

**Sunday 1st September – ASSF – Holy Communion
Nicodemus**

Romans 4: 13-17, John 3: 1-15

May my words and all our thoughts be acceptable in thy sight,
O God, our rock and redeemer. Amen.

One of the interesting things about this preaching series on people in the bible is that in among all the major characters we know quite a lot about, there are all these other folk we are getting to know – minor characters – maybe they only appear a few times in the bible, but from these few passages, we can build up quite a picture of them and their character and what impact their encounter with God and /or Jesus had on them.

One such character is Nicodemus. He appears only in the gospel of John – but he actually pops up three times.

The first time is the gospel reading we heard John chapter 3 – the longest passage about Nicodemus.

He is introduced as a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews – one who lives in Jerusalem – the capital city. We often hear about Pharisees in the gospels, usually in opposition to Jesus, but what actually was a Pharisee? The word Pharisee – means separate and it was the name that came to be used of a particular sect or group or denomination of Jews in 1st Century Israel. The 'separateness' came about in two ways. One was that in the multi-cultural political turmoil of the time, when Greek translations of the books of the law and prophets were often in use, the Pharisees were a group that insisted on the continuation of the practice of reading the law and the prophets in Hebrew. This was a way of separating or distinguishing them from the wider culture. Secondly, the Pharisees were separate from other groups, e.g. the Sadducees (their main opponents) because they fully believed that it was possible to encounter God outside the temple in Jerusalem. And in a world where more and more Jews lived in exile, and there were issues around the legitimacy of the rebuilt temple anyway, this was important.

In some people this 'separateness' could become legalism and nit-picking application of the law, but at its best Pharisees were devout and holy people, open to discussion and interested in where God was to be found in the world.

So when a new prophet, teacher, and healer appears- albeit one who was upsetting all the tables in the temple at Passover – the Pharisees, like Nicodemus, were naturally interested and open to the idea that God was doing something through this man.

So Nicodemus comes to Jesus – but as not only a Pharisee, but a leader of the Jews, a member of their internal ruling council, he came by night to visit this rebellious prophet who had spent the day overturning tables in the temple.

Nicodemus came, expecting a standard sort of discussion – Jewish debate followed clear rules, which allowed for disagreement over many points, but always with respect for the others point of view. So his opening words 'Rabbi, we know you are a teacher – signs of God' are clearly the opening gambit in this familiar game of verbal chess. Jesus reply however throws him completely – very truly I tell you ... this wasn't at all what he expected – it's like asking a standard question like dreadful weather isn't it and getting a meteorological lecture in return – not what you were asking – which is a standard social comment in the UK - and not the answer you were expecting – which is, of course, yeah, terrible isn't it!

And the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus continues along these lines with his comments about needing to be being born again in the spirit and other things. I want to keep our focus on Nicodemus and not get into a detailed discussion of the rest of the passage here – fab though it is – but it's worth noting two things from this conversation.

First of all, Jesus made clear that he was not here as just another prophet or teacher – who would have engaged with nicodemus on the terms that he expected. Jesus was doing something new – which effectively means discontinuous with the past. This something new – which is the second point I want you to note - was of Gods spirit and not the flesh – which

here as so often can be read to mean the line of Abraham, the historical Jewish faith, no matter how fragmented. It was something that needed people to be born again – to see things anew – to see things in a different way – to reread the law and prophets through different eyes, to see God's action in the world in a different way. This was the message that Jesus conveyed – or attempted to convey to Nicodemus.

Nicodemus is silenced by this. We can picture him silenced, listening, looking puzzled and perhaps walking away deep in thought.

Nicodemus then appears again in Chapter 7.

Again, chapter 7 sets the scene of a festival in Jerusalem, the festival of booths this time. Jesus has once again been stirring up controversy and upset in the temple. The council, including Nicodemus, are asking the temple police – why didn't you arrest this man for causing public disorder – very clear expectations of how people would behave in the temple and the assumption of the right to remove those who are perceived to be disruptive. They respond – this man seemed different, he seemed to have authority – is ridiculed by the majority of the council – who scoff at the idea that an itinerant teacher could know better than them what was of God. But Nicodemus says – hold on a bit – it is not our law and practice to condemn someone without listening to their point of view. It is interesting that Nicodemus is identified further as the one who went to speak to Jesus before – but I think this short passage shows us something about Nicodemus at this point in the gospel – he is still basically acting as one of the good Pharisees – respectful and open-minded but not as a follower of this new way, a full disciple of Jesus.

Nicodemus' final appearance, in chapter 19, is with Joseph of Arimathea, another Pharisee and Jewish elder. Again Nicodemus is identified as the one who spoke to Jesus before. Again he comes by night, to act as a decent Pharisee, a decent man and make sure that Jesus has a proper burial. He spends a considerable sum of money on the proper spices, myrrh and aloes – to ensure Jesus not only is properly buried, but is buried as befits a man who has come from God.

By this point, after Jesus' death, Nicodemus is still uncertain what is happening, but he acts according to what he knows and believes to be right according to the law and gives Jesus a royal burial. Perhaps he feels some guilt that he couldn't stop the arrest and trial, couldn't stop him being handed over to Pontius Pilate and put to death. We don't know.

And the story stops there – unlike the apostles, the women, we don't know what his reaction to Jesus' resurrection was, whether he believed and was indeed born again, or whether he maintained his intellectual distance, his way of life and if he had made the right call.

If we met Nicodemus we'd think he was a good man, a decent man, a moral man, a respectable man, a man of faith, a devout man, a good rich man, a philanthropist.

But what Jesus was calling him to was not decent or respectable by his standards. It was not philanthropy – being a good person who helps others. It was not even piety or practice of faith in the way Nicodemus would have seen it. It was no more and no less than giving his life to Jesus through the spirit wherever that took him – risking and most likely losing social respectability and position, possibly wealth and certainly the certainties of the faith he'd spent his life following. Cf Paul – similar background – not a good man from the point of view of the Christians he persecuted but probably without that he's similar to Nicodemus – one of the good Pharisees. His letters show us he was engaged in similar intellectual debates and struggles as Nicodemus trying to make sense of this tension between flesh – the way of faith according to the lineage of Abraham and the way of the spirit offered by Jesus. But the big difference is that Paul accepts the risk. He changes. He allows the spirit in. He gives up his status, wealth and certainties to follow the way of Christ and in the end loses life itself.

Which are we like ...? We may not be subject to the tension of the flesh – the claims of the biological descendants of Abraham, against the spirit – that could make anyone, of any nation, into children of God. But we have our own tensions, our own struggle to overcome the call of the flesh for that of the

spirit. Again I could spend the whole sermon on this point – and I’ve already gone on plenty long enough – but I come back to the point made that being reborn in the spirit means seeing things in a different way, in the way of our saviour who sacrificed himself to show his love for us. A saviour who turned the values of his time – and all times – upside down. A saviour who challenged and continues to challenge all of us who call upon his name – cradle Christians, born again, everyone – to see things through his eyes, to live according to his values, by the grace and power of the holy spirit.

So I suppose the question is – when we encounter Christ – are we Nicodemus – who listened, was respectful, but never quite managed to let go of the old ways, who never quite managed to allow the wind of the spirit to drive him where she would. Or are we Paul, who accepted that life changing encounter with Jesus and spent the rest of his life working out what it meant for him and sharing that with others. Allowing the wind of the spirit to drive us where she will is uncomfortable, it will challenge all we take for granted, but at the end of the day it is what Jesus is calling us to do, to take up our cross and follow him.

Amen.