



Praise, Prayer & Preaching sermon

Lent 2: The one whose gift was eternity

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John 3:1-17

1 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. **2** He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." **3** Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again." **4** "How can anyone be born when they are old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!" **5** Jesus answered, "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit. **6** Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. **7** You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' **8** The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." **9** "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. **10** "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? **11** Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. **12** I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? **13** No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the Son of Man. **14** Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, **15** that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him." **16** For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. **17** For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

In the second address in this series about The Man who was also Lord! I turn to John 3 which is located in the context of three chapters which Gerard Sloyan described as "A Wedding, a Night Visitor and a Conversation at Midday". These chapters are full of insight.

It is arguable that no passage in the New Testament has been given as much attention as John's third chapter. However, there is, for some, a good deal of hesitation when the preacher announces John 3 as his or her theme. Why might that be?

- The familiarity with the story of Nicodemus
- The antipathy that some feel toward 'born again' language, especially when it denotes a kind or temperature of religion
- The sheer weight of the themes that emerge—for there is so much in the space of one chapter.

I want to 'avoid the old ruts' and yet remain faithful to this absolutely central narrative in our understanding of our Christian journey. One writer suggested to his readers that it is good to let the descriptive details and powerful dialogue carry the message and not to create what is beyond the text. This is always sound advice—but particularly important in John 3, in a setting which needs little introduction.

Nicodemus functions as a representative figure ... "a member of the Jewish ruling council" (v.1). It is important not to add to scripture by assuming things about him of which we cannot

be certain. There are three biblical sources of information—all in John (3:1-11, 7:50-52 and 19:39-42).

From the outset, John's gospel is laden with double entendres and here we discover Spirit/wind, lift up/crucify and born again/born from above. These wordplays are no mere accident.

We are told Nicodemus was a devout man—how else could he have belonged to such a selective group within the Jewish community? As such, he would anticipate the arrival of the kingdom to come at the end of history ... and he might presume his place was secure because of his religious status. His credentials are altogether outstanding. There is no suggestion that Nicodemus was insincere, yet Jesus tells him he needs to be born afresh.

The narrative that follows describes the interaction between Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus clearly needs to move from his one-dimensional world to the spiritual reality to which Jesus introduced him. There is an earnestness of purpose about Nicodemus.

The clue to this new world comes from the action of the Son of Man and this is all defined in terms of his 'ascent' in a way that is likened to Moses in the desert with the bronze serpent. The Greek word translated 'lifted up' (14-15) also means 'lifted up on a cross'. Therefore, it can be an exaltation and humiliation (John 12:32-33).

God's giving up of his Son to death on a cross makes possible the life of a new world. The whole ministry of Jesus Christ will find its ultimate focus and purpose for us in his death and resurrection.

Whenever people from Europe visit us here in Australia and we set them off for a day's adventure in the city, we sometimes tease them by saying, "Watch out for the snakes!" True enough if we lived in the bush, but we are unlikely to meet a brown snake in either Roseville or George Street. In our garden on occasions we have a lovely blue tongue lizard, but this is hardly a dangerous snake.

In many cultures of the world, serpents have an underlying message. The serpent in the Jewish/Christian tradition is seen as a strong negative force, symbolising evil in the world and in all of us.

The question of what we do about the serpent, therefore, becomes a question of what we do about evil. In John 3, the issue of the serpent arises in reference to the Old Testament and Moses in the desert.

Tom Wright suggests this passage "gives a clear confident answer". Wright further affirms his thinking on this issue by saying, "Humankind as a whole has been smitten with a deadly disease. The only cure is to look at the Son of Man dying on the cross and find life through believing in him."

Text: John 3:16 and 17

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

The early chapters in John set the scene for the rest of the gospel. Following the great Prologue in John 1, we have Jesus situated only marginally in the religious life of his people and this particular passage is distinctly located following the clearing of the temple courts, which probably caused great religious and cultural offence.

What do we learn from this passage about our own Christian journey—and in a way that helps us in the offer of the gospel to others?

