

How time flies; today is the 11th Sunday in our sermon series, “Becoming like Christ”. This week we are looking at the story of Nicodemus’ meeting with Jesus and how we can continue to become like Christ despite fear and anxiety.

I must confess to having a mischievous smile on my face earlier this week when I sat down to plan what I was going to say because two incidents from our Anniversary trip to Venice last weekend sprung to mind.

Firstly, I saw a perfect definition of anxiety on the Saturday evening appear on Jane’s face. We had asked our hotel to recommend a restaurant and they suggested what turned out to be Venice’s oldest restaurant, dating back several hundred years.

What we were not told was that the menu was written in Venetian dialect Italian which meant that we struggled to identify any of the ingredients describing the dishes on offer and that the waiting staff had an extremely poor command of English.

Jane thought she had ordered a Duck dish but on arrival the one thing for certain was that it wasn’t duck; one look at her face defined for me what anxiety meant.

Then, on the Monday morning we decided to travel to the airport on the regular half hourly air port water-bus shuttle. We timed it so that our 50 minute journey and 15 minutes walk on arrival would mean we got to the check in desk shortly after it opened.

The water bus duly arrived only for the attendant to shout across a gap of 2-3 yards that it was full up. He said not to worry because another would come in 10 minutes. In addition to ourselves, there was a German family of 4 and another British couple who looked a little uneasily at each other and settled down to wait.

After 15 minutes with no sign of the promised water-bus, the look of unease on every face was starting to get worse; after 25 minutes we were starting to fear that the next water bus would also be full and that would mean we would all miss our planes.

Hurried discussions started to take place as to how we might share the cost and get an expensive high speed water taxi, that is, if we could work out how to get one. After 29 minutes of waiting you could almost smell the fear as the next scheduled water bus came into view.

I’m sure I imagined it, but the attendant came to the boat’s side and gave a wicked grin as if to get ready to say...sorry we are full up...and I could literally feel and hear my heart thumping against my chest until he said “Airport only” and the boat drifted into the landing stage.

Anxiety and fear... I’m sure those were emotions felt by Nicodemus when he decided he would visit Jesus for two reasons:

1. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. This means that he would have been deeply respected for his intense piety and deep scholarship and would have devoted much of his life to studying the Torah and its application to daily life. He would have studied the Jewish bible for hours each day and prayed for a minimum of two hours. Few people would have been more embedded in the traditional Jewish understanding of God than Nicodemus was.

Yet his first words to Jesus were: “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” – that shows just how much he is putting not only his reputation on the line but also his lifelong understanding of who God was and how God worked:

Nicodemus is admitting that Jesus has been sent by God. He is no mere man; in Jesus, Nicodemus is recognizing the mark of divine parentage. Blasphemy in capital letters.

- 2 He was also a member of the Sanhedrin; the Jewish ruling religious council. This consisted of a very select group of just 70 men who served as a kind of combined House of Lords and Supreme

Court of Justice, adjudicating disputes and legal matters so that the Roman authorities did not have to get involved. As you might expect, only the leading men were elected to such a prestigious position.

Together, these two facts meant that Nicodemus was no ordinary person, but a man of very high standing, hugely respected by his peers. He held the very opposite by way of reputation, to many of Jesus' followers.

Yet, he honestly senses that there is more to Jesus than his colleagues have allowed. He desperately wants to understand more but his very standing in the Jewish culture denies him the opportunity of meeting up with Jesus, the man consistently ridiculed and berated by Nicodemus' friends and colleagues.

He couldn't meet with Jesus without taking a great risk to his reputation and standing in society and we can't be sure as to his motivation in going to see Jesus, but in any event it was an extremely brave thing to do.

The fact that his visit is in the darkness of night speaks of considerable fear and anxiety; of not being found out to have associated with Jesus. The fear of being found out and the anxiety of not knowing what was going to happen when he did meet with Jesus must have been a great weight on his mind when making the decision to go to see Jesus.

The African Impala can jump to a height of over 10 feet and cover a distance greater than 30 feet. Yet these magnificent creatures can be kept in any zoo with a 3-foot wall. The animals will not jump if they cannot see where their feet will fall; their fear is too great to make that leap into the unknown.

And yet, here is Nicodemus doing just that. Yes, he is taking the prudent precaution of visiting at night but by meeting with Jesus, Nicodemus shows despite his fear and anxiety he feels compelled to go to Jesus.

I think it relevant that Nicodemus went to Jesus personally.

By that I mean he initiated a relationship on a one to one basis. He didn't send for Jesus, which his position in the Sanhedrin and Jewish society might have entitled him to do; no he humbled himself to visit a man who denounced much of what Nicodemus stood for and was from a much lower social standing.

Nor did he send a messenger or seek the answers he was looking for in a committee or by other third party means. He understood that a relationship with Jesus has to be on a one to one basis.

And when he does meet up with him there is an almost playful quality about the way Jesus leads him on, using images which would have been very familiar but presenting them in unfamiliar and slightly startling ways; teasing Nicodemus into expanding and deepening his understanding.

"Are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?" says Jesus.

Nicodemus hears Jesus say "No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit". And Jesus continues by teaching Nicodemus - and us too - about the nature of the Holy Spirit; "The wind blows where it chooses".

The original Greek word 'pneuma' means both wind and spirit; and would have conjured up in Nicodemus' mind the conjunction of these same two images in Genesis 1.

A wind, by its very nature has no material form or shape. It is invisible; we cannot see its source or its destination. Nevertheless, its presence is known by its effects. Likewise the presence of the unseen Holy Spirit is seen in the work he does in transforming human lives.

Similarly wind is a powerful force which cannot be stopped or controlled by people in just the same way that the Holy Spirit is not subject to human control. The moving of the Holy Spirit is God at work.

Here was a man talking about creation and of everyone being born of the Spirit with authority way above that which Nicodemus himself possessed, notwithstanding his excellent grasp of biblical content and position in the Jewish hierarchy.

Nicodemus was a man who had quelled his anxiety; conquered his fear and was now converted to following Jesus.

I say that knowing that the text doesn't reveal to us the facts of Nicodemus' conversion, but converted he most certainly was - because the next we read of him, Nicodemus is helping Joseph of Arimathea take the dead body of Jesus Christ down from the cross.

We don't know for sure, but if he hadn't already done so at that time Nicodemus has decided to come out, as it were, to be publically seen as a follower of Jesus. But the starting point for him becoming Christ like by publically declaring his belief in Jesus was the time when he set aside his fear and anxiety.

In a way we are all Nicodemus – we live amongst doubting and disbelieving people and pulled in conflicting ways; on the one hand towards the supposed security of the familiar and what the majority believe and on the other, towards the exhilarating life-enhancing risk of following the unpredictable movement of the Spirit.

Our church strap line starts with the words “To live by faith”. But the problem which many of us struggle with is having the courage to set aside our anxiety and our fear by not only being a follower of Jesus Christ in the relative safety of our own family but also living out our faith publically 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year.

And the first step of becoming like Christ despite fear or anxiety is to not be like the man who fell from the cliff top but managed to grab a tree limb on the way down and the following conversation ensued”.

“Is anyone there?”

“I am here. I am the Lord. Do you believe me?”

“Yes, Lord, I believe. I really believe, but I can't hang on much longer”

“Don't worry. If you really believe there's nothing to be afraid of. I will save you. Just let go of the branch”

“Hello, is anyone else up there?”

We live with anxiety and fear; let's be like Nicodemus, not the man who fell.
Amen