

Wednesday Worship—People Jesus Met

Nicodemus

15th July 2020

Opening prayers

Welcome in the name of Christ.
May God's grace, mercy and peace be with us.

We come this day hoping to encounter Christ.
All **We come with burdens only he can lift,
and questions only he can answer.**

May we open our hearts to him.
All **may our lives be healed
and may we be strengthened for service.**

Faithful one, whose word is life:
come with saving power
to free our praise,
inspire our prayer
and shape our lives
for the kingdom of your Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.
All **Amen.**

Introduction

Today we begin a new series of worship, focusing on people Jesus met. We begin with the story of Nicodemus, who came secretly to Jesus by night and was both welcomed and challenged. It was hard for him to grasp the truth, just as it can be hard for us sometimes, and we can learn a lot from his story.

Hymn: I cannot tell

Prayers with lighting of a candle

Come, Lord and rule.
Come into our hearts
and fill them with love.
All **Come, Lord and rule.**

Come into our minds
and fill them with peace.
All **Come, Lord and rule.**

Come into our lives
and fill them with light.
All **Come, Lord and rule.**

Come into our days
and fill them with glory.
All **Come, Lord and rule.**

1st Reading: Numbers 21.4-9

From Mount Hor [the Israelites] set out by the way to the Red Sea, to go around the land of Edom; but the people became impatient on the way. The people spoke against God and against Moses, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.' Then the Lord sent poisonous serpents among the people, and they bit the people, so that many Israelites died. The people came to Moses and said, 'We have sinned by speaking against the Lord and against you; pray to the Lord to take away the serpents from us.' So Moses prayed for the people. And the Lord said to Moses, 'Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live.' So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

Prayer of response

Lord our God,
forgive us when we grumble against you.
Have mercy on us when we struggle and fall,
hear our cries when we call to you for help,
and bring us healing and peace.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
All **Amen.**

Psalm I

Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.

The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

Prayer of response

Lord, help us to stand firm in your righteousness.
May your word bring us light,
and may we always know your protection
even in times of difficulty.

All **Amen.**

2nd Reading: 1 Corinthians 2

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God.

Yet among the mature we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish. But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,

'What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the human heart conceived,

what God has prepared for those who love him'—

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God, so that we may understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we speak of these things in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual things to those who are spiritual.

Those who are unspiritual do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are discerned spiritually. Those who are spiritual discern all things, and they are themselves subject to no one else's scrutiny.

'For who has known the mind of the Lord
so as to instruct him?'

But we have the mind of Christ.

Prayer of response

Lord, we thank you for your wisdom,
and for revealing it to us, your children.
May we always be open to the leading of your Spirit,
that we might grow in understanding day by day.

All **Amen.**

3rd Reading: John 3.1-16

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, '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.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." 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.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

'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.'

Prayer of response

Lord our God,
we come to you like Nicodemus,
not always able to understand
but seeking your wisdom and light.
Open our eyes that we may see the truth,
fill us with love that we may love as you love us,
and fill us with your Spirit
that we may be born from above.

All **Amen.**

Anthem: God so loved the world

Reflection

There are many sermons about Nicodemus which focus on his conversation with Jesus, and I've preached a few myself.

Today, though, I want to look more widely at his story in the Bible.

The gospel reading we've heard today is Nicodemus's first appearance in the Bible.

In this passage we get a picture of a man who's part of the elite.

He's a leader of the people and a religious expert, who knows and tries to keep all the laws.

But there must be at least a tiny part of him that's open to something new as he comes one night to see Jesus.

This wasn't particularly safe for him.

Jesus has stirred up Jerusalem and the authorities are set against him, so for a man like Nicodemus being seen with him could be socially, politically and personally dangerous.

Nicodemus must've been looking for something and doesn't even get past his first flattering words before Jesus gets to the heart of things.

Jesus sees a man who's devoted his life to God and faith in the best way he can but who still lacks a vital piece of understanding – the need for renewal from God.

Nicodemus often gets described as being slow to understand here but that's a little unfair. We have the benefit of centuries to work out what being born again or born from above means, plus Jesus's words were in fact rather more ambiguous than our English translations lead us to believe.

And in fact, there's something encouraging to me in the fact that Nicodemus came and asked and tried to understand even when he just couldn't.

He came in the dark and in secret but at least he came, and in the process took a risk he didn't have to take.

