

Lent 4: John 3:14-21

Nicodemus

The reading from John follows Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, the curious Pharisee who sought out the controversial Rabbi under cover of darkness to ask him questions... and was left wrestling with what Jesus meant about being born again. How can someone enter a second time into his mother's womb??? He couldn't understand. Jesus was saying he had to start again, be transformed, think and be like a different person to see and be part of the kingdom of God.

Jesus directed Nicodemus to the Scriptures. He used the story from Exodus about the snake in the desert to explain that God had made a way for people to be saved, they must look to the Son of Man as they looked to the snake.

Still a problem. Why would looking at a bronze snake make a difference, what the people really needed anti-venom. God's solution sounds crazy. Likewise the larger work of God requires faith in the saviour's capacity and the solution he offers. Nicodemus is struggling to accept the path God presents, he wasn't the only one in the first century and to be honest, the Gospel still seems like foolishness in our days. Yet it is the only path offered to remove the poison in our veins, and rescue us from death on our doorstep.

Nicodemus' story encourages us to ask questions, to pursue Jesus, and not to worry when we end up with answers that confuse us. It's a story that encourages us to keep following. In the end of the Gospel Nicodemus is no longer afraid to stand up to his peers. Though I'm certain he doesn't have all the answers he desires, and he likely has no expectation that Jesus will rise again, he does something out in the open. He purchases a large quantity of myrrh and aloes to enable Jesus' body to be prepared properly, and with Joseph of Arimathea, another secret believer who has come into the light, puts him safely in a fresh and respectable tomb (John 19:39-42).

What happens to make a person change in this way? To go from meeting Jesus secretly to publicly aligning himself with this renegade, and risking his privilege and status, especially when it looks like Jesus' mission failed at his death?

The reason is the same one that transformed most of the disciples from scared men in an upstairs room, to bold preachers and persevering pilgrims filled with hope in their Saviour to the day they died. It is the truth and power of the Gospel.

For God so loved the world

And so we come to the reading for the day...one of the quintessential Gospel passages.

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.

God takes the initiative to love and give, his love is stronger and deeper than anything we have known and by the work of the Son, death is conquered and eternal life is offered to the world.

Ephesians puts it this way...

because of his great love for us, in order that...he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, God who is rich in mercy, expressed his kindness to us in Christ Jesus and made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions...it is by grace you have been saved, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:5-8).

We have become very skeptical in our world. We continue to suspect God's intentions, to question the Lord's motives, to doubt the Father's heart for humanity whom he created in his own image. But...

God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

The Son was sent on a mission, with a message - *the Kingdom of God is near, repent and believe the good news*. Despite what humanity tends to suspect, this is not some coercive political manoeuvre, the offer Jesus gives is an **invitation**. And it's not manipulation for a desired outcome - it **can** be taken or left. Neither is it a universal yes to everyone...it is not a blank cheque, it **must** be taken or left. A decision must be made...to follow or not, to believe or refuse, to listen or ignore.

Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

The purpose of his coming was to offer love, joy, reconciliation, forgiveness and the goodness of his grace. The Father shows his heart by offering salvation rather than demanding obedience. And it means he opens himself up to rejection. We may misunderstand him or not listen, we might prefer independence, or doubt there is any consequence in this life or eternity to worry about. We might be too focused on our own affairs to even notice he has introduced himself and opened the gate to wellbeing in this life and eternity in the next.

God acts in love and love risks rejection. You put yourself on the line and woo the other, but you can't make them love you in return. That's how it goes. So there's a sad edge to the Gospel...

...Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.

Back in Numbers, in the desert with Moses, the Scripture tell us poisonous snakes were sent to punish the Israelites. In a way the snakes are just symbolic of what was already

happening in the community - the people were complaining and moaning about the leadership and speaking against the Lord who had just saved them from the Egyptians and was sustaining them on their journey to the promised land. They had quickly forgotten the oppression they had experienced as slaves.

“Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!” (Numbers 21:5).

This sort of talk contaminates relationships, it undermines leaders who are trying to do their job faithfully, and it incites rebellion against God, denying his goodness and resisting his plans. This sort of chatter spreads like poison, affecting the heart of the person who speaks it and infecting the person who listens, joins in and passes it on. Left unchecked it makes a healthy community toxic and leads to its ultimate death.

Some of the Israelites died before they went to God for a solution. Perhaps were in denial about the appearance of the snakes, or maybe they were angry God was punishing them, and resented him. Maybe they loved the darkness more than the light like John says, and weren't able to own up to the truth that they were impatient with their journey, that they had been grumbling against Moses and speaking against God's purposes and his provisions. God needed to save them from themselves this time, and help them to be his people.

They needed God's help before the snakes came, before some of them died. Now they realise it and call for help. He hears them, he always wants to help them, though they doubt his love.

The passage says all who looked to the bronze serpent were healed. But if they had not, instead of being healed by the God who stood behind it, they would have stayed in pain with venom in their systems and died. I expect some still died, us humans are a stubborn lot, its not just the Israelites. I imagine some didn't see the need for the remedy and continued about their day; or they didn't want the remedy God provided and sat wrapping a tourniquet around their leg hoping to save themselves; I'm sure some thought it was ridiculous to think looking a cut out serpent on a stick would solve anything.

Silly or not, it was a simple thing to do, and it was effective for those who followed the instruction. God didn't desire anyone die, but the invitation had to be acted on - they needed to trust God and look at the bronze snake. Or not.

It's the same message Jesus brought. It's the same message we hear and share as his disciples. Repent and believe the good news or not. Continue to trust the Father's heart for us, and let him transform us into the likeness of his Son or not.

It's good news that there is hope for those who will turn from their own ways and trust in Jesus. In fact, there is no other hope for us but him.

People like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimethea, people like Peter, James and John, Bartholomew, Thomas, Matthew, Philip, Andrew, Judas known as Thaddeus, the other James son of Alpheus, Simon the Zealot, Matthias and Paul and many other unnamed

followers since saw the truth in Jesus, repented of their own ways and accepted his invitation.

...whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

They continued to turn to Jesus across their lives and allow him to change them. These folk had darkness in their life just like everyone around them, but they believed the good news and came into the light. They were not afraid of what the light would reveal but welcomed its presence, and the cleansing it brought, day after day.

If you have not accepted Jesus as your Saviour and Lord, even if you're a bit perplexed like Nicodemus was, hear the good news of the Gospel this morning...

If you know Jesus already, if you've known him for a long time, perhaps you find yourself in company with Moses' friends today. We are all guilty of grumbling against each other, of complaining about our leaders, and speaking against God's goodness to us. If we let it go unchecked, it will spread like poison in our veins, upend the Lord's work among us, damage our capacity to show his character to the society in which we live, and it will destroy our community.

If you have heard the Lord speak to you in this, hear the good news of the Gospel this morning...

God so loved the world...

God **so** loved the world...

God so loved the **world**...

...that he **gave**...he gave his only **Son**...he gave his **only** Son...

...that **whoever believes**...whoever believes in **him**...

...**should not** perish...

...should not perish but **have everlasting life**... Praise God.

It's the invitation to Nicodemus...no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit... 'You must be born again!'

Repent and believe this good news. Let it go, turn over a new leaf, a new forest, start again, be born of the Spirit, be transformed, think and be like a different person, see and be part of the kingdom of God.

"Come," Jesus says, "leave your nets and follow me..."

Phillips Commentaries; Feasting on the Word Year B