



Man of the People

(John 3:1-17)

John 3:1 Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "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." 3 In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." 4 "How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" 5 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit." 9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. 10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? 11 I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. 12 I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? 13 No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven--the Son of Man. 14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. 16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 17 For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

Ever been in the situation that you want to know something but are too afraid to ask. A few years we did our first visit to Bruges in Belgium. It's a beautiful city and well worth a visit. The problem was that we went into the city without any cash and quickly found a cash machine that turned us out some money. The only problem is that we needed money for the car park. How do you ask for change in Belgium? I don't speak Dutch. It took a large chunk of the day to ensure our change was right for the car park. However to my embarrassment we realised two things. Firstly, most Flemish Belgians speak English fluently and secondly, the car park took notes and gave change as well as taking credit cards! If you don't ask, you don't get.

This evening we have read about a man who knew that if he was to get answers to life, he needed to ask – but he was a man with a high profile. Nicodemus was quite a different person to the disciples that Jesus then had. He was a learned man - a leader – whereas the disciples were ordinary working people from relatively humble beginnings. Nicodemus was - a ruler of the Jews - member of the Sanhedrin – and a Pharisee.

The Pharisees were the most conservative of religious parties in the Sanhedrin. They had their own rabbinic laws as well as the OT which they changed the meaning of to what they want to believe. There were also the Sadducees - liberal Jews - didn't believe in the more supernatural parts of the Jewish faith such as angels or the resurrection. They were sad-you-see! They are rather like liberal ministers - what don't they believe in? - they follow the religious traditions but don't believe the bits that don't suit them and alter it to what they want to believe.

There were also Herodians - these were supporters of Herod. They weren't really very religious but wished to use the Sanhedrin to support Herod who was the nearest thing to independent political power the Jews had. They also tried to alter the Jewish faith so that it suited them even though Herod was a descendant of the former Greek rulers and not part of the official Jewish royal line.

There is always the danger that we want a faith that suits. It is easy to have a god that is in conformity with our views and lifestyle. The world does it all the time and Christians have been doing it since time immemorial. David and I were having a chat this week and we discussed a list of "big bad heresies". The thing was that all of them started within 50 years of the start of the church at Pentecost and one of them – Judaising – is dealt with in the NT as well as references to a form of

gnosticism (the Nicolaitans) also getting onto Revelation. And it has come down to the present day. As we look at our modern churches, we find the world and our fallen-ness seeping in very quickly. In a House of Commons debate and MP said "Hands off the Church of England - its the only thing that stands between us and Christianity! Another person once said "Every day people are straying away from the Church and going back to God."

Don't smirk too much, because we baptists are much the same. Of course, thinking like this makes many people say "I reject denominationalism – let's start a denomination-free New Testament church. Do you know how many people have done that over the years – the Independents (Congregationalists), the Brethren, the Pentecostals, the Free Evangelicals, the House Church movement – New Frontiers, Pioneer, Salt and Light and we now have plenty of further denominations!! The one thing we learn form history is that we don't learn from history.

It gets worse when we try to see how we should relate to the world. Nicodemus was religious and a politician. This is quite topical in the week of a General Election. Politicism - is the Church a political body? Someone like the Rev Ian Paisley would say is does. The church is people, not an organisation. Yes, we do have a take on the outside world as we can't live in it without getting an opinion of it. If you've seen that advert to try and get us all to vote you'll know that whether it is about traffic jams, closing times, public houses, what the papers say – we are all political with a little "p". Here's a tongue in cheek version of political "isms" which was given to me by the politics teacher in a college I once worked in:

A GUIDE TO POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

- ◆ SOCIALISM You have two cows - you gave one to your neighbour
- ◆ COMMUNISM You have two cows - the Government takes both and gives you the milk
- ◆ FASCISM You have two cows - the Government takes both and sells you the milk
- ◆ NAZISM You have two cows - the Government takes both and shoots you
- ◆ CAPITALISM You have two cows - you sell one and buy a bull
- ◆ TRADE UNIONISM You have two cows - they take both from you, shoot one, milk the other and throw the milk away
- ◆ DEMOCRACY You have two cows - they are installed in Council houses and given the vote
- ◆ LIBERALISM The two cows form a happy relationship with each other and the milk goes sour

There are many Christians in all our political parties. As regards Thursday I believe we must do two things. Firstly we must prayerfully consider our vote and what we do with it, remembering that all political parties are human institutions and will reflect the fallen-ness of humanity. Secondly, we must pray that the government is elected on Thursday is one which will act wisely, which will show mercy and love righteousness. 1 Tim 2:1 I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone-- 2 for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness. 3 This is good, and pleases God our Savior, 4 who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth

But as we look on those who would deal liberally with the scriptures and upon those who try to make political gain out of Christ, we remind ourselves that we're evangelicals - we believe in the authority of Scripture don't we? We believe in doing God's will don't we? We obey Scripture. We believe in following him wherever he asks us to go and we do what he asks us us to do, don't we? We pace around and tell everybody how morally and spiritually superior we are to other Churches in the area - they're liberal, or perhaps they're full of nutty people who live on their feelings rather than God's word.

