

1st March

Gospel: John 3.1-17

Every now and again you might find yourself in a deep conversation with someone about life, the universe and everything. It's rare because we British don't talk about such stuff. We either must be in a crisis or inebriated usually. Most of life is mundane conversation – the weather, sport, holidays that kind of stuff. Then out of the blue we may let our guard down and start opening up about the stuff that really worries us, about who we are, about where we are going and if there is any meaning to it all. My brother always had an expression for those types of conversations: he would say we had a 'deep and meaningful'. He was usually uncomfortable and flustered by it all - it was all getting deep and meaningful!

Over the next few weeks of Lent we are going to be looking at conversations in John's gospel that Jesus had with people which were deep and meaningful. The first of these is Jesus encounter with Nikodemus.

Nicodemus was a leading member of the Jewish ruling council. A man of great social standing and status but who lack the courage to come out of the shadows. Nicodemus comes 'by night' to visit Jesus so that no one will see him!.

Nicodemus has respect Jesus: verse 3 Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.'

But that doesn't mean he's going to take the step of faith and commitment to him. Nicodemus, who has lots of questions doesn't want to be seen talking with Jesus in public – that is why he approaches him at night, under the cover of darkness.

Perhaps Nicodemus and those he represents regard their standing in the community as more important to them than what they see in Jesus (cf. John 12.42-43(John 9.22,34).)

Though Jesus speaks directly and forcefully to Nicodemus, he uses symbols to persuade him to make a move. What he needs is the excitement and disruption of 'birth from above', that is from God or the Spirit (see John 1.13), symbolized by immersion in the water of baptism. This 'birth' is like 'the wind' ('wind' and 'spirit' translate the Hebrew word ruach), whose coming and going, from and to God, make it a sign of grace and

blessing. And energy too: the 'Spirit' will bring Nicodemus and his companions out of the shadows.

New life? New birth? A chance to start again? New spirit? You interested Nicodemus?
You interested?

Some people are fascinated with Jesus but still keep him at arms length. There are many reasons people don't want to get drawn in.

The life of faith can be a bit scary – like being blown along by the wind.

Blondin was a famous tightrope walker and acrobat in the nineteenth century . Large crowds used to watch him, particularly when he was crossing the Niagara Falls. His act began with a relatively simple crossing using a balancing pole. Then he would throw the pole away and being to amaze the onlookers.

There is a story of one occasion when a royal party from Britain went to watch him perform. Blondin crossed the tightrope on stilts, then blindfolded; next he stopped halfway to cook and eat an omelette. He then wheeled a wheelbarrow from one side to the other as the crowd cheered. He put a sack of potatoes into the wheelbarrow and wheeled that across. The crowd cheered louder. Then he approached the royal party and asked the Duke of Newcastle, 'Do you believe that I could take a man across the tightrope in this wheelbarrow?'

'Yes, I do', said the Duke.

'Hop in!' replied Blondin.

The crowd fell silent, but the Duke would not accept the challenge. No one was willing to volunteer.

Eventually an old woman stepped out from the crowd and climbed into the wheelbarrow. Blondin wheeled her across and all the way back. The old woman was Blondin's mother, the only person willing to put her life in his hands.

Faith in this sense is hopping in. it isn't merely an intellectual exercise. It involves an active step of putting our trust in Jesus. Like being blown along by the wind – who knows where we may end up?

There is new birth. Baptism in water brought people visibly to belong in this Jesus movement. Baptism is a visible sign of belonging to the Jesus community. The spirit

baptism is the internal belonging, the inner change, the new life, bubbling up from within, that Jesus offers to those who receive him.

The two are closely joined – visibly joining the Jesus community and invisibly being changed by Jesus from within.

The spirit of God is on the move like a spring breeze bringing freshness to life and no human family, tribe or organization can keep up with it. Opening the windows and letting the breeze in can be very inconvenient especially for the Nikodemus's of this world who suppose they have everything tidied up, labelled and organized into neat piles. But then the spirit blows through and everything is up in the air quite literally.

Jesus is claiming to be the new way to join heaven and earth and Nicodemus can't get to grips with this new way of seeing things.

And then John brings in the story of the snake. (vs 14-15)

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,[f] 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.'

Snakes are like spiders – they polarize people and a lot of folk have a reaction to them. At my last church one of my church members used to keep snakes as pets. I remember going to visit him in his home and he'd say Simon sit down – and I'd say I'd rather not – I was worried that the carpet was moving. He had a fridge full of frozen mice that he would defrost in the microwave and then pop into the snake tank.

I had to preach on this passage once and so I asked him, Denis can you bring a snake to church. A non-poisonous one please. So it was a parade service and the girl guides were in and as an all age talk I got Denis to come in with a snake coiled around his arm – apparently you don't put them on your shoulders or around your neck because they could choke you. Honestly when he walked into the church literally the front row fainted. The guide leader screamed loudly. I was new into ministry It was how not to do a all age talk. I then challenged people to face their fears and form an orderly queue to come up and touch the snake. There were people trembling at the back of church.

