

John 3:1-21

In the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

You might have noticed that you were all given a piece of paper with a question on it. At the end of the sermon, there'll be a couple of minutes to complete that sentence if you haven't done so yet. Just place the paper in with the offering plate when it comes round.

Who knows what a lectionary is?

Within the Anglican tradition, we follow the new common revised lectionary. Its a lovely little book which gives us the combination of readings from scripture we are supposed to use, not only each week on a Sunday, but for every day readings for morning and evening prayer and for a daily eucharist if needed. The lectionary like our churches follow a neat three year cycle, each year gives us access to one of the synoptic gospels, Matthew, Mark or Luke. And each year the stories from John are interspersed throughout.

For me, the Lectionary is a Godsend, it means I dont have to decide what readings go together based on my particular bent. I just don't know where I would be without the guidance and discipline of the Lectionary telling us whats coming up. But some weeks are hard. Sometimes the lectionary is kind, giving good combinations of readings to work with, sometimes not so

kind, putting seemingly random pieces of scripture together, where even with a degree of knowledge, it's difficult to see a connection. Sometimes the set readings are particularly challenging and I wish I could just choose something different, but other times the readings are so well known, that I feel as though there is nothing new or innovative to say. Reading like the one this week.

What can I say about John 3:16 which has not been said before? *'For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, so that all who believe in him, might not die, but have eternal life in him!'* Arguably, this is one of the most well known, maybe even famous pieces of scripture ever. This piece of Scripture from John's gospel has been used on billboards, and T-shirts, facebook memes, bumper stickers, and church signs for many many years. This famous piece of Scripture is the Bible's most recognisable text, even from people who seemingly have nothing to do with the church. Even if they have no idea where in the bible it's from, most know that the bible is its origin. For me, it sort of sums up the entire gospel in one neat little sentence. But most people don't know or even want to know much about its context; where it sits within the scope of the whole, of not only John's gospel, but of the whole canon of scripture. Most don't know or even want to know that it's part of an ongoing conversation between an established cleric of the day and God, manifest in Jesus. Most people can't tell you anything about the textual context or even what the verses either side of John 3:16 say. You've just listened to them and even you'd have to think about it.

But then again, most people who hear or read this piece don't actually care about its context, or setting, its relevance or irrelevance in Scripture or in their own lives for that matter. Like a lot of things these days, as long as the words fit the context of the person speaking or writing, it matters not where something comes from, or even if its true. Humanity has been very good at cherry picking scripture to not only say what it wants it to say, but in the way it wants it said. From our modern 21st century perspective, we only have to look at the current marriage debate as a for instance, to see how some use scripture for and some against. Some will try and make it say whatever it needs to say for the context to which its being fit and, it doesn't seem to matter about the truth or the historical context at all. And of all the millions of people who recognise this particular text, most do not immediately attribute Jesus words to this conversion conversation with Nicodemus. But a conversion conversation it is, none the less.

Jesus is speaking about being born again. About giving your life to the one and only true God. He doesn't force the issue, but leaves it open ended so that Nicodemus can make up his own mind. However, within our modern context, being born again seems to require an immediate response and because of this, can have negative connotations. For some people it implies that they are fanatical in some sense for God. That before they didn't know God and now they do. But being born again is not always like that, neither

does it always mean fanaticism. I was asked recently when did I give my life to Jesus. And I felt stupid as I ummed and ahhhed and couldn't answer. I tried to stall and asked a question in return. 'what do you mean?' 'When did you make the decision to follow Jesus and give you life to him?' They asked. 'Well I don't know' was my eventual answer. Put on the spot I couldn't answer. Now I know some people who can tell me not only the day or month they gave their life to Christ, but the hour and in some cases the minute. Great, but for me, I think I came to faith in Jesus Christ slowly like Nicodemus did. It was not a sudden rush like a pregnant woman's water breaking, rather, it was the slow day by day growth and change in life, like a whole pregnancy that brought me to truth in Jesus. And unlike some churches who have altar calls which demand someone openly give their lives to Jesus right at that minute amongst the hype, I like the slow birthing of truth, within the folds of a faith community like ours. I think that was Nicodemus' truth also. While John 3:16 has rightly earned its place among the most memorable and hopeful verses in the New Testament, if not all of scripture, its larger context here is a powerful witness and a reminder of the love of the God whom we meet in Jesus and the love of God who waits for us to be ready. Eternity is a long time.

