

John 2:23-3:17 The most important message we need to hear

Introduction

‘Do you believe me?’ –someone has told you a story which matters a great deal to them, but they detect from the look on your face or your body language in general that you are less than convinced of the accuracy of their statement. There are many scenarios where this is familiar to us. In various English cities during the recent riots and troubles a whole range of people have been picked up and taken to police stations along with goods which had been stolen from various stores that had been looted. The explanations were varied. Some were admissions of guilt with no attempt to cover up what everyone knew had been the case. Others claimed to find goods in parks or on the streets and saw no reason why they could be facing a time of imprisonment for their actions. ‘Do you believe me’ – it happens in our families when something goes wrong and it may not be immediately apparent who should take responsibility. On a more positive note the story told may be a presentation at a college or university or job interview. Or a business proposal seeking the necessary financial support for it to succeed; or a sharing of an account of spiritual experience as happened in this passage in John’s Gospel;

Jesus was in Jerusalem at the Passover festival, a week of celebrations that was a highpoint of the Jewish religious year. The vast crowds had much time on their hands and many would gravitate to the many rabbis holding meetings in which they were explaining some aspect of their faith. In Jesus’ case that year the crowds were larger as many had heard of the extraordinary miracle of water being turned into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee and possibly some other miraculous signs which are not described in the Gospel accounts that have been recorded for us. In John 2:23-25, the author gave a summary of what had happened and how Jesus viewed the new apparent popularity of His cause amongst the ordinary Jewish people. *Now while He was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs He was doing and believed in His name.²⁴ But Jesus would not entrust Himself to them, for He knew all men.²⁵ He did not need man’s testimony about man, for He knew what was in a man.* Jesus was aware that performing miracles drew great crowds. Some of these people would have viewed it as great entertainment as the shows of Paul Daniels or David Copperfield would be viewed today. Others more open to the spiritual truths He was teaching would have enjoyed His meetings, but without wanting to commit themselves to following Him. They were not willing to pay the price of probable unpopularity with the religious authorities and so hung around on the fringes of His meetings. It appears that John is suggesting that this interpretation of what was going on covered the views of the vast majority of people who might have been listening to Jesus preaching in Jerusalem at that time. Yet it was not the whole story. There were others, fewer in numbers, who were serious seekers after truth concerning God and who wanted to explore more deeply what Jesus was proclaiming. This was not a few easily influenced and uneducated people; rather it included some of the leading religious figures of the day. Most were exceedingly nervous about expressing an interest in following Jesus, although it is likely within a few years after His death and resurrection that a significant proportion of them had come out as followers of the way (Acts 9:2) taught by Jesus. Acts 6:7 recorded: *So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.* John chooses to illustrate his point by choosing the example of one man, Nicodemus. This was no ordinary rabbi, but one of the most prominent men of his day. Had there been tabloid newspapers then and the story of his visit to Jesus had leaked out, almost certainly a headline story or two would have been generated. Why was he talking with Jesus the prophet from Galilee?

1. The Problem which is puzzling (John 3:1-2)

¹ Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. ² He came to Jesus at night and said, Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no-one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with Him. What do we know about Nicodemus? (a) **First of all he was a Pharisee** This was the most devout Jewish group of religious leaders of that day. The Pharisees were a movement with around 5,000-6,000 laymen as members who had a variety of occupations by which they supported themselves and their families. At the same time they spent years in their spare time studying the Bible and Jewish traditions of interpretation of the Scriptures as to how people could please God in the way they kept His laws. They had a very high view of Scripture, but too high a view of their thousands of traditions which overwhelmed many ordinary Jewish people. Their motivation was highly commendable, but their mindset was totally legalistic. The concepts of love and grace were unintentionally missing from their theological mindset. The Pharisees led all the services in the synagogues throughout the land. By contrast the Sadducees, a much smaller group of landed gentry who owned and ran the Temple in Jerusalem, were all inter-related and held to much more liberal views of God and the Bible. The Sadducees denied any supernatural elements in the Bible and, in addition, only recognised the first five books of the Old Testament. (b) **Secondly he was a member of the Sanhedrin** The Jewish ruling council was like a parliament for Israel to which a small number of the affairs of the nation had been devolved by the Roman authorities. Its membership was fixed with two-thirds of the seats held by the Sadducees as the upper classes and one-third Pharisees representing the views and concerns of the majority of the ordinary people! Nicodemus comes across as a very devout man, but also an intelligent able leader in his nation who was highly respected in his native land. Nicodemus was a man of great integrity and honesty and with an openness to new ideas that was uncommon amongst people at the highest levels of that society. He was aware that many in Jerusalem had simply dismissed Jesus out of hand as yet another Galilean rabbi with outrageous ideas that would be popular for a few years then fade away. The claims of some Pharisee colleagues that if Jesus' miracles really did happen that they must have been carried out under the influence of the evil one (Matthew 12:24-28), did not ring true to this religious leader in Israel. (c) **Thirdly he came to Jesus by night** Nicodemus had come to the unmistakable conclusions that God was at work through Jesus. His mind could not reconcile the teaching of Jesus with the understanding of the Jewish faith he had held as a Pharisee, but he was sure that he had something to learn from Jesus. In academic terms Nicodemus was as highly qualified as anyone in the land, yet he did not assume he knew all the answers. His humility shines through this passage. None of us either has all the answers, but have you come to learn from Jesus to enquire into His message to hear what He has to say to you concerning your own life today? Each one of us like Nicodemus needs to come to that point in time when we acknowledge a need to give God first place in our lives and to investigate how best we can do that in practice; it can be difficult to take this step as our personal or professional pride can get in the way. What will my family think if I say that I have become a follower of Jesus? Or in a place of work what will my colleagues think if I come out as a Christian and want to live my life in accordance with the teaching of Jesus? There is absolutely no doubt that Nicodemus was thinking that way 2,000 years ago. This was why he came to visit Jesus during what we would call the evening, after six o'clock, at a time when very few people would be out on the streets. He did not want anyone to know that he was interested in Jesus. There are people like that today who read the Bible or Christian literature in private where no-one else can see –or they might think that I am actually interested in it!

