

Reading John 3:1-17

### Jesus Teaches Nicodemus

**3** Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. <sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus at night and said, “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.”

<sup>3</sup> Jesus replied, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.<sup>[a]</sup>”

<sup>4</sup> “How can someone be born when they are old?” Nicodemus asked. “Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!”

<sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, “Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. <sup>6</sup> Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit<sup>[b]</sup> gives birth to spirit. <sup>7</sup> You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You<sup>[c]</sup> must be born again.’ <sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>[d]</sup>

<sup>9</sup> “How can this be?” Nicodemus asked.

<sup>10</sup> “You are Israel’s teacher,” said Jesus, “and do you not understand these things? <sup>11</sup> Very truly I tell you, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. <sup>12</sup> I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man.<sup>[e]</sup> <sup>14</sup> Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up,<sup>[f]</sup> <sup>15</sup> that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”<sup>[g]</sup>

<sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

All of you will be very aware of the brand name 'NIKE'. It's everywhere regarding sport. We all know it now for the brand that has the tick as its symbol. To give you an idea of how big Nike is, in 2016 their revenues across the world hit £28 billion.

But I wonder do you know where the name NIKE comes from? The Company adopted the name 'Nike' from the name of the Greek goddess for victory, who was called Nike (pronounced Ni-keh).

Our reading this morning from John 3 talks about a man called Nicodemus. He's a Jew, but he adopted a Greek name. The name Nicodemus comes from that same word Nike, but it's two Greek words- nike meaning victory and demos meaning people. The greek word demos is where we get the word democracy from. So therefore the meaning of Nicodemus is the victory of people - 'the people's victor'.

But as we study this guy (Nike-Demos- the people's victor, i.e. Nicodemus), I want you to consider how he changed from being the People's victor to God's victor.

In the eyes of his Jewish community Nicodemus was a victor. He had made it in life - he had influence, power and money among his Jewish citizens.

He was the people's victor, in terms of his academic excellence. In the world of academia, he was a professor in the Jewish laws. Put in our contemporary context, he was a university professor in one of the Jewish universities. His academic achievements therefore got him a place in the prestigious Sanhedrin- the religious body that governed the Jews. And unlike university professors today, his position brought with it great wealth.

But then one day, this people's victor became God's victor as he encountered Jesus. However, he chose to travel at night. Now why did he go at night – it might have been the embarrassment of a man of such stature going to see Jesus who was causing all kinds of issues in the community. It's also possible that the conversation he wanted to have with Jesus was much more personal rather than the typical academic questions that people would have fired at Jesus in the public square. Nicodemus wanted some questions in his mind to be answered. Academically he knew everything on the religious laws, and yet it wasn't enough; there were issues still in his mind.

You see despite all his head knowledge, this private time with Jesus was more valuable than his academic attainment or his status.

How do we know this? Well we hear of two further references to Nicodemus; next in John 7 where he stands amongst his peers defending Jesus. He appealed to his fellow religious leaders that it was worth listening and talking to Jesus, for he had personally met him. And then we hear of him in John 19, after Jesus' death. John tells us he brought a mixture of myrrh and aloe, which weighed 100 pounds. This would have cost a sizeable sum of money. This gives us a picture of a relationship that was much deeper than that of a conversation in the street; it should what Nicodemus was willing to give to the person who he had met with privately and personally.

So what can we gain from this? It reminds us that we've got to invest private and personal time with Jesus. Our knowledge of him through church life is not enough. It must be personal and private. Our background as loyal church attenders or members of the Church of Ireland count for nothing if there is not first a personal relationship with and recognition of what Jesus has done for you and me. The issue here folks is that the name Jesus might well be known across the world, but that really doesn't cut it. Jesus longs for a close

relationship with us. After all, we know through our own relationships, that we don't really know someone until we spend time with them, isn't that right?

In my bible readings for this morning, I read the story of Francis Chan who is a renowned pastor and writer in the US. Francis Chan's mother died giving birth to him. The only affection he can remember receiving from his father lasted about thirty seconds when he was on the way to his stepmother's funeral aged nine. When he was twelve, his father also died.

Francis is now a pastor. He and his wife, Lisa, have seven children. When his children were born, his own love for his children and his desire for their love was so strong that it opened his eyes to how much God desires and loves us. He said, 'Through this experience, I came to understand that my desire for my children is only a faint echo of God's great love for me and for every person he made... I love my kids so much it hurts.'

Calling his first book *Crazy Love*, he wrote, 'The idea of Crazy Love has to do with our relationship with God. All my life I've heard people say, "God loves you." It's probably the most insane statement you could make to say that the eternal Creator of this universe is in love with me. [Therefore], there is a response that ought to take place in believers, a crazy reaction to that love. Do you really understand what God has done for you? If so, why is your response so lukewarm?'

That folks is what's going on in our story today. Nicodemus could have all the head knowledge of the religious law, but without a relationship it meant nothing. For every one of us, God desires that our understanding of him goes far beyond the practice of church, the knowledge about him that can be found in reading lots of books. It's not about knowing about him, it's about knowing him intimately.

Nicodemus knew Jesus. When he was defending Jesus in public, John described him as the guy who had gone to Jesus earlier. When Nicodemus provides funeral incense for Jesus' funeral, John again describes him as the guy who had gone to Jesus earlier. In other words, John is telling us that when one has a personal and private time with Jesus, you will boldly defend him in public and you will willingly serve him with your resources.

So the obvious question is this - have you a personal daily relationship with Jesus? Come to him like Nicodemus if you have not. You may already have knowledge about Jesus in your head, as Nicodemus was. But also open your heart to Jesus as Nicodemus did, tell him to come and reign and rule your life; then you will experience what he experienced after he met Jesus that night. Over and above all, you will see the Kingdom of God and you will enter into it. Its effect turns us from people's victors – those who have a position or status in society, to God's victor – those who have a personal relationship with their saviour.

Maybe there is someone in your family, a son, a daughter, a brother, a sister, who may have been brought up in the church. If you ask them about Jesus they will be able to give you that text book answer. But folks, that will count for nothing in eternity. Jesus desires that personal relationship. I'd encourage you, that if you yourself have that relationship with Jesus, go and speak to your relative, and ask them to come into that personal connection with Jesus again. In September we hope to run the Alpha Course. Why not begin to think about how you could invite that friend or family member along, so that they too can have that personal encounter with Jesus in the way that Nicodemus did.