

St Bartholomew's Burnley, Sunday 1st March 2026

(2nd Sunday in Lent)

John 3. 1-17

“Throughout John’s Gospel the author speaks about light and darkness, flesh and spirit, heaven and earth. These three themes are present in today’s Gospel. We meet Nicodemus at night, in the dark.

In today’s Gospel, as I just said, Nicodemus is spiritually and physically as we say in the dark. He was a logical and a reasonable person. He was one of the pharisee clan of respected Jewish leaders who followed a rigorous interpretation of the law. Incoming to Jesus he is risking his reputation and the wrath of his colleagues. However, he is just too interested to know more about what Jesus has to say I suspect, well I believe like many Australians he was willing to give time to hear what Jesus had to say but, in the end, found it too demanding. He like so many today who cannot bring themselves to the point of belief because it challenges their own understandings of life and priorities. In my own engagement with people of all walks of life, disbelief is so often expressed without any serious exploration or with misinformation often influenced by friends and colleagues who also know little themselves.

Jesus always found what we would call “Bolt holes” or a cave, or hiding places, or special places where he went to pray and be alone. We hear how he was often weary and needing time out. He often, we are told, it was the Garden of Gethsemane that he went to and where he would go on that final evening before his death on the cross to be with God and to escape the charged atmosphere of the Upper Room.

I suspect that many people knew Jesus went there and so under the cloak of darkness Nicodemus makes his way out of the gates of the city on some kind of pretext to meet Jesus. He wants to know about God, the God that Jesus was teaching about and healing in his name. As a Pharisee of course he knew about God, he was a teacher, but he had questions to ask. It seems to me that he was having one of those wilderness or reflective experiences I spoke about last week. Reflecting on his own life and faith and open to explore possibilities. John in our Gospel today describes the significance of Jesus and his conversation with Nicodemus, as New Testament scholar Francis Moloney describes it, “as a journey from the darkness of ignorance, gloom, depression and meaninglessness into the light of the new covenant proclaimed in Jesus.”

I suspect Jesus was both surprised and with a hint of irony engages with Nicodemus, teacher to teacher. In the conversation that follows light challenges the darkness and

Nicodemus is offered a way out of his own wilderness. Jesus reminds Nicodemus as he reminds each of us that there is potential in all our lives that loves the light, that loves wholeness and seeks to do good. Although we are bombarded by the media with bad news, I believe that most of us want to do the right thing for everyone.

I know as I am sure you do also that many people are trying to see the light and do the right and proper thing, trying to move from the wilderness and the darkness into the light. We often describe some of them as troublemakers or dissidents or disturbers. There are even some of these disturbers in the Church. I view them as the prophets of our time.

Jesus seeks to push Nicodemus out of his comfort zone and challenges him to think and reflect on his own faith. He seeks to draw him away from the Temple, from the walls of the city, from the ritual of blood sacrifices into the dingy, dark world of a cave or bolt hole, into a world where Jesus was, with his dangerous and in the eyes of the authority's treacherous teachings. Nicodemus struggles with this and in a similar way we do also. He could not understand how one could be born again and so crawls away silently.

In the darkness of night and in a cave, a flame was flickering that illuminated the darkness. It was for Nicodemus and is an occasion when we are called into a deeper understanding of our

faith, into new and possibly threatening territory that we recognize that the truth of God is bigger than words we use to describe the divine. It is the proclamation that love is the essence of God. It is God who brings us into life and calls us to live a Christlike life, a life of love embracing compassion, mercy and justice. It is not about some future utopia nor simply about the here and now. It is about belonging to Christ, attaching ourselves to his vocation that is to be ours also. It is about recognizing that the shape of heaven is the moral foundation of the kingdom of God.

German theologian Bonhoeffer and many others throughout the history of the Christian faith have followed Jesus from the wilderness into the light of grace and unconditional love putting their life at risk of death and exclusion.

Whatever Nicodemus failed to understand in his encounter with Jesus the effect must have been important as it was Nicodemus that the Gospel writer tells us who came to the Garden tomb bringing myrrh and aloes to anoint the body of Jesus.

Sometimes it is the same for us.

Amen