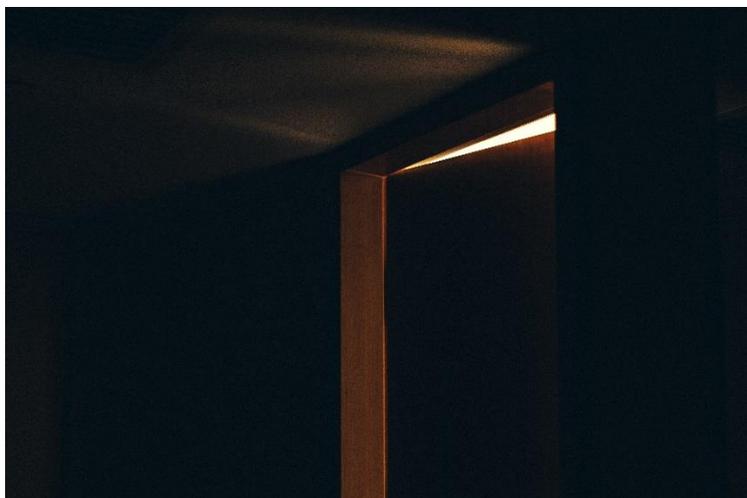


Sermon on Sunday 5 March 2023

by Melanie Seward, Lay Reader

Readings: Psalm 121 & John 3: 1-17



Being drawn to the Light

Today in our reading we have a clandestine meeting in the darkness. This character called Nicodemus is found only in John's Gospel.

He is a Pharisee. The Pharisees taught that people needed to keep not only the written commandments whose origins were from the time of Moses but, also the oral traditions handed down through the generations. Nicodemus was a scholar specialising in how a Jew should live out scripture. He is a leader, a man of religious and social standing yet, he comes in the night to see Jesus. Being seen with Jesus might create difficulties with those who are suspicious of Jesus or even see him as a threat. So better to avoid being recognised or risk someone thinking that he is a follower of Jesus.

Nevertheless, there is a part of Nicodemus that is desperate to have a proper, unhurried and uninterrupted conversation with Jesus. He wants to question Jesus about what he is about, what

he is teaching and what on earth it all means. So, in the middle of the night, Nicodemus talks about what Jesus is doing as being signs from God, but to where does this lead? Jesus teaches of being born of water and spirit, but what does that mean? How can we be born from above? How can we be born again? How can it be? Questions... Questions...Questions.

Jesus explains: "What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit."

Jesus tries again: "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Listen, Nicodemus (Jesus is saying), faith involves a moving divine spirit. Faith is not obtained by just being able to understand beliefs and reciting prayers, by keeping the rules or even learning from the generations of tradition - all of these are communicated man to man on an earthly plane. To be born again is to connect to the love and mystery of God.

This is to look beyond the material, earthly dimension of life that is here one moment and gone the next; look beyond to the underlying divine creation and spirit that renews rather than destroys, that calls for us to seek forgiveness rather than dwell in bitterness, move away from hatred to love, value the spiritual gifts of God and others over our own possessions and status. Jesus is saying... be the change, begin again, follow me, join God's kingdom, grasp life in this world and the next.

Nicodemus stands in his metaphorical darkness searching but not quite grasping the light of God in the world, standing right before him. Trying to discern the truth, he appears to be

missing something. He has all the learning and a fair amount of life experience but he's just not getting it. There may be a spark, however a connection has not been made. Look at me, says Jesus, and walk with me into the light; all Nicodemus seems to offer are questions, he does not give of himself. There is no public recognition of Jesus other than teacher, no step of trust and, as far as we know, no learning with other disciples.

The author of John's Gospel does mention Nicodemus again. When the leaders begin to conspire against Jesus, Nicodemus reminds his colleagues that the law requires that a person be heard before being judged (John 7. 50–51). Finally, Nicodemus appears after the Crucifixion of Jesus to provide the embalming spices, and with Joseph of Arimathea prepares the body of Jesus for burial (John 19. 39–42). We don't know what Nicodemus thought, believed or decided to do after this. I wonder, what happened to him...

... and, I wonder, do we see anything of ourselves in Nicodemus? Like him, we are all on a journey of faith. There will be some of us here feeling as if we are just not getting what Christian faith is all about. Relax, it's okay to ask questions – of us and God – remember, Jesus was willing to engage with Nicodemus and all his questions.

Perhaps you are on the fringe of things, you see something of the love and mystery of God but are still puzzled, even confused. Again, keep asking, keep thinking and pray simply that God will show you the way. Talk to others on the same path and they can pray with and for you.

Maybe some of us are sliding into the habit of thinking that we have the answers; like Nicodemus our questions just lead us back to the human formulated answer of ourselves and others. Meeting with others to talk after the service, for a coffee in

town, in a home group or joining the Lent Course can help us draw closer and allow ourselves to be transformed by the living God.

In John's Gospel, the Greek word used for 'believing' is always a verb and not a noun. Encountering Jesus is not about getting all the doctrinal stuff about exactly who Jesus is and what we can say about him - we don't have to understand every word of the scriptures - it is about the journey with Jesus.

We don't know what Nicodemus thought, believed or decided to do after he buried Jesus. We don't know how he walked the rest of his journey or the end of his story... but we are ALL still walking on our journey; some of us will have barely started, but Jesus is the light that illuminates the Way for all of us.