

Lent 2, 2014.

Nicodemus visited Jesus by night; this much we know. We also know that he was a Pharisee and an important person. We can imagine him to be a cautious person, reluctant to commit to something that he didn't fully understand and that may endanger his position and prestige, but we can never really get into his head and understand what was going through his mind when he made these nocturnal visits. Nicodemus was a fringe dweller in terms of the community of disciples. He appears again in John's Gospel to ask Jesus about the law and to plead for an opportunity for Jesus to be heard before the Sanhedrin condemned him, and then for a third time when he brings the spices to embalm Jesus' body after the crucifixion. These little cameos make him a bit of an enigmatic figure who only appears in John's Gospel.

Our faith community is notable for its fringe dwellers, those who appear and disappear, and those who appear

only once or twice a year. Like Nicodemus there is a reluctance to commit wholeheartedly with the faith community. In fact I often wonder if, had Nicodemus been born in our generation, he would have identified himself as C of E.

Nicodemus was drawn to Jesus and asked searching questions of him. I wonder if he was afraid of giving up his old life and the certainties that it seemed to give, for a life of discipleship with a man who seemed intent on turning all of the old ways on their head?

In the same way commitment to the life of the body of Christ means stepping away from old comforts and certainties. It means coming to worship when your neighbours are having a Sunday lie in. It means saying to your children that you love that their involvement in football, hockey, cricket or pony club is an important part of their life but comes second to giving time to God. There is a great old saying that we should give to God what is right rather than what is left over.

Paul, in his letter to the Romans, makes it clear that there is far more to faith than the outward signs of belonging. He uses Abraham as his example and asks the question – “was he considered righteous before or after he was circumcised”, and of course he tells his audience that Abraham was a righteous man long before he underwent the ritual circumcision that marked him as the one chosen to be the progenitor of God’s people. It is not the ritual that defines us but rather the way that we live our faith. Of all the families that are on the parish mailing list the majority would consider themselves Anglicans and parishioners, and yet very few of them participate in the life of our community. Most of them continue on in the belief that the church will be there for them when they need it, and indeed that it is their right that it be there, and yet few contribute to the life of the church physically or financially.

Lent is a time when we are called to take the time to reassess our relationships with God and with each other.

How deeply are we committed to Christ and his bride the church? God called Abram to move out of his comfort zone and to take a leap of faith with the covenant promise of God’s continual presence with him. Abram could have said no, but he trusted God and began that great journey that saw him realise God’s promise to him that he would become a great nation.

Nicodemus is drawn to Jesus. He acknowledges Jesus as having come from God because only the power of God explains what Jesus has done. I always say that John’s gospel is a theological treatise rather than a narrative account of the life of Jesus and here he doesn’t disappoint. John uses this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus to define in a few verses what the mission of Jesus is all about – firstly about our need to be born of water and the Spirit to enter the Kingdom of God and finishing this morning with Jesus’ words “ For 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. Indeed God did not send the Son of Man into the world, but in order that the world may be saved through him”.

The key word in this passage is *believe*. To quote the essayist Debie Thomas: *In her 2013 book, Christianity after Religion, historian Diana Butler Bass points out that the English word "believe" comes from the German "belieben" — the German word for love. To believe is not to hold an opinion. To believe is to treasure. To hold something beloved. To give my heart over to it without reservation. To believe in something is to invest it with my love.*

This is true in the ancient languages of the Bible as well. When the writers of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament wrote of faithfulness, they were not writing about an intellectual surrender to a factual truth. They were writing about fidelity, trust, and confidence. As they saw it, to believe in God was to place their full confidence

in him. To throw their whole hearts, minds, and bodies into his hands.

What does it mean to believe in Jesus? To hold onto him? To trust him with my life? For Nicodemus, it meant starting anew, letting go of all he thought he understood about the life of faith. It meant being “born again,” becoming a newborn, vulnerable, hungry, and ready to receive reality in a brand new way. It meant coming out of the darkness and risking the light. None of this could be reduced to an altar call or a litmus test. The work of trusting Jesus was mind-bending, soul-altering work — it was hard, and it took time, and it involved setbacks, fears, and disappointments. No wonder Nicodemus walked away baffled that first night. Jesus was calling him to so much more than a rote recitation of the sinner’s prayer; he was calling him to fall in love, and stay in love. Why is belief important to God? Because love is important to God. To believe is to be-love.

The fact is, I can't think of any significant human relationships in which doctrine matters more than love and trust. So why should my relationship with God be any different?

I must confess that I find encounters with so-called born-again Christians uncomfortable. I admire their zeal and I envy the wholehearted commitment that I see in some of the evangelical churches, however they often ignore the fact that through the waters of baptism we are all born again. The problem that we have is letting go of the trivial things that we become attached to and becoming a newborn, vulnerable, hungry, and ready to receive reality in a brand new way, coming out of the darkness and risking the light. Our problem in essence is to fail to commit.

It is easy to recite those words – for God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, but what do we give in return? Love is not a one-way street. The great theologian Augustine of Hippo wrote of love as being like a tripod.

The three legs are love, the lover and the beloved. Take away one leg and the relationship ceases to be. To believe is to return the love that God gives us and to seek to do his will.

I would urge you in the context of discipleship to consider the gifts that you possess and pray to God to discern how best they can be used to serve this parish and its role in God's mission in the world. Nicodemus was a fringe dweller amongst the disciples. Peter and Andrew, James and John left behind all that they had to follow Jesus. Are you a Nicodemus or are you a Peter? How is God calling you to participate in His mission?

Amen.