

Sermon: *Second Sunday of Lent 2017 (12'3'17)*

[John 3: 1-17; Genesis 12: 1-4a; Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17]

Michael Fluck, Reader, St. Faith's, Havant

May I speak in the name of the one true God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen †

Part 1:

We're now almost two weeks into Lent, which represents the 40 days Jesus spent in the wilderness, enduring temptation, and preparing to begin his ministry. For Christians, it's a time for self-examination and reflection, for focussing on our personal relationship with God, preparing ourselves for the coming of Easter - a time for re-energising our *faith*. And *faith* is very much at the heart of this morning's readings.

Our gospel reading comes from John's Gospel, believed to have been written (or informed) by the 'beloved disciple', Jesus's own cousin. He'd known Jesus well, accompanied him throughout his ministry, watched him die, then encountered the *resurrected* Jesus; afterwards he'd cared for Jesus' mother.

In the reading, Jesus and his disciples are in Jerusalem for the Passover festival. One night, he receives an unexpected visitor – Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a Pharisee – highly educated, well-versed in interpreting God's laws, and concerned with persuading people to keep to them; he was a member of the ruling council, the Sanhedrin - an important man.

Part 2:

I'm intrigued by Nicodemus. Why does he come *by night*? – presumably he doesn't want to be seen. Something extraordinary must have impelled him.

Clearly, the authorities are becoming *worried* by this upstart preacher, Jesus, who speaks with surprising authority and deep knowledge, attracts so much attention from ordinary folk (partly due to his remarkable acts of healing), and who appears to make extraordinary claims about his *own* relationship with almighty God (speaking of God as 'my Father'). And, if all that wasn't enough, he accuses the Pharisees of hypocrisy!

So, Nicodemus comes to find out for himself what this trouble-maker's up to. Perhaps he's just a *fraud*, exploiting gullible people; or maybe he's mentally *deranged*; worst of all, perhaps he's a dangerous *political subversive* whose activities could provoke the Romans to react violently against the Jews?

But Nicodemus' conversation with Jesus leads him to *dismiss* all these possibilities. And when we read the rest of John's gospel, it's clear that this highly educated lawyer, well-versed in the scriptures, is profoundly *affected* by his encounter with Jesus (and by the events which follow during the next couple of years). John mentions him on two later occasions:

- Firstly: when the Pharisees and priests send Temple guards to arrest Jesus, Nicodemus stands up for him, asking '*does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?*' - but the council have already made up their minds.

- Secondly: immediately after Jesus' shameful public execution (like a common criminal), we read how Nicodemus now aligns himself publically with Jesus. He buys a large quantity of burial spices, then helps Joseph of Arimathea (a secret disciple of Jesus) to wrap Jesus' body and place it in the tomb provided by Joseph.

It's clear that Nicodemus has come to *believe in* Jesus, to have *FAITH* in him.

Part 3:

So what *happened* in his meeting with Jesus that could so affect someone like him?

Rather than *condemning* Nicodemus him, Jesus appears to be trying to *nurture and enlarge* his faith – and this seems to have borne fruit.

First, Jesus stresses the importance of spiritual *re-birth*. He insists that no one can see the Kingdom of God (*recognise* it working) without being ‘born from above’, nor can you *enter* it (become *part* of it) without being born of water and Spirit. Faith requires a radical *shift* in how we view things, and this can only come about by opening our hearts and minds to the Holy Spirit, allowing it to *work within* us (and to work *through* us). That’s something we should try to focus on during Lent.

Secondly, Jesus makes some extraordinary claims about *himself*. We can imagine Nicodemus’ astonishment as it dawns on him that Jesus is talking about *himself* when he says ‘*no one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man*’, and when he implies that this is actually the Son of God.

