

“QUESTIONS”
Psalm 13; John 3:1-18

I wouldn't mind a small bet that there are quite a few of you sitting there with questions in your minds at this point. What's going to happen now? How long's this going on for? What is all this about? What on earth am I doing here this morning? Even those of you who come along here regularly are wondering what's going to be said now. And whether we are regular churchgoers or not, we find ourselves constantly questioning things, don't we? Whether it's the relatively insignificant questions about what we're going to wear or where our council tax actually goes or whether The Baggies will last more than one season in the Premiership. Or the bigger questions about what will happen to Lily in the years ahead or what's going to happen if a friend's hospital diagnosis isn't good – or, indeed, why we're here at all or what's the point of life. Life is full of questions. And all sorts of people try to give us answers.

People like me – people who have a Christian faith – would suggest looking in the Bible or exploring the words of Jesus. Of course, you'd expect that from a minister in a church, wouldn't you? I'm paid to say that, the cynic would say. But I'm not going to say this morning that the Bible is full of answers to the great questions of life. And the reason for that is quite clear – and you can see it in the two bits of the Bible we've read this morning. The Bible is actually just as full of questions as are our minds.

We read from a Psalm a few minutes ago, *Psalm 13*. The first four sentences are questions – and that's half the Psalm. We tend to think of the Psalms as great songs of praise to God – and many of them are. But most of them are songs which express a sense of bewilderment with life. The book of *Psalms* (and there are one hundred and fifty of them) is strewn with questions to God about why life is like it is. And you can read through any of the books of the Old Testament and find similar themes – *Ecclesiastes*, *Job*, many of the writings of the Hebrew prophets. They are asking the same questions that you and I ask. What's life all about? Why do bad things happen? Why do good people so often get a bad deal? Why is life apparently so unfair to so many people? We may think we can find answers there, but there are an awful lot of questions to wade through first.

And the story we read from John's gospel is also based on questions. It's about a visit which Nicodemus makes to Jesus. Nicodemus was one of the establishment figures in the society of Jesus' time. He was a fairly rich man and had a great deal of influence because he was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were a kind of religious political party. They wanted the Roman occupiers out of Palestine. They believed that the answer to most of the nation's problems lay in stricter conformity to the laws that Moses gave the Jewish people. And they were the guardians of the nation's cultural traditions. We also know from reading the accounts of Jesus' life by Matthew, Mark and Luke (as well as John's) that they didn't like Jesus one bit. He was too radical, too popular and too clever by half as far as they were concerned. But Nicodemus had spotted something in Jesus that he wanted to follow up, so he arranged to meet him one night when his anonymity would be rather more secure.

What's interesting is that he starts off by saying that he thinks he's got Jesus pretty well worked out (v2). A good start, you may think. But Jesus in his usual infuriating way – and if you read through the gospels, you'll find he's always doing this: he must have been one of the most frustrating people to have a conversation with – Jesus responds with a very enigmatic statement about the Kingdom of God and being “*born again*”. This is origin of that phrase that many Christians use to describe themselves and which has had a bit of a bad press in recent years. Nicodemus now has to start asking some questions. Quite understandably, he's not too sure what being “*born again*” actually means. After all, no-one has used this term in this way before and he takes it rather literally. I suppose it may be that you think you've got Jesus all sussed out, and then you discover something that makes you think again. Don't take it for granted that Jesus is who you think he is: he may start raising questions for you too.

Anyway, Jesus replies to Nicodemus again – and it's another rather obtuse response (vv5-8). Still Nicodemus can't get his head round what Jesus is trying to say. We're reading this with hindsight and twenty centuries of interpretation to help us, so maybe we don't get quite as confused as Nicodemus does.

After all, we use the phrase “*born again*” in all kinds of contexts now from advertising new cars to describing a sports star’s renewed enthusiasm for his or her game. What he means is that if Nicodemus – or anyone else, for that matter – really wants to get serious about God, then they need a completely new start. It’s just like starting a brand new life.

Of course, the next big question we’d probably ask – and Nicodemus doesn’t because he’s probably got a different grasp on ideas about God – is why we need a new start anyway. Well, looking out at the world of which we find ourselves a part, we can see that all is not well. Whatever our views on good and evil, we sense that there are things which need to change. And when we stop to reflect on our own lives, we find that there are difficulties there as well. We may find ourselves having to cope with problems and difficulties which we wish would go away. We may find that there is a sense of frustration, a lack of fulfilment, a deep sense of anxiety about the future, a strong fear of death. That’s not the way God wants it to be and it’s not the way he created it all.

