

Reflection on 26 May 2024

by Forbes Mutch, Lay Leader of Worship

Readings: Isaiah 6. 1-8 & John 3. 1-17

Breathing like Nicodemus

About a year ago, I joined an exclusive club. It wasn't Soho House or the Hampton Court Real Tennis Club or the Cowdery Polo Club. No, I decided that I needed to link up with a personal trainer. Celebrities have them, politicians have them, senior business executives have them. And now I have one. I am part of that club. It means that if I ever find myself sitting next to Jennifer Aniston on the bus, I can say: *"Jenny, you've got a personal trainer; so have I."*

I meet my PT (as we in the club call them) at the Hartham Leisure Centre for an hour a week. I realised that I needed to increase my upper body strength, improve my balance when walking and talk knowledgably about Arsenal and Nottingham Forest and all things football – it's all part of the training. Lee is great. He's an ex-Paralympian basketball player: so he sits in a wheelchair and watches me fall off the treadmill or collapse pulling weights heavier than myself. And I have improved in most areas of physical activity.

But there is one thing that he has also taught me, and that is how to breathe. Did you know that breathing is quite an important part of living? It's a bit like eating. And like eating,

what you breathe and how you breathe has a big impact on the difference it makes to your life.

And breathing correctly improves how you smell.

It's like preparing for a session of mindfulness. That begins by focussing on breathing. For a moment, you let go of any tormenting baggage in your mind and relax into your body and its life-giving breath. You let the in-breath gently fill your lungs, hold it for a moment and then allow it to flow out again. You do it in your own time and to your own rhythm, without forcing the air either way. You then begin to be more alert and awake and aware.

And with breathing there can come the occasional elusive scent. Sniff too hard and it escapes you; wait, breath gently and you may catch it again.

Catching a whiff of something starts making you ask questions. What's that smell? Oh, they're laying tar on the road. It smells like the garden fence in the summer when I was a child. Or the smell of wild garlic. It reminds me of the Italian restaurant where my wife and I had our first date. One thing leads to another and a chain of associations takes you on a journey.

It's like hearing the word of God. It can be elusive at first, but if you keep on pursuing it, things begin to fall into place.

This morning, we heard about Nicodemus.

Nicodemus turns up only in the Gospel of John. He makes three appearances. He is a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Council) in Jerusalem at the time of the trial and crucifixion of Jesus. The first time he appears is in this morning's story. He has caught the scent of something that smells interesting. *This Jesus – who is he, what is he preaching, it's fascinating, I think I'll have a quiet word with him, do it discreetly at night, out of sight from the other Jewish leaders, don't want to upset the apple cart.*

So, Jesus agrees to meet him and they have an intellectual conversation that leaves Nicodemus completely perplexed... but intrigued.

The second time that Nicodemus appears in John's gospel is four chapters later, while the Jews are debating what to do about Jesus. Nico is still part of the Sanhedrin, although John refers to his earlier meeting with Jesus and it's clear that, since then, despite his befuddlement about being born again, the word of God has been playing on repeat in his mind. In the Sanhedrin debate, Nicodemus stands up for Jesus, saying *"Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he has been doing?"* He gets slapped down, but he has obviously been taking some deep breaths and smells injustice in the air. He begins to show his true colours in that debate. He is on a journey.

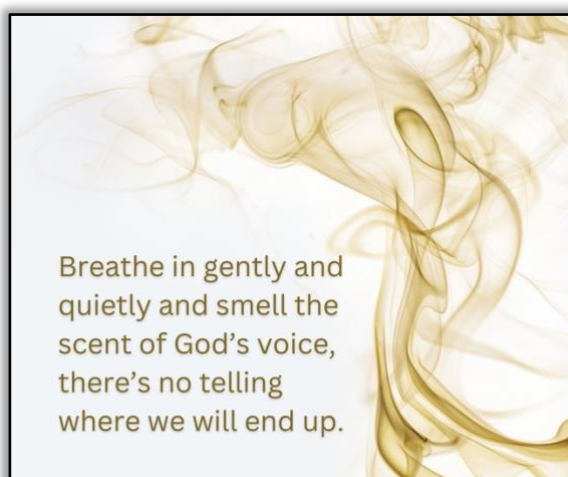
The third time that Nicodemus pops up is towards the end of John's gospel, after Jesus has been crucified. According to John, Joseph of Arimathea (another Christian believer and member of

the Sanhedrin) claims the body of Jesus for burial and is accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who, John says, had earlier 'visited Jesus at night'. Nicodemus brings a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds (which would have cost quite a lot of money). *Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrap it, with the spices, in strips of linen.*

So, there you go. Nicodemus had caught the scent of faith, had nurtured it in his own time and to his own rhythm, and then began to be more alert, awake and aware of the importance and power of Jesus and God. Perhaps he had a personal trainer like me. Well, he did – he had Jesus himself to start with.

The point is, sometimes you meet a personal trainer, or join a gym or an organisation or a church – you join with a set of your own intentions – but, as you pursue them, other teachings and callings develop. You learn how to breathe in the aromas of something more profound.

And then, you become like Isaiah in this morning's first reading, who said: *I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?" And I said, "Here am I. Send me!"*



Nicodemus heard that voice. We can all do it – breathe in gently and quietly and smell the scent of God's voice, there's no telling where we will end up. Amen

With thanks to Adam Ford and his fabulous book *Mindful Thoughts for Walkers* (2017, Quarto Publishing PLC)