

Sermon Trinity Sunday 2018 - All Saints Parish Church Wokingham

By The Reverend Canon David Hodgson

Reading: John 3.1-17

Today is Trinity Sunday – a great and celebratory day in the Christian calendar. Yet I do not plan to preach today specifically about the Christian teaching of God the Holy Trinity, Father Son and Holy Spirit. I did that last year on Trinity Sunday and it's available on the church website in the sermon archive section both as a document and to listen to as a live recording. Today I want to preach on the gospel reading we heard and explore what this story about Nicodemus can teach us today about faith in God.

A man came to Jesus at night to open a conversation. This is Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee, one of the group who were the religious pace-setters of the day. Nicodemus is described also as a member of the ruling council. Pharisees presented themselves as keepers of the true faith of Israel. In John's Gospel, as in the other three gospels, we see them undermining Jesus, accusing him of false faith. The Pharisees were afraid of his popularity with the people. In the end we are told it is the Pharisees, together with the chief priests, who engineered the arrest of Jesus. Nicodemus, we learn later in the gospel of John, spoke out in the ruling council, and argued that according to their own law they should reserve their judgement about Jesus until he had been given a hearing to find out what he was doing. But the other Pharisees refused and rebuked Nicodemus. Later still after the crucifixion we read that Nicodemus is one of the two men who came and gave Jesus a decent burial, according the custom of the Jews. So here is a man who officially, as a Pharisee and member of the ruling council, was opposed to Jesus and believed he should be arrested but wanted to talk to him and find out more about him. No wonder he came at night not to be seen; and maybe Saint John highlights this image of darkness, to symbolise Nicodemus' search for enlightenment by the light of Christ. Nicodemus is a symbolic figure too for the readers of Saint John's gospel in the first century after Christ, when to choose to accept Jesus and have faith in him was a difficult choice, risking exclusion by their own faith community.

Nicodemus begins the conversation with an astonishing admission. "We know that you've come from God, you could not otherwise perform the signs you are doing." This was astonishing because it admitted straightaway that many, maybe all of the rulers, actually did know God was working genuinely through what Jesus was doing, but that effectively they were in denial.

Jesus' reply was certainly mysterious to Nicodemus. "Very truly, I tell you no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" – or in some translations – "born again." The Greek word can mean either, but clearly Nicodemus understood some form of second birth to be what Jesus meant. Nicodemus was confused by the saying – he seemed to want to take it literally. You can't be born when you are old. It's not possible to re-enter a mother's womb in order to be born a second time. With that it appears that Nicodemus had lapsed back into that same sort of denial, denial of what his heart and soul were telling him, that his fellow Pharisees were doing. What John's gospel surely wants us the readers to acknowledge is that when it comes to believing and trusting in God's work in the world, believing God came to us and is with us in Jesus, then there is a wonder and a mystery here. It is not simply an extension of existing knowledge. The metaphor of new birth gives the idea of coming into a completely new and different world. It's possible to go through human life without faith in God and consequently it's unlikely you will really see God at work anywhere let alone in Jesus. But to see and to enter into an understanding – a faith and a perspective – that God is working in this world, to see and embrace for ourselves by faith God's purposes of love, peace and forgiveness, secured by what Jesus did, that is a matter of the life of the Spirit in us – a matter of faith.

Remember that the whole purpose of John's Gospel, it declares in Chapter 20, is so that we may come to faith in Jesus as the Christ, the one from God who gives us life, true life. The story of Nicodemus is a challenge and an invitation to us the readers of the good news about Jesus

according to John, to see Jesus for who he is, to see and to believe what God has done for us and for the world by what Jesus did in his crucifixion and resurrection. Specifically in this story we asked to recognise that this is a matter of our faith, of the life of Spirit in us, to see the world and to be in the world looking for the kingdom of God, the reign of love. This we would not do simply by our natural birth into it. It requires a new birth, the birth of faith and the life of the Spirit.

Jesus - and especially his death and resurrection - what the gospel calls being lifted up - has created a new way of being in the world based on a relationship we may have with God. This is what eternal life is – it's not just about life after death – it begins in this life, when we place our faith in the crucified and risen Lord – a relationship with God based on accepting and having faith in God's free gift of love which came to light in Jesus.

A true and living relationship with God cannot be based on what you can prove about God, or what you can do to please God. It has to be based on believing and trusting in God's love; which is shown in what Jesus did for us, giving himself for us. Living by trying to please God by what you do is a self-centred approach; the focus of your concern remains your self – how am I doing? Am I good enough? Can I make myself acceptable to God by doing more or doing better? Christian faith sets us free from this, free to live to God. Today we must not lose sight of the core message of the Christian gospel; the unconditional overflowing sacrificial love which God has for the whole of creation and every person and creature in it.

Like being born – we don't have to do anything to be born, we just are - the new birth of the Christian is something that is given not earned.

This gospel includes the famous summary of the Christian message:

“God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life”.

These days believing in God can feel like a strange thing - a baffling thing we are not sure how to defend or justify to the rest of the world especially the world of work and public conversation, but yet we know in our hearts and souls we cannot deny. In some ways we are in the same boat as Nicodemus. Being open about faith in God and in Jesus today almost feels like being the odd one out as Nicodemus was, and as readers of John's gospel in the first century were. And of course outrageously there are Christians in the world today who are not merely running the risk of seeming odd to their peers, but are persecuted, denied full rights and participation in their societies, attacked and driven from their homes and countries because they are not the same as the majority.

Believing is a word we misuse in English. We think it means intellectual assent - agreeing with a statement, a belief in an opinion. But it doesn't mean that in the bible sense. Believing is about what you set your heart on – everyone who sets their heart on Jesus will not be lost is the Christian faith.

When Jesus asks us to believe in him it is an invitation to enter into his story with our lives; to find the meaning of our lives in the meaning his life gives to the world. It is something we do with our hearts as well as our heads – it is our thank you to God's gift.

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