

## Sermon Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> March 2015

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**Readings:** John 3:14–21; Psalm 107.1-3,17-22

Last week, in our gospel reading from John, we had Jesus venting his fury in the Temple precincts and clearing out the money-changers and animals. Jesus walked into the outer courtyard of the Temple, a space filled with hundreds of people going about the religious practises of their day, he looked around and shouted: “Take these things out of here! Stop making my Father’s house a marketplace!” He grabs hold of some cords, ties them together, and uses them as whip.

He alone manages to clear the courtyard. He must have been screaming and acting like a man possessed as he chased after people and animals. They must have feared for their lives for the money-changers to let him pour out their money and turn over their tables. This isn’t some constrained response. This isn’t a scuffle behind the scenes. This is akin to a man rushing into the Commons chamber during Prime Minister’s questions like a dervish, screaming accusations, throwing the mace to the floor, tipping over the Speaker’s chair, and chasing everyone out of the chamber.

This all happened during Passover, a major Jewish festival when Jerusalem would have been full of pilgrims. The other gospels place this story at the end, as part of the events of Holy week leading up to Jesus’ arrest, but John places it at the very beginning. In the other gospels the tension builds as we move towards Jerusalem, in John it’s there from the very beginning.

Jesus must have been the talk of the town. Everyone must have known what had happened; tales would be being told and elaborated upon as the list of eye-witnesses grew from the hundreds actually present to the thousands who claimed to be. Then under cover of night Nicodemus manages to gain an audience with Jesus. Remember that it is night time, outside it is pitch black, the occasional flicker of a candle flame behind shutters and the shadows cast as watchmen make their rounds.

Nicodemus arrives in the dark, which is crucial for what we will hear in this passage. Also Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. In Jesus’ time the Pharisees were a religious movement that sought to connect everyone with God through observing the Torah, rather than leave it to the Priests and the sacrifices at Temple. They were also a minority party on the ruling Sanhedrin. In the time that John was writing his gospel, which was after the Temple had been destroyed, they were the main voice contesting with Christianity to be acknowledged as Judaism. The Roman Empire allowed Judaism exemption from the cult of the Emperor and as such was a tolerated religion. With the fall of the Temple the rule of the Priests ended and for a time Pharaaic Judaism and Christian Judaism fought each other for supremacy. In the end the Pharisees won that battle and Christianity split away from Judaism.

So under cover of night, a prominent establishment figure visits the radical preacher who is the talk of Jerusalem. In day-light Nicodemus’ visit would have been noticed, would have been gossiped about, and would probably have been a scandal through which he would have lost prestige and privilege.

Their conversation begins with Nicodemus offering a compliment. “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” Then with each reply from Jesus Nicodemus just gets more and more confused until he declares “How can these things be?” and he then fades into the background as Jesus carries on talking.

After talk of only being able to see the kingdom of God through ‘being born from above’, ‘born of water and Spirit’, and the unpredictability of the Spirit, Jesus expresses his disappointment. Jesus is disappointed that Nicodemus hasn’t understood when he has talked about things from the world they

can see, so how will he understand when he speaks of heavenly things. Despite his disappointment Jesus continues, and speaks of heavenly things anyway.

Firstly we have a reference to a strange passage from Numbers 21. This takes place during the Exodus and the people of Israel are again complaining that they are going to die in the wilderness, so God sends poisonous snakes to kill them. Which does seem a strange reaction after all the effort of sending those plagues to get them out of Egypt, and the daily routine of manna at dawn and the delivery of poultry at night? Moses prays and God, in direct violation of the commandment to not make graven images, instructs Moses to make a bronze serpent and raise it on a pole. Then whenever someone was bit they looked to the raised serpent and lived.

Whatever the dubious origins of this Old Testament passage clearly the construct of looking up to an image of God and being healed was well known when John wrote his gospel. John uses it to draw a parallel with Jesus as the Son of Man being lifted up, which could be a reference to the crucifixion or the ascension. We then have that often quoted verse, John 3:16 "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."

