

Sermon March 12<sup>th</sup>

### **A night visitor (John 3: 1-17)**

Picture a scene from one of those old spy movies. The streets are dark and our hero is walking rapidly his coat collar turned up and his trilby pulled low over his eyes. As he reaches his destination, he glances swiftly over each shoulder before entering the house where a secret assignation will take place.

This is the image that comes into my mind when I read today's gospel about Nicodemus who visits Jesus by night. We don't learn a great deal about him in these few verses but what we learn is significant.

Firstly, he's a Pharisee, one of the religious elite, a leader of the Jews. As we know the Pharisees prided themselves on their meticulous observance of the law as set out in the Torah. This they believed was the way to find favour with God.

Secondly, he chooses to visit Jesus under cover of darkness 'For fear of the Jews.' What's he afraid of? Well, fear of ridicule, fear of being discredited. He's a respected teacher of the law. He doesn't want to be seen meeting with this disruptive preacher who his fellow Pharisees view with suspicion. So why's he here, seeking a private consultation with Jesus? He 's obviously got something on his mind, something that he fears may compromise him in the eyes of his fellow Pharisees.

It seems he's curious. Nicodemus knows that Jesus has performed miracles and healings. Maybe he's been present in the crowds and witnessed what Jesus has been doing – (perhaps sent there to observe and report back to his fellow Pharisees) We don't know but somehow his appetite has been whetted. He wants to know more. Who is this man Jesus? Where does he get his power from? It would be surprising too if he wasn't a bit on the defensive, after all the Pharisees have come in for some harsh criticism from Jesus. Nevertheless he's drawn to him and despite the lateness of the hour, Jesus doesn't send him away. No, instead he gives him time and space and his full attention

It doesn't read like it was a particularly comfortable experience for Nicodemus. He's deeply challenged. All his assumptions about his status and his standing with God are undermined.

You see, Jesus talk about a new birth that's necessary if one is to see the kingdom of God. a spiritual birth open to anyone (whosoever ) who believes and is baptised in the name of Jesus, not just those like Nicodemus who can demonstrate their Jewish lineage and their obedience to the law.

But Nicodemus doesn't get it or maybe he does get it but he's not ready to act on it. Not yet...

Because this isn't the only time we read about Nicodemus. He turns up on two more occasions in John's Gospel and it seems that his night-time visit to Jesus bore fruit for on these occasions he's not cowering under cover of night.

The second time we meet him he's with his fellow Pharisees. They 're furious because the temple police who they'd dispatched to arrest Jesus, have not only come back *without* him but seem to be awestruck by what they witnessed and heard him say 'Never has anyone spoken like this!' they say. The response of the Pharisees is dismissive. ' Surely, you have not been deceived[by him] too have you?' You see they've already condemned Jesus.

It's then that Nicodemus speaks up (I can imagine him, his heart pounding as he prepares to put his head above the parapet). 'Our law does not judge people, without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing does it?' he reminds them. So this man who was fearful of the Jews is now challenging his fellow Pharisees. We sense he's shifting his position.

The third time we read about Nicodemus is after the crucifixion and he's providing burial spices and assisting Joseph of Arimathea in the anointing and burial of Jesus' body -an act of loving discipleship carried out in daylight.

So we see Nicodemus' progression from fearful to bold, from questioner to disciple and from darkness to light. And it began with him seeking Jesus out in secret.

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Now, **today** we're entering our second full week of Lent and I'm going to suggest something which may seem a bit radical. I think Lent is a time for self indulgence! No! That doesn't mean I'm suggesting you open the chocolates and pour out a glass of wine. I'm not advising you to book into a spa for a bit of pampering. What I'm suggesting is that Lent is a time when we can think about 'me' and not just 'we'. It's a time when I can pay special attention to **my** spiritual needs. It's a time for seeking out Jesus for a **one to one** conversation where I can, like Nicodemus, ask the questions on **my** mind, share with him **my** doubts and fears and tell him the deepest desires of **my** heart. It's a time for listening to what Jesus has to say to **me** - his special words of love and healing, his words of forgiveness and encouragement for **me**.

Of course having a one to one encounter with Jesus doesn't mean we literally have to be in solitary prayer, (although that **is** an important part of our walk with him.) I've often heard God speak to me in public worship -you know what I mean- those times when that hymn seems to have been written with me in mind or when a familiar verse from the bible suddenly **means** something to me, or when the preacher seems to have an uncanny insight into the state of my mind!

In order to meet Jesus, Nicodemus had to find where he was staying and go to him but the **risen** Jesus, who we worship is **always** with **us** as the poet Tennyson writes 'Closer is he than breathing ; nearer than hands or feet.' Lent is an opportunity to explore ways in which Christ's presence in our lives can be something we experience not just believe. And If we want to explore this more deeply there's loads of stuff to help us in our one to one encounters with God whether it's a big book like this\*, a wee leaflet like this\*\*, or an app on your mobile phone. Have a word with Andrew or myself if you want to know more.

Meanwhile let's remind ourselves of the amazing message that Nicodemus received when he visited Jesus by night.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that **whosoever** believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life'.

\* Common Prayer - Shane Claiborne

\*\* A Pattern for Prayer - Mirfield Publications