Thirdly, Jesus insists on God’s *love* for the world, despite all the sinful shortcomings of human beings. [Notice: he says ‘the world’, not just the ‘chosen people’]. In one of the most *powerful* passages in Scripture (which is embodied in John Stainer’s beautiful choral work ‘*The Crucifixion*’), Jesus tells Nicodemus:

“God so *loved* the world that he *gave* his *only Son*, so that everyone who *believes in him* may not perish but *have eternal life*. ... God did *not* send his Son *into* the world to *condemn* the world, but in order that the world may be *saved through him*”.

It’s about FAITH - *entrusting* ourselves to God.

Part 4:

Someone who put his trust in God was Abraham, ancestor of the Jewish and Arab peoples, who lived in SE Turkey 1800 years before Jesus. He and his wife Sarah, well-advanced in years, were childless – a source of great sadness (even shame) in an age when family was everything.

One day, out of the blue, God speaks to Abraham – who, like everyone else then, was almost certainly a worshipper of idols and nature gods.

God promises the astonished Abraham that, if they have *faith* enough to trust and obey him, then (despite their great age) God will ensure that they become *parents* – what’s more, their descendants will become a ‘*great nation*’ (implying both great in number and in importance). And the *importance* God attaches to Abraham *obeying* his instruction is mind-boggling - “*in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed*” – Wow!

So, entrusting themselves and their household to God, they set off, through unknown territory, to an unknown destination. That’s faith! And God fulfils his *promise*: against all odds Sarah bears a son, Isaac; and his descendants eventually become the Jewish people, one of whom is Jesus himself, God’s own Son - sent to save not *one* chosen people but the whole *world*.

Part 5:

St Paul takes this up in his letter to Christians in Rome, as we’ve heard. But Paul isn’t using Abraham as an *example* of an *individual* who was ‘justified’ (brought into a right relationship with God) because of his faith.

Paul’s point is that Abraham was the *beginning* of God’s ‘*Covenant family*’ – a family into which *all* believers have been adopted. The crucial thing, Paul tells us, was that Abraham *believed* God’s *promise to him*, and had enough *faith to act* upon it. It *wasn’t* the case that Abraham *obeyed*

God's *laws* and so God established a Covenant relationship with him (and with everyone else who succeeds in obeying them) – apart from anything else, the 10 Commandments hadn't even been given then.

No, the *Covenant relationship* into which God invited Abraham wasn't just about *him* - it was intended to deal with the problem of *ungodliness* in the world and everything which follows on from this – the degradation, cruelty, selfishness, and wickedness which seem to beset human life in the world (as is painfully evident each time we turn on the News).

In a real sense, we can think of Abraham as the father of *all* believers. Like him, *we* too come into a *Covenant relationship* with God (become *children* of God) through *faith* – by *trusting* God's promises.

A major theme of Paul's letter is that God's *Covenant* is designed to put the *whole world* to rights. And every *believer* in God's promises (each one of us) *belongs* to his 'Covenant *family*' through whom he works to renew the world, to deal with evil in all its forms, because 'God so *loves* the world' – despite everything.

Conclusion:

Because of *Jesus*, God's kingdom is open to *everyone* with eyes to see – not just to *morally perfect* people (there *are* none!).

God has taken the *initiative* – all the *evil* which is evident in the world (and, if we're honest, in each one of *us* at times) was, in some sense, allowed to take out its full force on Jesus *himself*. Jesus' death wasn't an *accident*, and it *wasn't* God letting the worst happen to someone *else*. When we look at Jesus we see, in him, the full display of God's *love* for us.

The 'kingdom of God' (the *remaking* of God's creation) was *inaugurated* with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. We're *each* called upon to play a *part* through the way we live our lives. But it's not only a matter of trying harder *to be good* – we simply can't manage it by ourselves. What we *can* do, inspired by Abraham, is to *trust in* God and pray for *his Spirit* to work *in* us, and *through* us.

IF we truly have faith in our loving God and in his purposes, THEN we shall be *motivated* to live by *his* standards (and to play our part in his renewing of his world). And whenever it all seems too *hard*, let's call to mind those words which Jesus spoke to Nicodemus.

Amen †