

“MEETING THE MAIN MAN”
Strangers In the Night - Nicodemus
John 3:1-18

One of the mantras of the current generation – and one which we often hear spoken in the Church – is that it doesn't really matter what you believe so long as you're asking the right questions. Of course, it has an element of truth hidden within it, but you have to question the logic behind it. After all, if I'm trying to rewire my house or do a bit of brain surgery or play a Mozart sonata, it does help to have a bit of confidence in the right way to do it rather than simply asking if the red cable should always go in there or if the cerebral cortex should really be connected to that grey bit or if it really makes any difference if we stick to the key and time signature that Mozart wrote it in.

However, part of the human condition is the ability to ask questions and, whether we are *au fait* with post-modern philosophy 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 Wolves will sustain one more season in the Premiership. Or the bigger questions about what will happen to our pension pot 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 pretty well wherever you open your Bible. The Bible is actually just as full of questions as are our minds.

If you read through the Psalms you'll find they're packed full of questions. 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 – and it contains the very heart of our Gospel, which it's good to remind ourselves of this morning as we take communion together. 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 and 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. As we're always saying (to the point, probably, of irritation for some of you) 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. That's at the heart of what we are remembering when we take the bread and wine of communion.

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 that sense – Jesus embodying God's love – Jesus is the answer – as the Jessie Dixon Singers used to belt out. A graffito spotted around that time said “*If Jesus is the answer, what's the question?*” Well, basically, every question ultimately has Jesus and the love of God which he represents as the answer.

In fact, the answer is that God loves **you!** 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. And belief – belief in this fundamental answer to so many of life's questions – is key to what Jesus tells Nicodemus here.

Firstly, we need to believe in what God says – and what he says through Jesus in this instance. It means believing what God says rather than what the world around us says. It means taking seriously what's written in here. If God says it's important and we believe in him, we have to believe it's worth sticking to. That includes the Ten Commandments, the teachings of Jesus, the words of the prophets and apostles. It means believing that God wants justice to be done in this world, that there is right and wrong, that our choices do have consequences for us. It means believing that Jesus is the only way to find God. It means putting other people first and ourselves last – in every situation. And that is all very tough indeed. It's not easy to say that you believe in God and therefore in what he has said – and actually trying to do it. You can't do it on your own.

Which leads us on to the next point. Believing in God also means believing in what he can do, not in what we can do ourselves. You see, for Nicodemus then – and many, many people ever since, right up to today – the idea was that if you try hard enough you can make yourself right in God's eyes. It's all a question of keeping your nose clean and not sinning too much. And we know that's just not possible. You don't have to think back too many hours, too many minutes even, to remember things you've done wrong. So it's really only God, through Jesus, who can help you out and ensure that at the end of this life you

continue to spend eternity in his presence. That's what Jesus means when he says to Nicodemus that *"whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."*

Jesus didn't come into this world to condemn it, as he tells this Pharisee whose colleagues had almost made condemning people into a religion of its own. He's provided a way to avoid all that kind of thing, but you do need to believe it if you want to benefit from it, because he goes on to say *"whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son"* (v18).

So, if you're sitting there this morning wondering about answers to the great questions of life, maybe there's a starter for you. 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 or so. But if you'd like to know more, then we might be able to help you. Talk to me 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 even be for someone here this morning that your question 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. And if you knew all that already, there's a reminder of what you've got to thank God for as you take the bread and wine in a few moments time.

Discussion notes on next page.

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John 3:1-21

Part of the human condition is the ability to ask questions: life is full of questions. All sorts of people try to give us answers – and the Bible is as full of questions as are our minds. For example, the book of *Psalms* 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?

This story is also based on questions. 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, but he had spotted something in Jesus that he wanted to follow up, so he arranged to meet him one night when his anonymity would be secure.

He starts off by saying that he thinks he's got Jesus pretty well worked out (v2). Jesus responds with a very enigmatic statement about the Kingdom of God and being "*born again*". Then Jesus replies to Nicodemus again – and it's another rather obtuse response (vv5-8). Nicodemus can't get his head round what Jesus is trying to say and has to ask questions. What Jesus means is that if Nicodemus really wants to get serious about God, then he needs a completely new start. It's just like starting a brand new life.

Belief is key to what Jesus tells Nicodemus here and it's at the heart of v16. Firstly, we need to **believe in what God says**. It means taking seriously what's written in the Bible. It means believing that God wants justice to be done in this world, that there is right and wrong, that our choices do have consequences for us. It means believing that Jesus is the only way to find God. It means putting other people first and ourselves last – in every situation. And we need to **believe in what God can do** – particularly in what he has done through Jesus – not what we can do to get ourselves closer to God. Jesus didn't come into this world to condemn it, as he tells this Pharisee whose colleagues had almost made condemning people into a religion of its own (v17). He's provided a way to avoid all that kind of thing, but you do need to believe it if you want to benefit from it, because he goes on to say "*whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son*" (v18).

Questions for discussion

1. How do we keep the balance between questioning and certainty? Isn't it arrogant to assume we've got all the right answers?
2. Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a word that is used today almost as a term of abuse. Why do the Pharisees have such a poor reputation? How can we avoid being Pharisaical?
3. Nicodemus came to Jesus at night to avoid trouble. In what ways do we try to conceal our allegiance to Jesus? Why do we feel that's necessary?
4. What do you understand by "*eternal life*"? Do we really want eternal; life – or do we just want to avoid "*perishing*"?
5. How can we persuade people of the need to believe in Jesus Christ?
6. Do you describe yourself as "*born again*"? Why/why not?