

SERMON for Lent 3 – March 5th, 2023.

Readings: Genesis 12: 1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17; John 3: 1-17.

There is certainly a lot going on in today's readings!

In the Old Testament, we have the beginning of Abraham's story, as Abram, as he was originally named, is called from his home in Haran, where he had moved with his family from Ur. Ur being in modern day Kuwait and Haran in Syria!

Abram's obedience to God's call is reminiscent of the disciples' call in the Gospels – Jesus called them, and they left everything and followed him. God calls Abram to leave home and family and go to a land God would show him, and Abram did.

One could speculate on the motivations of Abram's obedience ... was it motivated by God's promise:

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. [Genesis 12:2]

I wonder what the situation in Haran was at the time. Did Abram need to move on to find his own place in life? We will never know the underlying motivations from the time - just what history and tradition have left us with.

Paul, writing his great theological tome to the Christians in Rome, in verse 3 says:

Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.

This is part of Paul's great tract on justification by faith rather than works. He argues that we can't work our way into heaven, we can't earn eternal life. It is by faith, 'through the righteousness of faith', that we receive God's free gift of grace.

From my memories of Reformation Church History, this is one of the passages which so stirred Martin Luther in his theology to believe in the importance of faith rather than 'good works' for our salvation.

Psalm 121 is one of my favourite psalms. I remember learning some outlandish version of it in choir at school. I remember our music teacher had a love for Benjamin Britten, so suspect the setting was his! My experience with this psalm, however, has changed over the years, from one of dread to deep love.

From a humorous experience I had with a bereaved family who chose this for the funeral of their loved one, in fact insisted on it ... but then objected to the fact that it referred to Israel ... "can't you change that to having charge 'of the nations'?" then wanting me to remove verse 6 because they didn't like the thought of being struck by the moon Certainly, it left me wondering why they wanted that psalm in the first place!

Another personal experience I have of this psalm was in a nightmare I had, sometime in the late '90s. I don't know if you remember a young, and sadly naïve, missionary woman in Afghanistan, who was caught evangelising by the Taliban, and put to death? This obviously coloured my dream, because in it I was up before a Taliban firing squad, and this is what came into my mind

I lift up my eyes to the hills:
but where shall I find help?
My help comes from the Lord:
who has made heaven and earth....

Funnily enough, about the same time a non-church friend of ours had a dream about me being captured by the Taliban

Let's now turn to the Gospel reading. This reading alone could give birth to a multi week Bible study! ...

Now, to wake you all up, I want you to put down your pew sheet, close it, and better still, sit on it!

Who can tell me the first line of Psalm 23?

Okay! Next, who can tell me what John chapter 3, verse 16 says?

Of the New Testament John 3:16 is probably one of the best know verses of Scripture. It is one of the most quoted and in these modern times, the most taken out of context.

So much is happening in the story **before** we even reach verse 16!

For example, how many of you realised that this is part of Jesus' discourse with the Pharisee, Nicodemus?

Let's back up a bit. Who **was** Nicodemus?

The reading starts: *Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.*

Pharisees get such bad press in the gospels, mainly from their opposition to Jesus' re-interpreting the law. They were sticklers for rules and regulations and woe betide anyone who stepped outside of it. Many probably were self-righteous prigs, but without them, we probably wouldn't have the Jewish scriptures and our own Old Testament. It was the Pharisees that after the fall of Jerusalem and the decimation of the Jewish people by the Romans, who collected the sacred scriptures, preserved them and put them together for posterity.

We only meet Nicodemus in John's Gospel, and we meet him three times.

In today's reading, Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, perhaps in secret, so no one will see him. Yet we meet him twice more, so this rather strange conversation about being born again etc. must have had an impact upon him.

In John 7: 50-52, Nicodemus protests Jesus' right to a fair hearing before the Sanhedrin, the Jewish Council, who were ready to condemn him out of sight, something that would have taken a fair amount of courage.

Then in 19:39 he is mentioned bringing spices for Jesus' burial after Joseph of Arimathea begs Pilate for Jesus' body so that they may give him a decent burial.

My very expensive *Anchor Bible Dictionary* [which I was advised to buy when I was doing my Bachelor of Theology and have promptly only used a couple of times!], was really very useful on Nicodemus:

Nicodemus is portrayed as a Pharisee who was also part of the ruling class in Judea, and presumably a member of the Sanhedrin. John 19:39 implies that he was quite wealthy, and in 3:10 Jesus addresses him as the preeminent teacher of Israel. ... This suggests that Nicodemus was a prominent figure within the governing group. ...

Though Nicodemus is often portrayed as timid, [some scholars] see him as quite courageous. Most likely, Nicodemus came by night, not out of fear, but to avoid the crowds that would have interrupted his interview with Jesus. His reaction to the council's desire to arrest Jesus was boldly calculated to bring out the irony of their lawless act at the very moment in which they were ridiculing the lawless behaviour of the "crowd". And he certainly showed more courage at the Cross than did the absent Disciples of Jesus.¹

The article then makes an interesting point:

There is no serious reason to doubt that Nicodemus was a historical individual. It is questionable, however, whether the gospel material leads to the conclusion that he became a disciple of Jesus. [Some scholars] see Nicodemus as the counterpart to Judas: he moves from darkness to light, just as Judas moved from light to darkness.¹

There is more in the article, which we don't have time for today, and it is interesting that in the TV drama *The Chosen*, we actually meet Nicodemus as a prominent character in the first two episodes, and certainly before we meet Jesus.

There is also so much more to this passage and is certainly worthy of deeper study than is possible to do here, but it has become so overshadowed by those last two verses:

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.

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.

Martin Luther described this as 'the Gospel in miniature'.

In my Lenten discipline of *listening to him* and asking myself *what God requires* of me, I hear the call and obedience of Abraham, the curiosity of Nicodemus and Paul's grounding of faith rather than works as being what is important to God. Even in the Psalmist we hear the assurance that "our help comes from the Lord".

For me, Jesus' words to Nicodemus here are the basis for the hope and understanding I have in God and what was happening through Jesus. God isn't the abusive father figure; God doesn't sit in unfeeling judgement over us.

These readings for me are about faith, hope and love.

For God so loved the world that he sent his son not to condemn it but in order that the world might be saved – you and me loved, not judged, but saved.

So if we are not judged, but loved, how much more should we not judge others. How much more should we encourage rather than judge or condemn each other?

"We don't get on". "He/She annoys me". are not valid excuses.

I believe God is calling us to live out this Lent, sharing the love and acceptance which our God shows us. Amen.

Revd Sally Buckley tssf
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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS:

1. The Anchor Bible Dictionary, Volume 4 K-N, article on *Nicodemus*.