Right at the beginning, however you want to interpret it, God caused this world to come into being and filled it with all kinds of amazing things, including human beings. The Bible tells us that God was satisfied with his work and thought it was all very good. Somehow, though, evil, sin got into the system and gradually this wonderful world got messed up. And sin affected each and every human being that was born. We all struggle with it, don’t we? We can’t seem to get it right. We end up saying, doing, thinking things that we know aren’t as they should be. We hurt one another. We grieve God. No-one, if they’re honest, can deny that.

But what is more worrying is that God, when everything was good at the beginning, said that if anyone messed it up, he would need to punish them. He didn’t want to do that, but when things went wrong, he had to stick to his word. Humanity needed to accept that. So, at the end of this life on earth, God will punish all that has been affected by sin – which means you and me, I’m afraid. And that, I reckon, leads to that deep down fear we all have about dying: somehow we are aware at a subconscious level that we’re going to have to meet God one day and he will not be pleased with us. It’s a bit like spending your whole life standing outside the head teacher’s study.

God loves his creation, though, and he doesn’t want to have to punish us. So he tried to find a way around it. And then he hit upon the plan of sending Jesus into our world. Jesus is a part of God. We refer to him as God’s Son, but basically, he is God in human form – in most ways he’s like us, but he’s also like God, most importantly in the fact that he’s holy, he’s completely free of evil. But God fixed it so that Jesus, as a representative of all humanity, could take on himself the punishment that was due to us. When he died on the cross, somehow – in a way which I can’t fully understand, and nor can anyone else really – he was standing in for me, and for you, and for all humanity. Jesus took your punishment and so made possible a life now that is free of the fear of death and a life to come which can be spent with God, rather than completely separated from him.

Which is what Jesus tells Nicodemus in *v16*. God loved the world, loved you and me, so much that he sent Jesus into this world to live and die and live again. Because of that, we can look forward to eternity spent with God, “*eternal life*”, if we are prepared to believe in it all, if we are prepared to take Jesus seriously. Those who do that, who take Jesus at his word and believe in him and try to live their lives as he asks, find that their fears about the eternal future can be allayed and that has a powerful effect on the way they enjoy life here and now. Jesus is quite clear here about the alternatives, about the choice that confronts Nicodemus and confronts every other member of the human race (*v18*).

Now, I said earlier on that the Bible is not full of answers. There are, indeed, many, many questions in the Bible. And to all those questions there is, I believe, just **one** answer. It’s an answer that is there wherever you read in this book – not always staring you in the face, but there nonetheless. Here that answer is staring you in the face. Here it is put as explicitly as you’ll find it anywhere else. The answer is that “*God loves this world*” and he loves it so much he was prepared to go through that horrific process of allowing Jesus to take your punishment.

In fact, the answer is that God loves **you!** If we didn't believe that there would have been no point asking him to bless little Lily this morning. If we didn't believe that there would be no point whatsoever to any of the songs we've sung or the prayers we've prayed. If we didn't believe that, there wouldn't have been any point even being here this morning.

So, if you're sat there asking yourself why on earth you're here today, maybe there's your answer – so that you could hear that God loves you, and he loves you so much he's given you an opportunity to choose to believe in him. We have no idea how Nicodemus responded to Jesus' words that night, although there is evidence to suggest that he did stand up for Jesus in debate and later was involved in his burial. How do you respond, though? Probably with more questions. That's fair enough – we can't answer everything in fifteen minutes. But if you are interested and you'd like to know more, then we might be able to help you. Talk to me or Liz or Anne afterwards and we can point you in the direction of some resources. Even if we can't answer your questions, we might be able to help you ask the right questions!

It might be that your question now is, “How can I get in on this? I want to believe in Jesus, so what's the next step.” Well, we'd be delighted to help you in that as well. Please have a word with one of us over coffee and we'd love to talk to you and pray with you. Today could mean a new start for you. It could mean that you finally find an answer to some of your questions. If you think that God might have been prodding you this morning, please don't leave without having done something about it.