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Easter is behind us and Pentecost is ahead of us. Having explored God's love at Easter, we are exploring the question, *How do I experience God's love in a practical way?*

Sadly, there isn't a magical formula to experience God's love. It is a process of **Healing**, which helps repair, remedy and recover from wounds in the past, to correct attitudes and behaviour to prevent its recurrence, so that we are released (*forgiven*) to experience God's love and live by it.

Last Sunday, through Peter's life, we learned the significance of *emotional healing*, releasing everything in our past which weighs us down, and accept God's gift of forgiveness. Peter's reply to Jesus' third repeat, *Do you love me?*, reveals his "release" (*you know everything!*) and forgiveness.

Today, we examine the dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the elite Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, one of the three leading counsellors in Jerusalem.

The Talmud (Jewish civil and ceremonial law, the primary source of Jewish religious law and Jewish theology) notes, Nicodemus was wealthy enough to feed the entire city for ten years<sup>1</sup>, and also provides a record of his dealings with the Roman General stationed at Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup>

The Sanhedrin, as with many power group, had a "non-dissenting" culture, i.e. while members may hold and discuss different views, as a group they would be seen to be in agreement. Divisions and squabbles were kept in-house, and the public witnessed a united body.

We must also appreciate the tension of Gospel authors who are writing for a mostly Greek speaking audience, translating from Hebrew and Aramaic, both of which had many dialects.

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<sup>1</sup> b.Gittin 56a

<sup>2</sup> b.Ta'anit 19b-20a

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I am neither a scholar nor a linguist, and there are people here today who are, so I can only quote what I have heard in dialogue with Jews and Rabbis. From them I understand, the name "Nicodemus" is Greek, a derivative of **Nike** (*victory*) and **demos** (*people*), i.e. **victorious for the people**. The Talmud refers to this man as a student of Jesus of Nazareth<sup>3</sup>, who was martyred sometime after Jesus' death.<sup>4</sup> The Talmud also suggests that his name Nicodemus was taken from a Hebrew word which means **to shine** "*because the sun shined out for him.*"<sup>5</sup> Another source claims Nicodemus' original name in Aramaic means "*innocent of the blood*", based on John 7 where he defends Jesus<sup>6</sup>.

Nicodemus is mentioned three times, and only in the Gospel of John: his *midnight* visit with Jesus<sup>7</sup>, his defence of Jesus in the face of mockery<sup>8</sup>, and when he brought spices for Jesus' body, after Joseph of Arimathæa secured the release of Jesus body.<sup>9</sup> It has been suggested, John seems to portray Nicodemus' character as timid, bordering on cowardly.

I beg to differ. People in positions of high authority, often find it expedient not to voice their difference and disagreement too loudly because, by remaining in their position they can do things to help those they feel are in need.

This background is necessary to understand the narrative of Nicodemus' visit. Theologians say, "**A Text Without a Context is a pretext**"<sup>10</sup>, and "**A Text without a context is a pretext for what we want it to mean.**"<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Talmud, Ketubot 66b

<sup>4</sup> b.San. 43a

<sup>5</sup> b.Ta'anit 20a

<sup>6</sup> John 7:45-52

<sup>7</sup> John 3

<sup>8</sup> John 7:50-52

<sup>9</sup> John 19:38 John 19:39

<sup>10</sup> Don Carson

<sup>11</sup> Ben Witherington III

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Context is very important if we want to really understand what the text is saying.

Not wanting to be seen as opposing the will of the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus decided to visit Jesus sometime after dark. Nicodemus greets Jesus with utmost courtesy; his words demonstrate his acceptance of Jesus as the promised Messiah: *"Rabbi/Holy Teacher! We all know you're a teacher come to us straight from God. It is very evident, no one could do all the God-ascribing, God-revealing acts you do, if God wasn't doing what you do."*

Jesus replied, *"You're absolutely right. Take it from me: Unless a person is born from above (born again), it's not possible to see what I'm pointing to—to God's kingdom"*, and this is where it gets stuck.

Nicodemus, learned as he was, could not grasp the "birth" metaphor Jesus used. People steeped in rules and regulations, people immersed in the Law, find it very difficult to think beyond the black-and-white of the Law. The law-makers, law-enforcers world is, therefore, very literal.

Two words trap Nicodemus: **born again**. *What do you mean?* he asks Jesus. *How can an adult go back into his mother's womb and be born again?*

Some time back I was privileged to receive the text of two dialogues, the first initiated by Dr. Gruber, who states, in visiting Jesus, Nicodemus was hoping for insight into the heavenly realm<sup>12</sup>, from a man whom he believed came from God and would best describe it.

The key to understanding this passage says Dr. Gruber, is verse 10 - *You are a respected Jewish teacher, and yet you don't understand these things?, things such as, humans can only reproduce humans, but the Holy spirit gives birth to spiritual life. You cannot be a part of the Kingdom of God, without being born of water and the Spirit, which is all about being "born again"*.

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<sup>12</sup> John 3:2, 12

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The second dialogue I was privileged to read was moderated by Greg Stafford, a scholar in first century literature. He notes, in two Aramaic dialects<sup>13</sup>, the two words **born again** mean literally, "born from the head" i.e. born from the beginning/born again, or born from the top/born from above.

This is part of the linguistic dilemma of Gospel writers, which John addresses commendably: Jesus is communicating with a person who understands "birth" as one time event signalling the start of life, but who also understands that God's dwelling place (Heaven) is a realm of perfect justice, truth and love, centred around Israel, which he wants to know more about.

Jesus is the perfect communicator, and we need to spend time in His Word if we want to understand His message. *How will you possibly understand anything about Heaven, if you don't believe what I tell you about earthly things?*

Jesus wants Nicodemus to understand, its not about knowing what God wants and doesn't want, nor about understanding God's Law in order to teach and enforce it, life is about **experiencing** God's love, and you Dear Nicodemus, need **spiritual healing**; you need to be healed of the broken, distorted, prejudiced and inaccurate ideas and notions about God, which are eating away at your soul and preventing the wholesome relationship God desires to have with you.

Don't focus/obsess on observing God's Laws! God wants you to focus on His saving love, and that is why he sent me, His Son to tell you: I have not come on God's behalf to judge the world; I have come to save it for Him!

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<sup>13</sup> Peshitta and Old Syriac

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Now remember, There is no judgement for those who believe in the mission of God's Son; judgement only exists for only those who don't believe in the mission of God's Son.

Each of us needs spiritual healing, to be healed of the broken, distorted, prejudiced and inaccurate ideas and notions about God, which are eating away at your soul and preventing the wholesome relationship God's desires to have with you. This spiritual healing is necessary to correct wrong attitudes and behaviour.

The linguistic dilemma of the Gospel writers is to our benefit. To be **born from the head**, literally born from the beginning, is to allow the flowing of water as a symbol of our desire to wash our past and start again; to be **born from above**, literally is to allow the Holy Spirit to renew and regenerate our minds *to do what is right by coming into God's light, where we can see, we are doing what God wants, we are participating in God's mission on earth.*<sup>14</sup>

We are all born naturally (not by choice) into a flawed and often unjust world. But at any age a person can choose to start a "new life" pursuing the practical realisation of justice, truth, and love.

**AMEN**

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<sup>14</sup> John 3:21