

Nicodemus- John 3:1-21

- Last week we started a new series looking at the changes that took place in people who came in contact with Jesus.
- When Levi the tax collector came face to face with Jesus and was told 'Follow me',
- That's exactly what he did,
- He got up, left everything, followed Jesus,
- And threw a party to celebrate his new life.
- Instant change.
- But that's not always the way God works in changing people.

- My friend Craig took a different path to committed discipleship.
- A group of us were in the middle of a bible study.
- Around 9 o'clock the doorbell chimed.
- When I opened the door there was a man in his early thirties in a suit and tie,
- Who introduced himself as Craig Bishop and asked if he could come in and ask some questions.
- He started to tell us his story.
- He was happily married and had two beautiful kids, a girl and a boy.
- They owned a lovely new house on five acres down the road.
- With his wife and brother-in-law,
- He ran a successful computer company that they'd started together.
- Now you're probably waiting for the moment when I say 'But...' aren't you?
- Well this is the amazing part of the story.
- There was no 'but...'
- He continued his story saying,
- 'I have the best life imaginable.
- 'In fact my life is so good I reckon there must be a God who has blessed me in this way,
- 'And I want to find out more about him.'
- You've probably heard unbelievers say,
- 'Christianity is just a crutch for those who can't stand on their own two feet'.

-If there was ever a person who blew that miserable argument out of the water it was Craig.

-He was successful in every way imaginable,

-All he wanted was to be able to acknowledge the One who was behind his success.

-So coming at night he sought after the light,

-And over a number of months,

-He came face to face with Jesus and he was changed for all eternity.

-In the passage we read earlier another man comes to Jesus at night.

-Another seeker after truth searches out the source of life.

-Jesus sought out Levi,

-But here in John 3 we see Nicodemus seeking out Jesus.

-Nicodemus was a member of the Jewish ruling Council,

-A select group of 70 members presided over by the high priest.

-In terms of the society of his time he'd made it.

-He was respected and honoured by his people.

-He was also successful in what he did as a Pharisee,

-Jesus even refers to him as 'Israel's teacher'.

-The implication is that he's number one in his field.

-We're not looking at a tax collector on the outskirts of respectability here,

-We're looking at a man who knows what it is to be esteemed and has tasted the fruits of success.

-But he's also a man who knows the cost of such success,

-And the price exacted upon anyone who goes against his group.

-Why else would Nicodemus come to Jesus under the cover of darkness?

-Nicodemus knows that there's more to Jesus than some mad eyed revolutionary tearing up the temple.

-He's probably one of the people described in John 2: 23,

-Who saw the miracles and are starting to believe in Jesus.

-He comes straight out and says it to Jesus;

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” John 3: 2

- Nicodemus has recognised two things about Jesus.
- First that he’s a great teacher from God.
- And second that God is with him.
- Nicodemus has seen or at least heard of the miracles that Jesus has been doing,
- That confirm his unique character.
- But he’s about to learn something else,
- Something that John has also told us about in ch.2,
- That Jesus knows the heart of people;

“When he was in Jerusalem during the Passover festival, many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing. ²⁴ But Jesus on his part would not entrust himself to them . . . for he himself knew what was in everyone.” John 2: 23-25

- Nicodemus comes to Jesus with his own agenda,
- He starts with what he probably thought was a polite soft soap to get Jesus on side,
- But Jesus cuts straight to the chase and answers the unasked question on Nicodemus’ heart;

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” John 3: 3

- That’s what Nicodemus wants to know.
 - He’s a pious man who wants to know about the kingdom of God,
 - How a citizen of the kingdom lives,
 - What’s expected of a follower of Jesus,
 - But he’s completely flabbergasted by the answer.
- Have you ever been in a situation where you’re on the back foot,
 - And what someone says to you just doesn’t make sense?
 - That’s just happened to Nicodemus.

- He comes to Jesus expecting to ask the questions,
- But Jesus quickly takes control of the situation,
- And confronts Nicodemus with the truths he needs to hear.
- Nicodemus however stumbles over the ambiguity of Jesus' words.
- Jesus says,
- ‘No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born from above.’
- But Nicodemus hears him say,
- ‘No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.’
- Nicodemus immediately sees the impossibility of that occurring;

“How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?”

John 3: 4

- It’s impossible for a person to go back into their mother’s womb.
- But Jesus wasn’t focussing on what a person could do,
- But rather what God would do to the person.
- Nicodemus needs spiritual not physical rebirth.
- Nicodemus needs to be born from above,
- He needs God to initiate the changing.
- Nicodemus still doesn’t get it.
- So Jesus expands;

“Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above.”

John 3: 5-8

- Jesus once again states that salvation,
- Entering the kingdom of God,
- Is something that is instigated and brought to fruition by God.
- It’s as mysterious as the action of the wind.
- Jesus finishes his speech to Nicodemus in vv13-15 saying;

“No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.” John 3:13-15

- When Jesus speaks to Nicodemus of birth from above,
- He's talking of a great mystery.
- But in vv16ff John explains the mystery to us.
- He tells us where salvation comes from,
- He explains the mystery of God's actions in the world,
- How God brings about the change that humanity needs so badly.
- John's explanation gives us an insight into the words of Jesus that eluded Nicodemus.
- Nicodemus slips back into the night,
- But John explains to us his readers,
- The mystery which has been revealed through the death and resurrection of Jesus.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷ ‘Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” John 3: 16-18

- For God to give his one and only Son,
- Corresponds to Jesus saying that the Son of Man must be lifted up.
- Jesus was lifted up on the cross,
- So now everyone has the opportunity to receive the forgiveness and new life he offers.
- That's why John says that God didn't send his Son to condemn the world but to save it.

