margaret's Uniting Church, Mooroolbark

Sunday 12th March, 2017 - Lent 2

GOSPEL READING John 3: 1-17 *Nicodemus Visits Jesus*

Nicodemus was wowed by Jesus, although perhaps that should not be a surprise. He is a Pharisee, and Pharisees were known for being attracted by 'bling'. They had vision for fancy things that carried their own sense of importance. Like getting the most important seat at the table, perhaps at the right-hand side of the favoured guest, Rabbi or teacher. Or the wearing of long robes in public, the longer and fancier the better. Or wearing big boxes on their heads with bible tracts to show the world how seriously the Scriptures were being taken. Nothing like having the word of God on your mind constantly! They liked the bling of polished silverware and they adored salutations.

I imagine Nicodemus might have expected a warmer welcome from Jesus. 'Oh Nicodemus, you are also a revered teacher, how wonderful that I have an audience from the Sanhedrin tonight!'

But that isn't exactly how Jesus welcomes our Pharisee. And John's gospel records something of a cold if not outright dismissive response by Jesus to his 'type'.

You see it is people like Nicodemus who are the problem. And we get an insight into that just before we meet Nicodemus in the cover of darkness.

When Jesus was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them, because he knew all people and needed no one to testify about anyone; for he himself knew what was in everyone. (John 2:23-25)

If Nicodemus looked to appearances, so did those mentioned here. The people believed in Jesus' name because they saw the signs or miracles that he was doing. We might think that is wonderful, because isn't believing in Jesus the point of all this? But Jesus rejects them for believing in such a way. And he goes into this encounter with Nicodemus knowing what is in the human heart.

So we might imagine that Nicodemus represents those who believed because of the signs. And that is precisely what Nicodemus says in the shroud of darkness. *'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.'*

Nicodemus is impressed by the miracle worker. He is attracted by the wow of water being turned into wine. Perhaps he is thinking, *I'd like to be at that wedding, where the best wine comes out late and in such quantity that I can lose myself in it. After all, good wine lubricates our social networks...*

If Jesus played the game of social networking, he would offer some deference to Nicodemus. But there is no polite reciprocation. Jesus jumps straight in. *'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.'*

It is quite a sharp response under the circumstances. Jesus effectively says that Nicodemus is in the dark. *You speak of these signs coming from God, but you cannot see the very kingdom you speak about!*

And this is the trouble with all who are wowed by Jesus the wonder boy. Jesus tells Nicodemus and those like us who hear the conversation, that this kind of belief falls a long way short. We need to find a new way of seeing and believing.

And I suspect we all struggle with this message.

After all, what is wrong with a miracle? Don't we look for them and pray for them and feel our faith is deepened whenever we experience or hear of them? We've all heard stories of miracle survival in disaster situations. We've perhaps prayed deeply and desperately for ourselves or others and been amazed at times those prayers seem to be answered. We've heard stories of Jesus healing people and perhaps even experienced miraculous healing ourselves. (This is not the place for it, but I do have a very personal healing story from my childhood.)

What then is wrong with Nicodemus and those who believed in the name of Jesus because of the signs he performed?

There is, it seems, a problem that for many, the miracle is the end or the goal. You may recall stories of healing in the gospels, where people are

made well but their lives are otherwise unchanged by the sign that Jesus has performed. For some there is a distinct lack of curiosity. We take what we can get, rather than look deeper at the one who offers us something that comes as love and gift.

And if all we can see is what is outside, like a good seat at the table or an impressive robe, then we miss the point about Jesus Christ, and what his signs point to.

In the gospel of John, it all points towards relationship. Jesus wants us to know God, to know that God seeks us and wants us to live. Rev. Bill Loader speaks of the God that Jesus reveals as *the love nexus which brings life*. We might find those words a bit strange, but it describes well that *'God so loved the world'*, and *'God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him'*.

If you are wowed by a miracle worker, then it is easy to miss the most important part – the stuff about knowing the God that Jesus reveals. Think about these signs of Jesus: Jesus feeds 5000 people on a hillside. Are we to be wowed by a few loaves and fish that feeds a mob one hundred times our size? Or do we see beyond it, that Jesus is the bread of life? Or if you were once blind, but find your sight is restored through Jesus, is that something you share in amazement on social media, or over some of that fine wedding wine to your friends at the table? Or does Jesus become the light for you forever – and the way and the truth?

Nicodemus challenges all of us as he is stuck in a world where bling and sensation matter. As the conversation unfolds over being born anew or from above, he cannot see beyond what is immediately in his face – and you can't climb into mum's womb and just start again. Nicodemus is blind to the movement of the Spirit of God. He cannot see what he cannot see., although ironically, he is so very, very close. The first words that he utters to Jesus name a truth that he doesn't see for himself. *'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God...'*

In that truth, we would not remain stuck on the wow of Jesus' signs. Rather than just for today in the feeding of 5000, we would see that Jesus is the bread of life. Rather than seeing the best of wine at a wedding banquet and settling in for a good night, we would see that in Jesus offers us the

hospitality of God. Rather than chucking away our spectacles if Jesus has restored our sight, we would see that the light of God has come into the world.

And that means that darkness gives way to light. And death gives way to life. And fear and condemnation gives way to love.

'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.

'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.'

We are invited to see deeper than Nicodemus and all he represents. We are invited to go deeper and lift up Jesus as the way the truth and the life. We lift him up until the light illumines the darkness. We lift him up when we struggle to see the truth of the one who has come from God. And we lift him up for a world that struggles with many forms of darkness.

A final word, thanks to Rev. Gordon Lingard.
(<http://www.bendigonorth.com/sermons.html>)

God = The Greatest One.

So Loved = The Greatest Degree.

The World = The Greatest Amount of People.

That He Gave = The Greatest Generosity

His One and Only Son = The Greatest Uniqueness.

That Whoever = The Greatest Invite.

Believes in Him = The Greatest Simplicity.

Shall Not = The Greatest Certainty.

Perish = The Greatest Possible Loss.

But = The Greatest Difference.

Have = The Greatest Possession.

Eternal = The Greatest Length.

Life = The Greatest Gift.