John gives a further slant to the story. He often used dramatic and vivid imagery to highlight the importance of Jesus and His message. John 3:19-21 is the nearest section of the Gospel that makes this point: *This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.²⁰ Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.²¹ But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.*

Later in John 8:12 Jesus used that same imagery in a sermon He gave in the Temple courts in Jerusalem: *When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.*

At that time of day he could expect to have an uninterrupted meeting with Jesus –and he was correct in that assumption. Maybe the meeting was prearranged. He needed to set aside time when his head was clear of other things –the busyness of the week; the noise and sounds of daily life- in order to think about that which was most important in life. Do you need to do the same? Too many people fill up their lives with ‘noise’ of various kinds to drown the sound of the promptings of the Holy Spirit in their conscience to consider their eternal future. Yet all of us need to put aside the good and the necessary at times for that which is essential and for our eternal good. Without Jesus you and I are eternally lost. Romans 3:23 reminds us that: *All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.* Paul in that letter goes on to remind us that *the wages of sin is death but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 6:23). This was never intended to be a polite chat about religion round the fireside. It was far too important for that. Nicodemus came very respectfully to Jesus and very openly and honestly declared what he had already discovered concerning Jesus in John 3:2: *Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no-one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with Him.* What is it that Nicodemus (and us) need to hear most of us from the One whom God has sent into the world? It may not be wanted or even welcome, but the message that Jesus brought is the one each one of us has to reckon with. Our response to it will determine whether we spent eternity with or without Christ.

2. **The Process which is humbling** (John 3:3-15)

(a) **A clear declaration of the truth** (John 3:3) *In reply Jesus declared, I tell you the truth, no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.* Can you recall any parties or functions where someone’s inappropriate or tactless words brought a disbelieving silence to the gathering? Or when in less dramatic circumstances you or someone else said something that was a conversation stopper. This clear declaration of Jesus to the most pre-eminent theologian in Israel fits clearly into that category. Jesus didn’t mince His words nor engage in the usual pleasantries of conversation, unless John has omitted them for economy of space in his book. Nicodemus was totally floored by them. He knew from Jewish traditions that: ‘A proselyte who embraces Judaism is like a newborn child’, but this language was never associated with a person born into a Jewish family. This was an evangelistic message to Gentiles, outsiders to the family of faith not committed orthodox Jews. Now there was a precedent in the Old Testament in the sermons of Ezekiel, the main preacher to the Jews who had been exiled to Babylon in the 6th century BC. In Ezekiel 36:26 the prophet had declared these words in a sermon to a Jewish audience in Babylon (Iraq): *I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.²⁷ And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.* This inner transformation of the person by the Holy Spirit had been forgotten in the Judaism of that era, not intentionally, but the effect was the same. The assumption had been that if we only keep enough laws, fulfil enough religious obligations then everything will be okay with God –with respect to that individual. Yet years earlier in the courts of the Jerusalem Temple Jeremiah had challenged the congregation with these words (Jeremiah 31:31-34): “*The days*

are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord.³³ “This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,” declares the Lord. “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.³⁴ No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,” declares the Lord. “For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” Nicodemus these words were spoken to Jews. Each personally must make their peace with God by faith. Each one must be born *ανωθεν* (*again* or *from above*). Pointing to a spiritual beginning that is as significant in the inner person as physical birth is from the natural human point of view! How serious is this matter? Does it really matter if I am not born *from above*, as long as I do good works or do my religious duties over the course of the year? *No-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.* Jesus says without handing your life over to God to direct, by a conscious response to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit, you cannot even begin to grasp what God’s rule or vision for human existence is all about, let alone live a life pleasing to Him. There is nothing more profoundly shocking that Jesus could have said to Nicodemus than these words and the message they contained. They will also be equally shocking to sincerely religious people today. Let me tell you a little of the story of Hugh whom I encountered twenty-eight years ago. It will have a happy ending because this man in his later years found Jesus. Do you need to find Jesus and put your faith and trust in Him today?

