

## St. Ninian's Parish Church

Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> March 2020

*John 3: 1 - 17*

Has anyone ever come to you for advice? How does it feel? It's flattering, isn't it? It makes you feel trusted, liked, important.

Has anyone ever come to you for advice, in the middle of the night; knocked on your door, woken you up? How might that feel? On top of feeling flattered, trusted, liked and important, you might think that the problem the person was disturbing you about must be pressing, immediate, important such that they couldn't wait until the morning at least? Or, would you feel suspicious because the person had to come in the middle of the night? 'Do they not want anyone to see them visiting me,' might you think?

Has anyone ever come to you for advice about something, in the middle of the night, who self-evidently considers themselves, and is considered by the whole country, to be an expert on the subject about which they have come to you for advice? How would you feel if in the middle of the night if there was a surreptitious knocking at your door - loud enough to wake you up - and when you opened the door, standing there on the doorstep was the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, "I've heard you have an opinion about the whole independence thing, and I was just wondering..."

What would you do? Would you burst out laughing? I think I would. Jesus didn't. He played it straight. He knew this kind of ridiculous thing doesn't usually happen, so when it does, something is going on. So, he took Nicodemus seriously, and told him what he thought. Jesus had worked it out - the night visit from the person in power, the representative of the establishment. Nicodemus hadn't come for advice; he had come to put Jesus in his place.

"There was one of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish Council, who came to Jesus by night. He said, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent by God. No one could perform the signs of yours unless God were with him.'"

Jesus took him seriously and gave Nicodemus an enigmatic metaphor to ponder; if you want to see the kingdom of God arrive in Israel then you need to be born again. Jesus might have taken Nicodemus' visit seriously, but Nicodemus didn't take Jesus seriously, which is why he had visited in the middle of the night. He treated Jesus's enigmatic metaphor about the kingdom of God and being born again as if Jesus was speaking literally, 'Born again, from your mother's womb, what do you mean, don't be daft!?' Well, that was a mistake. Don't ever treat Jesus like a fool, all you'll get is a long lecture that will make you look stupid.

Nicodemus wasn't stupid. He was a Pharisee, and not just any Pharisee, he was a member of the Jewish Council - an important man. He was a member of the establishment. The establishment back then, much like today, was very clear about who people were in this world, how they should live in this world, and whether they were living within or outwith the kingdom of God.

Who you were, back then, depended on your birth. If you were born to Jewish parents, then you were Jewish. If you were born to Greek parents, you were Greek. If your parents were Roman citizens, then so were you. That's who you were. Moreover, if you were Jewish or Roman or whatever then you had to obey the laws and the customs of Israel or Rome or wherever. If you didn't follow the laws, then you might be imprisoned. If you didn't follow the customs, you might be ostracised in some way. Your identity, the way you lived, and your fate, all depended on where or to whom you were born, and whether you were obedient to

the laws and customs of that identity you inherited from where you were born or to whom you were born.

It is the same today. Who you are, the way you live, what your fate is in life depends almost entirely on who your parents were, where you were born, and whether you are obedient to the laws and customs of the country in which you live, even though you decided none of these things. You had no say on who your parents were, or where you were born, and very, very little say about the laws and customs of the country you live in, which you are expected to be obedient to. But these things are the things that for most part define who most people are, how they live, what their fate is.

Nicodemus represents that tradition, which can be applied to religion, nationality, and other things that identify people by the circumstances of their birth. Nicodemus was born to Jewish parents, in Israel. That made him Jewish. Moreover, he was obedient to the laws and customs of Judaism, and that sealed his fate. You couldn't be more Jewish than Nicodemus. His identity was certain. How he should live was clearly defined. His fate - his salvation - was clear; he'll die Jewish. That was his life.

What a load of nonsense, said Jesus. If Nicodemus represents the establishment back then, and now, that defines who you are by your birth and by your obedience, Jesus represents a completely different way of understanding who you are and how you should live. That different way of understanding your identity and life is one that you have a say over.

Who are you? Are you who your parents were? Are you defined by the country you were born in? Is your character built on your obedience to the laws and customs of the country you live in.

Nicodemus says, yes that's right. Your fate, your salvation is sealed by those things. Jesus says no. Your fate, your salvation, depends on you discovering your own identity. If you want a relationship with God, if you want to be a Christian, being born to religious parents is never going to be enough, nor is coming to church every Sunday, nor is sitting through a church membership class, nor is doing all three. It is helpful to do these things, but it's not enough; you need a spiritual connection to God to truly feel what it means to be a Christian.

If you want a relationship with Scotland, to be Scottish, being born to Scottish parents is never going to be enough, nor is being born here in Scotland, nor is passing a citizenship test, nor is doing all three. It is helpful to do these things, but it's not enough; you need a spiritual connection to truly feel Scottish.

If you want a relationship with another person, a marriage, it's not enough to attend a legal wedding ceremony; to live in the same house with your partner, and to sleep in the same bed. It is helpful to do these things. You have obediently followed the laws and the customs of marriages, but following these laws and customs won't seal your fate as a married person; if that's all you have, your marriage can't be saved. To truly feel married, you need a spiritual connection with your partner.

Jesus isn't the only person who knows this, there are people all over the world who know that they are not defined by where they were born, or to whom they were born, or by the laws of the land of their birth, or by the customs upheld by their parents. Those people are migrants, millions of them, who travel thousands of miles away from war torn nations, away from laws that oppress them, away from customs handed down to them that enslave them; people are seeking identities of their own choosing in new places, with new people, amongst different laws and different customs.

In our Gospel reading this morning Jesus is telling Nicodemus that he should be a migrant, not a migrant of place, but a migrant of the mind. Nicodemus thinks his fate, his salvation, depends on the relationship he has with God as a consequence of being born Jewish; Jesus is telling him that his fate, his salvation, depends on the relationship he builds with God himself. He has to be born again, it's a spiritual thing.

"In truth I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born from water and the Spirit. Flesh can give birth only to flesh, it is spirit that gives birth to spirit."

The difference between these two people, Nicodemus and Jesus is the difference between a person who is obedient and a person who is faithful. Obedience can get you far in life, but you only truly arrive when you have faith – when you start to believe. Whoever you are, you can go far by being obedient to your identity as defined by the land of your birth, the parents you were born to, the laws and customs of the land you live in, but you only truly arrive in life when you start to believe in yourself, when you have faith in your own existence; and that's a spiritual thing.

In many ways Nicodemus is right, identity does come from who your parents were, where you were born and how obedient you are. Of course, it does, to an extent. But Jesus is right too. Birth and obedience are necessary, but not sufficient to save you. You need to discover who you are yourself in relationship to your religion, nation, family.

This is the season of Lent and we are on a journey with Jesus to the crucifixion in Jerusalem. To follow Jesus on this journey to the crucifixion and then to the resurrection and to your salvation, you need to obediently stay with him on the road he is taking. But, that's not enough. You need faith as well. You need to discover this road for yourself. You need to believe that this is your journey as much as his, otherwise when the going gets tough you'll worry, and then you'll panic, and then you'll wander off, and then you'll get lost, and you'll realise that you don't know who you are after all, or where you are or what you should do. You were born into this life and that birth defines you. But, you'll never be you until you are born again.

Obedience and faith are both important. Be obedient to your traditions and find your own faith, and you will be born again, you will discover a new life, you will become your own person, you will find salvation.

*Now to the one who can keep you from falling and set you in the presence of his glory, jubilant and above reproach, to the only God our saviour, be glory and majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all time, now, and for evermore. Amen.*