The story of Nicodemus is a very human one. He was a leader among the Jews who lived a public life in opposition to Jesus, but deep within himself knew there to be a deeper truth and connection to God through this enigmatic

man. So in private, under the cover of nightfall, doubtful Nicodemus visits with Jesus to test his theory.

He begins with flattery, with the known that fits his Jewish framework. "Rabbi," he says, "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 knows that Jesus was a good teacher; a knowledgeable interpreter of Torah. However, immediately, Jesus confuses Nicodemus. '*No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.*' Nicodemus clearly doesn't understand. 'How can one enter again into the mother's womb?' He says. I think Nicodemus wants to understand Jesus perspective, but first he must unlearn that which blocks the truth. Jesus is saying to Nicodemus, the kingdom of God is not just a matter of praying the right way, or in a certain way like you do, neither is it a set of liturgical customs, the kingdom of God is about a complete rebirth of our entire knowledge, truth and understanding! Nicodemus doesn't understand the scope of what God can do with faith and trust and truth. God can and does change and enable the impossible.

And we have many examples throughout scripture of this very thing. Abraham and Sarah were old and childless, yet God promised them a son who would be the beginning of a whole nation. And what did Sarah do? She laughed at the absurdity of it. Then theres Moses? God commissions him through a burning bush, thats not consumed by the fire by telling him that he is to be

God's mouthpiece. Moses' response is a stuttering stammering: "Who me? You have the wrong guy, I cant even speak properly and I don't know your name!"

And most astonishingly, was the apostle Paul. Paul as Saul was still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord when God sent a dazzling bolt of light and called him to become an apostle of Christ Jesus, which of course, he did.

This same dynamic is at play here with Jesus and Nicodemus.

God is once again working at the edges, making possible what is long thought impossible. Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cover of nightfall, to take a chance and asks him about this God stuff, face-to-face. He feels something, he knows something, he even trusts something of God through it in himself and is testing his faith and resolve.

After Nicodemus leaves Jesus, he seemingly returns to his position among the Jewish establishment. But his conversion is happening slowly. It doesn't always happen with a bolt or a flash of lightning like Paul's conversion; sometimes we have to wait, like Sarah. Sometimes there is no ending; no real memorable story that gets passed down through the ages, that neatly finishes all the open questions with a nicely stitched up ending. In the case of Nicodemus, we hardly hear from him again. A little in chapter 7, and then not

until near the end, which has Nicodemus standing at the cross with a now dead crucified God.

Like human birth, Nicodemus conversion didn't happen overnight, it took time. Slowly building momentum. By the end of John's Gospel, Nicodemus' birth from above is laid bare in the way he publicly stands at the foot of the cross armed with the gifts of Jesus birth; those expensive spices for burial, waiting to take Jesus body and place it in the grave forever aligning himself with Jesus' truth in God, not the establishments. And I cant help but wonder if those famous words spoken to Nicodemus by Jesus are remembered here, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not die but have eternal life."*

The truth is, his and our birth of faith in God can be slow. It sometimes takes a bit of time to fully live into the gospel challenges and truths.

We can never fully know what Nicodemus was thinking as he departed Jesus' company that night, but we can be sure that something within him changed. Little by little, heart beat by heart beat, his heart was broken open and he was born anew, born again from above, born of the spirit of truth, guiding him through the darkness of doubt, to the cross of truth and light.

Oh, that we would meet him there.

How is your journey with God?

Amen.