- Our sins have already condemned us.
- But Jesus' death forgives us.
- That's why the Cross saves not condemns.
- That's the good news of the kingdom of God.
- That's the mysterious way that God works in his love.

- But can you imagine what that news would have meant to someone,
- Who believed that because they were Jewish they were already right with God?
- Who believed they hadn't sinned because they kept all the rules and rituals of their faith?
- Nicodemus came to Jesus as a man who'd been raised believing that his religion made him right with God.
- All his powerful friends believed the same thing.
- Nicodemus didn't leave Jesus that night a convert.
- But he was moving forward.

- In John 7:45-52 we read that,
- The Jewish hierarchy had sent the temple guard out to arrest Jesus,
- But they came back empty handed;
 - “The chief priests and Pharisees, asked them, ‘Why didn't you bring him in?’ ‘No one ever spoke the way this man does,’ the guards declared. ‘You mean he has deceived you also?’ the Pharisees retorted. ‘Has any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law--there is a curse on them.’” John 7: 45-49
- Do you sense a bit of hostility here?
- The temple guard cop the first wave of wrath.
- See what the Pharisees think of anyone who has a positive opinion of Jesus;
- ‘You mean he’s deceived you also?’

- Now remember Nicodemus came at night?
- He wasn't too keen on being seen with Jesus.

- And yet here he is,
- Faced with an injustice.

“Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?”” John 7: 51

- Notice that’s all that Nicodemus at this stage is prepared to do.
- He’s only pointing out to the rest of the Council what the law allows.
- They go ballistic.
- You can tell how angry they are by the mistakes they make.
- They dismiss the common people as ignorant and under a curse,
- But wasn’t it their job to teach those people?
- They ask;
- ‘Has any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? No!’
- But it’s one of their own asking the embarrassing question of law.
- They make their final attack and it too is wrong.

“Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.” John 7: 52

- Except the prophet Jonah came out of Galilee.
- His hometown was next door to Nazareth.

- Nicodemus was obviously cowered by this ferocious attack.
- But we are seeing a movement in his belief about Jesus.
- It may not have been spirited but at least he made a stand.
- But there’s one final event which shows the radical change that finally occurs in Nicodemus’ life.

- Now remember Nicodemus is a pious Pharisee,
- A stickler for the rules, regulations and rituals of the Jewish faith.
- He would have looked forward eagerly to all of the feasts and celebration of his people,
- And the greatest event in the Jewish calendar was the Passover festival.
- But John 19:38-42 says;

“Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jews. With Pilate's permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen.” John 19:38-42

- Nicodemus helps Joseph take down the body of Christ.
- A Pharisee touches a corpse.
- At that moment Nicodemus turns his back on all he once held dear.
- He becomes unclean according to Jewish law,
- Unable to join in any ritual,
- Excluded from the upcoming Passover festival.

- Unclean by Law,
- But pure before God.
- The cross of Jesus put to death his sins,
- And gave Nicodemus the fresh start with God his old lifestyle couldn't.
- Unlike Levi,
- Nicodemus' contact with Jesus set up a process of change.
- Nicodemus was not instantly changed.
- We don't have recorded any other contacts of Nicodemus with Jesus,
- But for him to make such a radical break with his past,
- He must have been watching, learning and wrestling with the light Jesus was casting on his soul.

- Each week after that first night,
- My friend Craig and I studied God's word together,
- And there came that point in the process where Craig committed himself to Jesus.
- After he personally met the God who had blessed him throughout his life,
- He was full on devoted.

- He joined our church,
- He worshipped with us every week,
- He met regularly in a small group,
- He witnessed the life changing power of Christ to his family, his friends, his work colleagues and staff.
- Being changed by God for Craig was not a one off event,
- It became a lifestyle.
- He nailed his colours firmly to the cross of Christ.
- Because he'd been so greatly blessed,
- He knew that Jesus didn't come to condemn him but to save him,
- And he accepted that salvation with joy and lives it to this very day.

- Are you as passionate today about the changes God has brought to your life,
- As when you first met Jesus?
- Are you open each day to that ongoing process of change that God calls us to?
- Are you still exploring your belief in Jesus just like Nicodemus?
- Where are you at?
- Disappearing into the dark to think some more?
- Willing to defend but not yet commit?
- Or ready to take hold of the cross of life?
- All of us today are being asked by Jesus to take another step forward.
- To leave the past and step out into the future.
- As we take some time now to pray,
- Ask Jesus to show you what changes God is calling you to make,
- Ask Christ to shine his light on your soul and point out the next direction he wants you to walk in,
- And leave here this morning with a new resolve to passionately follow where he leads.