He could've ignored Jesus, had him summoned for official questioning or just gone along with what his colleagues were saying.

Also, Nicodemus was a man used to having all the answers, so it must've taken some humility to admit to not knowing, to show that he didn't have everything figured out.

I think Nicodemus is a good example to us of the fact that we don't have to have everything worked out, and we don't need to always have all the answers.

We can come to Jesus as we are, with our questions and doubts, openly or quietly, and be sure that Jesus will take us seriously, listen to us and help us towards greater understanding.

So this story is an encouragement to us to take that step out towards greater understanding, to risk getting it wrong, to be prepared to show our ignorance and to not always take the easiest path.

This meeting in Chapter 3 fizzles out without any particular conclusion but Nicodemus pops up again twice more.

In Chapter 7 the chief priests and Pharisees send the temple police out to arrest Jesus but the police refuse to arrest him because they're so amazed by what Jesus has to say.

At this, the chief priests and Pharisees condemn both Jesus and the people who listen to them.

All except for Nicodemus, who speaks up for justice and giving people a fair hearing.

He gets shouted down but he's gained courage to at least speak up for being openminded.

Then in Chapter 19, when Jesus is buried, Nicodemus comes with an extravagant amount of myrrh and aloes to prepare the body.

Nicodemus, it seems, has come a long way, from secret questioning to a public call for fairness to an open act of love.

His is not one of those instant conversion and all problems gone stories. Instead, it's a very human story of uncertain beginnings, trying to understand, plucking up courage and finally taking the plunge.

In this way it's a story we can all understand and relate to, and something we can take encouragement from in all our uncertainties and worries.

We don't need to have all the answers, just a willingness to admit we don't know and the persistence to keep looking for them.

We don't need to have our lives sorted and God sewn up in our understanding. Instead we need openness to God's guidance and to being surprised by new things.

We might not know where our journey of faith will take us or what God will do next.

And we face uncertainty about the future over the pandemic and the economic effects.

But despite all the things we don't know, we can be sure of one thing: that, in all the journeys of our life and faith, our surprising, confusing, glorious, loving God is with us and stays with us, from beginning to end, however long it takes.

Intercessions

God of Nicodemus,
God of all of us who think we are
too old or too poor or too small or too weak or too busy.
God of all of us daunted by the sheer wonder
of the plan you lay out before us:
we come to you now, aware of all you have done for us,
and yet still struggling with our doubts.
Birth us all anew, O God.

All hear us and help us on our journey.

God of Nicodemus,
we pray for this world,
where so many are confused or lost,
where so many are hungry and thirsty,
where so many struggle with heavy burdens,
with illness, pain or sorrow.
We pray for your suffering world, Lord,
especially those affected by Covid-19
or by anxiety about it.
Birth us all anew, O God.

All **hear us and help us on our journey.**

God of Nicodemus,
we pray for those who long for a new beginning,
and for those concerned
about the future of their livelihoods and families.
We pray for those who are imprisoned,
for those cut off from loved ones,
and for those who are facing the final journey through death.
Birth us all anew, O God.

All **hear us and help us on our journey.**

God of Nicodemus,
we pray for your Church.
Give us courage to follow you.
Give us faith to act even when we do not understand.
Bless us that we may be a blessing to all in your name.
Birth us all anew, O God.

All **hear us and help us on our journey.**

Birth us all anew, O God.
Hear us and help us on our journey.
Help us to grow up again,
to accept not only earthly things but also heavenly things,
to lift up your Son and be lifted up ourselves,
to let your Spirit move us beyond our understanding.
God of Nicodemus and of all of us,
hear us and help us,
even as surely your Spirit blows among us,
all for the sake of your dear Son,
who taught us when we pray to say:

All **Our Father, which art in heaven...**

Hymn: Love divine, all loves excelling

Closing prayers

May long summer days
speak to us of God's enduring light.
May bright summer flowers
speak to us of God's unending beauty.
May fresh summer fruits
speak to us of God's continuing kindness.
May warm summer nights
speak to us of God's enfolding comfort.
May early summer dawns
speak to us of God's renewing hope.
And the blessing...

All **Amen.**

To him who is able to keep us from falling
and to present us without blemish
before the presence of his glory with rejoicing,
to the only God, our Saviour through Jesus Christ our Lord,
be glory, majesty, dominion and authority,
before all time and now and for ever.

All **Amen.**