In many cultures the snake is seen as positive and powerful, though dangerous . In many others, including ours, snakes are seen as strong negative force symbolizing the evil in the world and in all of us. The question of what to do about the snake or the serpent is a way for asking the question of what to do about evil - or what different cultures have designated as evil.

John writes this passage with a clear and confident answer. Looking back at the incident described in the book of Numbers 21 where the Israelites have been wandering in the wilderness and have started grumbling to Moses. God punishes them by sending poisonous snakes to invade their camp killing many of them. God gives Moses the remedy; he was to make a snake out of bronze, put it on a pole and hold it up for the people to look at. Anyone who looked at the serpent on the pole would live. The snake entwined around the pole, a symbol which appears in other cultures too, remains to this day as a sign of healing, used by various medical organizations.

Here it is used by John to point towards the death of Jesus. Moses put the snake on the pole and lifted it up so the people could see it; even so, the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

Humankind as a whole has been smitten by a deadly disease, and we are not talking about coronavirus here. We are talking about sin – our selfishness, our rebellion, our defiance. The only cure is to look at the son of man dying on the cross and find life through believing in him. Jesus took it all on and love triumphs. Your sin, the evil in the world, death, coronavirus – it won't win ultimately because Jesus is risen and is Lord. Love wins.

This is very deep and mysterious, but we must ask: how can the crucifixion of Jesus be like putting the snake on a pole? Wasn't the snake the problem, not the solution? Surely John isn't suggesting that Jesus was like the poisonous snakes that had been attacking the people?

No, he isn't. what he is saying and will continue to say in several ways is that the evil which was and is in the world, deep rooted within us all, was somehow allowed to take out its full force on Jesus. When we look at him hanging on the cross, lifted up, what we are looking at is the result of the evil in which we are all stuck. And we are seeing what God has done about it. Love wins.

We are seeing in particular what God's love looks like. It is a dramatic display of God's love. The cross is the heart of God's amazing picture of what God is like. Taking on the evil of the world and giving back love. Look evil in the face and see back the love of God that will triumph through it all.

But evil isn't then healed, as it were, automatically. Precisely because evil lurks in each one of us deeply, for healing to take place we must ourselves be involved in the process. This doesn't mean we have to try harder to be good. You might as well try to teach a

snake to sing. All we can do, just as it was all the Israelites could do, is to look and trust; to look at Jesus, to see in him the full display of God's saving love and to trust in Him.

God has planted a sign in history that says evil will not win, the cross has defeated it and love can transform.

As we are born again, spiritually we can have the presence of Christ in our lives transforming us over time and transforming our relationship to God and to other people.

Ultimately Jesus transforms sickness, sorrow and even death – because he has taken that on and has won. He comes back for us. We are made spiritually alive...

Maybe a fear of death will prompt people to consider the claims of Jesus – the only person to have come back from the dead. Fear of death can be a motivator. It was for me.

My church youth club leaders allowed us teenagers to crash back at their house for long talks into the night about life the universe and everything: 'Deep and meaningful', as my brother would say. It was through the youth club that I got a crush on one of the girls who used to attend! I was sweet sixteen, and never been kissed. She had just become a Christian and the difference in her life was obvious, she had a new sense of confidence and joy which made her even more attractive. I was desperate to go out with her and the compromise was that she took me off too many gospel meetings including one done by one of the church member's brother. He made an appeal for people to accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour and I shrank into the chair. After the meeting he collared me and said look you may not get another chance to accept Jesus – what if you got run down by a bus tonight!

Unnerved by this encounter, a short time afterwards I was in the youth club downstairs when Lynn's brother Stuart, who at the time was a Baptist minister in Glasgow and who was visiting her for the weekend, challenged me to a game of pool. In the middle of the game he asked me if I had accepted Christ into my life. Talk about sportsmanship. I couldn't hit the cue ball after that. I began to suspect there was a pincer movement designed to get me.

There was a Billy Graham meeting in Blackpool and the church booked a coach and even though there was a Burnley match that night I went. Billy Graham did his usual end of meeting appeal for people to give their lives to Christ and I went forward. At the time I was a reluctant disciple and if truth be known, fear had bounced me into the kingdom. Hormones had got me interested in the Christian faith – or more precisely the girl in the

youth club. But fear was the final push. That is always the danger when you use that evangelistic approach.

Don't get me wrong, it's important to consider what it may be like to come face to face with God. Nicodemus was wrestling with that before Jesus. The disciples found a God in Jesus who loved them and served them, and I thank God that that went on to be my experience. My eventual openness to the work of the Holy Spirit, allowed God to pour his love into my heart.

People come to faith in all sorts of ways – through a time of crisis, a moment of decision, or gradually, growing up in the faith.

We are all different, thank God. The important thing is that we are walking with Christ, supporting each other, open to the Spirit and confident of the good news of Jesus Christ, lifted up and saviour.

How about you? Still in the shadows? Will you be born again and know the fullness of life in Christ through the Spirit?