

**ANGLICAN CHAPLAINCY OF ALL SAINTS' MARSEILLE**

**WITH AIX-EN-PROVENCE AND THE LUBERON**

**CHURCH IN THE LUBERON**

**SERMON – 14<sup>th</sup> MARCH 2021 – FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT**

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I do not know why but today's gospel starts half way through the story. As such it lacks context. We don't know who the principals are, what time of day it was or who said these words and who to, so let's begin with some background for that may help you personalise the story.

In the verses preceding our reading we are introduced to a man named Nicodemus. We are to meet him twice more later in the gospel most notably as he assisted Joseph of Arimathea in removing Christ's body from the cross. He also brought a huge amount of ointment to embalm Christ's dead body. Nicodemus is an educated man, a Pharisee, a Jewish sect whose beliefs became the foundational, liturgical, and ritualistic basis for Judaism around and beyond the time of Christ. Nicodemus is a member of the Sanhedrin, the tribunal that had full authority over the people of Israel. They both interpreted and enforced the Jewish laws. These judges, if you will, were the religious leaders and teachers of the nation of Israel. No one knew the law better. Jesus called Nicodemus a master of Israel.

We are told that Nicodemus came to find Jesus at night, though we are not told why he came at night. It may be that he was busy during the day with his Sanhedrin business. He may have thought that Jesus would be more accessible at night or he may not have wanted his fellow pharisees to know that he was going to meet with this heretic Jesus. Nicodemus starts by calling Jesus Rabbi, a teacher, and says we know you come from God as no man can do the miracles that you do unless God is with him. In other words, Nicodemus knew where Jesus had come from, who had sent Him and what He did but he not know who Jesus was. A little knowledge, but not enough.

Jesus does not respond to this obeisance from Nicodemus. Not waiting to hear what Nicodemus wants, Jesus cuts straight to the chase to address what Nicodemus needs. Jesus says "I tell you the truth, except a man be born again, he cannot enter the kingdom of God". Now surprised by this remark Nicodemus

is immediately on the back foot. He takes the literal meaning and replies, “how can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?” Jesus, attempting to make it easier for Nicodemus to understand, said: “I tell you the truth, except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God”. We'll return to examine this statement later for Jesus went on to say “that which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be surprised that I say, you must be born again. The wind blows where it will and you hear the sound of it, but you cannot tell when it will come, and where it goes: so it is with the birth of the Spirit”. Jesus here wants Nicodemus to know that he didn't have to understand everything about the new birth before he experienced it.

By this point Nicodemus was totally nonplussed. Totally lost, Nicodemus asks Jesus quite plainly: “How can this be, please explain it to me?” Jesus chided Nicodemus for not being aware of the need for and the promise of new birth, because these were laid out plainly in the Old Testament passages that Nicodemus would have been familiar with. “Are you the teacher of Israel” Jesus asks “and you do not know these things?”

For the third time Jesus says, I tell you the truth and goes on to explain all. We tell you all we know to be true and testify what we have seen but you don't believe us. If you haven't believed the earthly things I have told you, how will you believe heavenly things? Jesus then refers to the incident that Gabriele read from the Old Testament. As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: That whosoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life. Here Jesus is referring to the incident that occurred when the disobedient Israelites were attacked by poisonous snakes on their journey from Egypt to the promised land. The people went to Moses for help. Moses consulted with God and God instructed Moses to make an image of a snake and mount it on a pole. Anyone who looked at the snake was cured from their bite, and lived. This incident paints a vivid picture of how salvation would be brought to mankind through Christ, foreshadowing as it did the sacrifice of Christ when He would be lifted up and crucified on the cross.

And then we come to the best known and most important words in the bible and here I will quote the King James version that I was brought up with: For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believes on him is not condemned: but he that believes not is

condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil. For every one that does evil hates the light, neither comes to the light, lest his deeds should be revealed. But he that lives by truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God.

So let's unpack what has happened here going back to "you must be born of water and spirit". There is much dispute about the meaning of these words but most likely Jesus is going back to the Old Testament with which Nicodemus should have been familiar. In one of the most glorious passages in all of Scripture describing Israel's restoration to the Lord by the new covenant, God said through Ezekiel, *I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you ...* It may have been this passage that Jesus had in mind, showing regeneration to be an Old Testament truth with which Nicodemus would have been acquainted. Against this Old Testament backdrop, Christ's point was unmistakable: Without the spiritual washing of the soul, a cleansing accomplished only by the Holy Spirit through the Word of God, no one can enter God's kingdom.

What Jesus was telling Nicodemus came as a great shock to him because he had kept the Ten Commandments and obeyed every aspect of the law every day since he was a child. He came to Jesus thinking his future on this earth and the next was secure but now Jesus is telling him that he is a condemned man and the only way to eternal life is believing that Jesus is the Son of God. What Nicodemus had not realized was that the Old Testament law was a way of life for the redeemed not a way of salvation for the lost.

Entry into God's kingdom does not come by knowledge or doctrine or by works, what we do or don't do; it comes by faith. If religious training were enough, Nicodemus, as a representative of Israel's religious leaders, should have all that he needs. But he is baffled, unable to enter into new life through his intellect.

And for all of us who have accepted Christ by faith and are feeling comfortable, there is a footnote to this incident. When we become too sure of what we know about Jesus, when we believe that we have grasped him at last, that is when we can perhaps expect to be undone like Nicodemus. That undoing — that

overturning of our certainty — may be a very good thing if it allows us to experience anew the miracle of our birth from above into eternal life, which has nothing to do with what we know or who or what we are. It is a gift of life from the heart of the Father, breathing His Spirit over us and through us, and opening our eyes to the Son, our Teacher, lifted up to draw all people to himself and his lesson of love.