Here is a journey out of darkness into light

God's great love for the world is often a movement away from darkness and all that this represents. Nicodemus came on a night journey and we may ask ourselves why he came by cover of night:

- Perhaps he wanted to save himself the embarrassment of being seen by colleagues from the Sanhedrin
- Perhaps he was beginning to perceive some glimpse of understanding as to who Jesus was from what he had heard him say—or heard others say about him
- Perhaps he wanted to put together a more cohesive picture before he openly declared his own interest.

Having said all that, it is right to say that from the very early part of the gospel, John has taught us that Jesus is a 'light that shines in the darkness' (John 1:8-9). This darkness can be used to describe our human condition apart from the light of Christ.

Nicodemus' framework for understanding life is shattered by the teaching and life of One such as he had never met before. Jesus is incisive and forthright in his interactions with Nicodemus.

Barnabas Lindars writes, "This Nicodemus' nocturnal visit is a search for truth in which he himself will be exposed. It is a detail which only becomes meaningful when the whole piece has been read."

In fact I would go further and say that the full meaning is only really understood when we have journeyed out of the darkness of our own selfishness and into the light of his Risen Power.

The journey out of the confines of position

The Sanhedrin—or the ruling council—was a group of great influence. Those who wielded power amongst the Jewish people at that time would comprise a core of highly priestly families, rich merchants, government officials and landowners.

The Romans were happy to give the Jews a measure of liberty in running their own affairs, especially if it kept them from interfering with Roman authority. They did this through a council of 71 known by its Greek name—the Sanhedrin.

In Jesus' day, this was largely controlled by the high priest and the Sadducees, although the Pharisees were also well represented. They had the delicate and difficult task of exercising whatever power and privileges they still had under the rule of the Romans.

Those who were appointed to this group were people of standing and there is no doubt at all that Nicodemus would fit into that category.

It would come as a great challenge for Nicodemus, with all his standing that comes through the years of his life, to have to be told the kind of things that Jesus said to him. Social position, religious status, culture, age and high responsibility did not exempt a person from the need for a new beginning.

Much study has gone into those people who, through God's grace, find their way to Christ. Studies have been made into why people make that choice. The numbers who make it later in life are far less than those who are younger. Why would this be?

- With younger people comes an exposure to need and a willingness to change direction
- With age there is often a resistance to change—and the belief that somehow we have all that is necessary on life's journey

To Nicodemus and ourselves comes:

- The challenge to our intellect
- The challenge concerning our status in life
- The challenge to come out from the crowd

A journey which reaches out to the world

This great text speaks about 'a greatly loved world' and this seems to be the whole purpose of Jesus' coming into the world. It is worth noting:

- This is the first mention of God's love in the gospel
- It becomes a dominant theme only from Chapter 13
- It is a word of universal outreach

It is to all people that Jesus Christ came into the world—none is excluded. This seems to me to describe why God did what he did in coming into this world. He loved!

Words are often helpful when we explore their original meaning. The word in the Greek (egapesan) describes a love that moves always in the interests of others, without a concern for self.

When we observe the best in people, it is very often when we see love poured out for the benefit of others without any personal advantage.

One scholar chose to call it "love absolute!"

Many sermons, lessons and observations on John 3:16 turn out to be about personal salvation. In point of fact the focus of the verse is quite the opposite—it is about God's generous love to all and his call to everyone.

We remind ourselves that God's love is so real and personal that it enables us to find a new beginning—and that personal transformation is where our Christian life begins. But the reach is for the world. It is wonderful when we come to a point of recognition that God loves us, but it is a glorious moment when we are able to find ourselves lifted to a place where we can say "God loves this world."

Most students of theology, at some point, will consider the many aspect of religious experience. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James distinguishes between 'once born' and 'twice born' believers. His purpose is to bring out the fact that some Christians experience their faith as a process of growth over the entire span of their lives, while others undergo a sudden transformation, such as leaves a vivid impression.