But we're different, aren't we? Or are we? Did you hear about the religious family that took Sundays so seriously that they even removed the swing from the budgie's cage so it wouldn't enjoy itself. People like us love to boast about how sound we are. Nicodemus was so "spiritual" that he missed what being truly spiritual was all about. Verse 9 9 "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked. 10 "You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? 11 I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. It's easy to do what we want - and spiritualising it to make it seem that is what God wants. Or worst, to use logic to make it seem that this is God's will. Usually its pretty obvious that it really isn't God's will.

But God might be challenging us about something else. Pharisaism wasn't just following rules and the rest of it. For most people religious experience is satisfying – although not necessarily in the

right sort of way. In my last church we believed in good challenging preaching, lively singing and lively services where people had experiences of the presence and power of God. Many found it uplifting but there are dangers. I hope you're not like some that used Church as a drug like ecstasy - a quick shot of good singing, the buzz of a challenging sermon and you're set up for the next week - until the next time.

Yet so often the root of our problems is that we're simply in the wrong place at the wrong time doing the wrong thing. That's a bit harsh – maybe? Yet I've done most of this and if we're really honest with ourselves - so have all of us. And some of us are in that condition today - we lie to ourselves about how spiritual we are, we read our Bible every day, go to Church regularly, pray and the rest of it - but we hide behind what we want to do, what we want to get out of the Christian faith, fueling our own prejudices - and all in the name of Christ! And we may well vote on that basis on Thursday.

One thing that is quite clear from this passage is that isn't what God asks or expects of people. Nicodemus was a man who had bent Scripture to his own end. My goodness wasn't he the religious one - fasting regularly, keeping the Sabbath, praying in public, giving a tenth of all he had. People looked up to him as the paragon of virtue. Yet he knew that he had a basic spiritual need and was honest enough to face up to it.

So he went to Jesus. By night - was he a coward? No, he was courageous to ask the questions of his faith: is there more than this? Important people like him didn't resolve his inner problems in public - very few people do. Besides, the only time to get Jesus was at night when he won't be surrounded by hundreds of people. The most important thing is that he went to Jesus and spent time with him. The thing that he learnt was that he had to be born again. He needed to be born again and most of the rest of the passage is about just this. But this is a challenge isn't for someone like Nicodemus who had to face up to who Jesus was.

Just a moment you may say, I've already done that. Nicodemus doesn't apply to me. Yes it does. Being born again means coming completely new. Being born of the Spirit. - a complete change; a rebirth - it takes time but God wants to deliver us from the bareness of being religious, of meeting-itis, of rousing sermon addiction, of happy singing disease and mould us into the people he wants us to be. God wants to do a work in this Church. That's what this morning has been about and what my sermons in the early part of 2005 have been about.

The Church is not a building it's a people. God wants to change each one of us. But you may say to yourself as maybe Nicodemus perhaps said before deciding to go to Jesus: I've been around a long time, I have a lot of experience in the faith, I don't need to change any further, I've finished my course, its for younger people to carry on the witness here - but where are the young people? There's more than there used to be – but...

You are here. God has brought you here and he wants to use you. Was Nicodemus cowardly - or did he use his day job to his advantage? Nicodemus turned out to be a defender of the faith in the Sanhedrin and also helped Joseph of Arimathea get Jesus' body from Pilate after the crucifixion. John 17 50-54 & 19:39 -42 His role in the unfolding of the Christian faith was not large, but it was critical. He wasn't a secret believer as some have suggested. If you keep your faith a secret, then what's it worth to you.

As I have said on many occasions recently and I believe God wants to ground it in our hearts and lives. God has a work, a role, a function for each of us in this expression of His body here in Swaffham. God may want you to be faithful and obey Him in much. It may be in little. But He has called you to be part of His body. Your role may not be large but it is critical - God wants to use you - will you let him today? Let's use the table this evening as an opportunity to commit ourselves afresh to Him and His service.