(b) **A firm explanation of the truth** (John 3:4-8)⁴ *How can a man be born when he is old? Nicodemus asked. Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!*⁵ *Jesus answered, I tell you the truth, no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.*⁶ *Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.*⁷ *You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.'*⁸ *The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.* Nicodemus for possibly the first time in his life, or at least the first time probably in years, when he was deep in a theological discussion and yet feeling totally out of his depth. No-one had ever spoken to him like this. No-one had ever made such demands on his life. Nicodemus struggles with too literal a picture of the birthing process. He visualises an adult seeking to be physically ‘born’ from a mother’s womb and find the imagery totally over-the-top and impossible. But deep down he knows Jesus doesn’t mean that, but he cannot think what else Jesus could have in mind. Nicodemus asks for clarification and asks Jesus to explain His point in other words. Jesus first repeats the point made earlier acknowledging a need for physical natural birth (*born of water*), but insists that a person who enters God’s kingdom has also been *born...of the Spirit* (John 3:5). No-one goes to bed a non-Christian and wakes up a Christian. Anymore than someone sleeping in a garage overnight turning into a car by morning; this inner transformation by the Holy Spirit is God at work in our hearts minds and consciences, helping us to repent of our sins, accept that Jesus Christ died on the cross to forgive us our sins and to enable us to have a new life in fellowship with God. Becoming a Christian is a conscious decision made in response to God opening the eyes of our understanding to see our need of Him. Like the movement of the wind in nature we cannot see it, though its effects when powerfully displayed cannot be avoided. Likewise no-one can see God at work in bringing someone to faith, but we can see the impact and transformation that can happen in their lives when God is at work helping them to be the man or woman He created them to be.

(c) **An authoritative explanation of the truth** (John 3:9-15) *How can this be? Nicodemus asked.*¹⁰ *You are Israel's teacher, said Jesus, and do you not understand these things?*¹¹ *I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.*¹² *I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will*

you believe if I speak of heavenly things?¹³ No-one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.¹⁴ Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,¹⁵ that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. To admit the inadequacy of our human efforts to earn God’s favour is humbling and cannot be anything else. We have to come to the end of our efforts to be ‘good enough’ to earn God’s favour and our ‘right’ to go to heaven. Only when we grasp that the gift of salvation is given to those who know they are not good enough to merit it; but who have received it through accepting that the One who was good enough, Jesus Christ, gave His life in our place, in order to bring us to God; Paul put it this way in Ephesians 2:8-10: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹ not by works, so that no one can boast.¹⁰ For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.* Our good works are a response of love, because God has saved us, not in order to earn salvation. In John 3:14-15 Jesus has directed Nicodemus back to an Old Testament passage with which he would have been familiar. In context it concerned the forty-year wandering of the Israelites in the desert after leaving Egypt under Moses, prior to entering the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua. In this particular story the people were most ungrateful to God and constantly complained about His provision for them. These verses record the punishment and the means whereby the people could live and not die when bitten by poisonous snakes. *They travelled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way;⁵ they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, “Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!”⁶ Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died.⁷ The people came to Moses and said, “We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us.” So Moses prayed for the people.⁸ The Lord said to Moses, “Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.”⁹ So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived (Numbers 21:5-9).* Looking at a bronze snake in itself was neither here nor there it could not bring about a medical cure. What God had in mind was that by looking at the snake they were in effect putting their faith in Him by doing exactly what He asked them to do in order to be saved. Are you willing to take such a step? Have you put your faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord of your life?

3. **The Prospect which is thrilling** (John 3:16-17)

(a) **The Gospel explained** (John 3:16)¹⁶ *For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.* The supreme motivation behind God’s actions in the world is to demonstrate His amazing love for humankind. How did He reveal this is practise? God sent Jesus from heaven to come down to earth to show us how to live and then on the cross to die in our place taking the punishment that was due each one of us for our sins, taking our condemnation so that in its place we might be forgiven and welcomed into God’s family. His sacrifice on the cross was sufficient for every person who calls on His name for salvation, but that is the challenge. Each one of us needs to take the step of consciously putting our faith in Him. Have you done that yet? If you haven’t, what has been stopping you up to now? This challenge to the rightly proud Pharisee who had accomplished so much good over his life comes to all of us. Earlier in John 1:12-13 there are

words that can encourage us if we are thinking I'm not good enough to be accepted by Jesus. Listen to these amazing words: *Yet to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God—¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.* Will you accept God's salvation on His terms, through Jesus?

(b) **The Purpose of the Gospel** (John 3:17)

¹⁷ *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.* What is the motivation behind God sending Jesus? John 3:17 gives it clearly that God is not in the condemnation business, rather seeking to welcome the people He created in His image into His family. Do need to be saved? May you take the opportunity to receive Jesus this morning if you have never done so before and God will give you His amazing gift of salvation, for Jesus' sake, Amen.