Nicodemus was an accomplished and respected member of his community, at the pinnacle of power and piety. It is probably this which would have made the words of Jesus sound so

radical and, I suspect, almost offensive. Jesus was telling this righteous, accomplished man that he needed a new spiritual centre. He must abandon his prideful notion of self-righteousness and let God begin again with his life. It must have been a hard pill to swallow—and I well understand why (at least at this point) he didn't really grasp it.

I don't know what ran through Nicodemus' mind as he walked home in the early hours of the morning, but when the Sanhedrin sought to arrest and condemn Jesus it was Nicodemus who entered a carefully-worded protest against injustice (7:50-52). And when Jesus had been crucified, it was Nicodemus who brought spices, an accepted sign of piety, to anoint him.

A journey which is for eternity

There is much to be found in these two verses in the third chapter of John's gospel. We see the unfathomable depth of God's love—that is the importance of the word 'so' in the text. Bruce Milne writes a striking sentence in his commentary, "He could not love more."

If the depth of love is measured by the value of its gift, then God's love could not be greater, because his love gift for the world (and for you) is his most precious possession—in the Person of Jesus Christ.

The all-inclusive scope of God's love is also to be found. There is no question that this is not altogether new—for many of John's early readers would have been familiar with the concept of God's special love for Israel. However, what we have here is his love, which is indiscriminate and all-embracing for everyone.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, the great theme appears to be the kingdom of God—and it is mentioned in this chapter just once in verse 5. It is not to be understood geographically, but dynamically. This is the place where God reigns. It is not a country where he rules, but a place where we acknowledge he holds sway over our lives.

If you were to ask people about 'eternal life', I think most people would refer to the life that begins after we have died and will then last forever. This is not really what Jesus is saying. Ian Barclay is right when he says, "it is not its duration that he has in mind, but its quality." Another writer goes as far as to say it is "resurrection life" and that is a good description.

We remind ourselves that Jesus spoke about what was described in earlier translations as "abundant life" and we read in John 10, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10)

A few years ago in a Time magazine article, Mark Leyner, a prolific modern writer, asked a question, "Can a person really, and I mean fundamentally, change?" Mark Leyner says this is not possible. He indicates there is no such animal as a changed person, "I don't believe in epiphanies, personal growth, mid-life crises or death-bed conversions." If this were true, then some of the assumptions that lie behind psychiatry, prison reform and religion are all false.

It may come as a surprise to those who are listening to this address to know that to some extent I think Leyner is nearer to the truth than we would like to admit. That is not to deny all the help we give to people in relation to reform and change, but we need God's power to change. I believe this is Nicodemus' problem.

It is only through the life-transforming power of the Spirit that a person can be re-made completely. This is far more than good intentions and a changed purpose—it is new life!

Charles Schultz, creator and author of the Peanuts cartoon characters, often conveyed a Christian message in his comic strips. In one such strip, he expresses through Charlie Brown the need we have to be loved and through Lucy our inability to love one another.

Charlie Brown and Lucy are leaning over the proverbial fence, having a chat.

Charlie says, "All it would take to make me happy is to have someone say he likes me."

Lucy: "Are you sure?"

Charlie: "Of course I'm sure!"

Lucy: "You mean you'd be happy if someone merely said he or she likes you? Do you mean to say that someone has it within his or her power to make you happy by doing such a simple thing?"

Charlie: "Yes! That's exactly what I mean."

Lucy: "Well, I don't think that's asking too much. I really don't."

Now Lucy stands face to face and asks one more time: "All you want is someone to say, 'I like you, Charlie Brown.' And then you'll be happy?"

Charlie: "And then I'll be happy."

Lucy turns and says: "I can't do it!"

What Lucy cannot do, God has done for us. What Charlie Brown needs (and everyone else for that matter), God has supplied for us in the Person of Jesus Christ. The gift of God's love is utterly transforming—and it begins in a gift—and when the Spirit of God takes hold of our lives, we are not only refreshed, but made totally new ... because we receive a new power and a new purpose from above.

The whole theme of John's gospel is captured in one verse in John 5:24: "Very truly I tell, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life."