This passage has caused much debate from the holding of placards at American sports events to Church battles over whether everyone or just the elect are saved. I guess for most of us we concentrate on the idea of God loving us and our receiving eternal life, but we may need to rethink that when we explore the verses that follow it.

By simply repeating it in isolation it can appear triumphalist, and we can limit the challenge the whole passage places on our own hearts. It can appear to function just as the verses from Psalm 107 we heard, a psalm of thanksgiving, acknowledging the goodness and eternal love of God which will save and heal us when we cry to God for help.

The passage from John's gospel continues assuring us that Christ did not come to condemn but to save the world, but it makes the point that the condemned face that fate already. The judgment comes because light has come into the world, and they have chosen to stay in the darkness. Those that are already close to God are drawn to the light.

And remember the scene in which these words are spoken is set in the darkness of night. Nicodemus has not approached Jesus in the light of day, clearly visible to everyone; he has come in secret under the cover of darkness.

From beginning to end John's gospel is full of the contrast between dark and light. John calls us to be children of light, living in tune with God, with no fear of being discovered as hypocrites. John gives us the image of Jesus as the light of the world. Those who love the light in which the truth about us is made fully visible, are attracted. Those who fear exposure prefer darkness and turn away. In order that the whole world can be included in this experience of finding that the light has come into the world, Jesus is lifted up and made visible. He then draws everyone to him. Of course, not all are attracted to light, but all who are have the opportunity to be illumined and healed.

We are called to live as light. To live as if we are always surrounded by light. Living as if there are no dark places we keep to ourselves, no secrets that only we know, and no choices that benefit us whilst harming others.

Incredibly hard, a high ideal, but in the end it makes life so much easier. We all fear people finding out something about us; whether it's an embarrassing story, a poor choice, a moment of weakness, or an unhelpful habit. There is always something we would rather keep out of the light. But trying to live in the light does save a lot of heartache, for us and for others. There will still be difficult decisions or situations, but if they are made in the light then feelings of regret, betrayal, anger, embarrassment or disappointment, while they may remain, will be lessened.

We are called to live in the light. We are called to reflect God's light around us, let it pass through us and be at one with it. We are called to care for the flickering lights within our world and help them grow and shine.

Nicodemus sought out Christ in darkness. He was cautious, nervous, and unready. He was worried about what other people would say, and the effect that being associated with Jesus would have on his standing in society.

We come together as Church in daylight. Folk passing by see the cars in the car park, can see us walking through the door, we are not hidden. People know we go to Church, but do they see the light of Christ shining within, through and around us?

Do they see dutiful attenders of a Sunday gathering or a pilgrim people living out the kingdom of God together?

Have we made our Church and our church-going a bowl hiding our lights?

If so, we need to find ways to crack open that bowl and let the light of Christ shine out, and also shine in. There is much of God within these walls, and there is much of God outside of them too. We need to discover ways of helping the light be seen.

We need to find ways in which to respond as we are encouraged to in Psalm 107: 'offer thanksgiving sacrifices, and tell of God's deeds with songs of joy.'

We do not have a Temple to offer sacrifices at, but we can give of our time, our talents, and our treasure sacrificially. We can find ways, together and individually, to open up the possibility of God to those around us and share the positives we find in living lives of faith.

Let me close offering a reflection I have found helpful with regard to this passage is through the work of Neil Douglas-Klotz who has sought to offer fresh hearings of Jesus' spiritual message through engaging with the Aramaic words Jesus would have spoken against the Greek text that put them down on paper. For John 3: 16 he offers:

For Unity so loved Diversity,

all the worlds of form,

that it brought you a child of Unity, fulfilled in all aspects of self,

so that whoever would have the same confidence in their own fulfilment,

like the earth underneath supporting all,

would not fade with their form, but continue, from world to world,

with and in the ever-living Life. **Amen**