

## **Sunday 1 March – Second Sunday of Lent**

### **Sermon by Christine Newmarch**

*An audio recording of the sermon from St Luke's will be available after the service at [Sermons \(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk\)](http://Sermons(tk-tiptree-braxted-benefice.org.uk)*

May I speak in the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is only John's gospel which tells us about Nicodemus. He places the account of his night-time visit to Jesus early in the gospel.

John makes no secret of Jesus' identity. It is very clear from the very start.

He tells us about Jesus first sign - turning the water into wine at the wedding in Cana – before Jesus' time had come.

Next John tells us how Jesus went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. It was on this occasion that Jesus was angered by the moneychangers in the Temple precincts, and threw them out. Word would have travelled quickly in Jerusalem.

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews and significant figure at the Temple, was intrigued. He wanted to know more and to speak with Jesus. He visited Jesus at night. The cool of the evening would have been pleasant for conversation, but John hints that Nicodemus was a secret enquirer for fear of his fellow Jews.

What would that journey have been like?

Where did he come from?

How did he know where to find Jesus?

We can imagine that the streets of Jerusalem were almost deserted; just the Roman soldiers on patrol, and some spies lurking in the shadows, of course. He made it there safely and met Jesus.

Reading the gospel it seems as though he had a private conversation with Jesus, that he found Jesus alone, like this? But most artists' interpretations show others in the background – Jesus' disciples most likely. Jesus tended to travel with them, to teach them, so this seems quite likely, but it would have changed the dynamics, making Nicodemus feel even more vulnerable maybe.

They talked and talked. Nicodemus knew that Jesus was a teacher sent from God, for how else could he do all the signs, for which he was becoming famous, apart from God's presence?

But Nicodemus had not grasped that he was not just visiting a rabbi sent from God, but God himself, incarnate in Jesus. How must it have felt to be there, in secret, afraid of his fellow Pharisees? Was he hoping to be given clear answers? Did he hope to have some special message to take back to the Sanhedrin, a message or some explanation which would suddenly make everything all right?

Jesus did not make it that easy for Nicodemus. He did not show the Sanhedrin leader the deference that he might have expected. Jesus challenged him, even teased him with teaching that seemed like riddles about being born again. A lot of the images Jesus used seemed familiar, but he was using them in startling ways.

Poor Nicodemus, it had been a long day and now his head was reeling with this debate. It was a bit much for Jesus to question why he, as a teacher of Israel, could not understand what he was saying. Nicodemus had expected a bit more respect. He wanted to learn, and some verbal tussling was the Jewish way of doing so, but this was hard going, very hard going. Had it been such a good idea to risk so much by slipping out at night to visit Jesus?

Jesus seemed to speak of himself as the Son of Man. What was that about? And about being 'lifted up,' just as Moses had lifted up the serpent in the wilderness? The brass serpent which Moses had lifted gave healing life. Where was that now? Jesus was saying that whoever believed in the Son of Man when he is lifted up would have eternal life. What was he trying to say? How could this man compare himself to Moses, or say that he could offer everlasting life to those who believed in him? This seemed like impossible nonsense.

Nicodemus was tired, his head was reeling. He did not feel he had shown himself in his best light in his discussions with Jesus, and yet... And yet he went home strangely elated by Jesus' words about love, eternal life and the world being saved.

All these thoughts stayed with Nicodemus. His admiration for Jesus grew, while at the same time other Pharisees became ever more angry with him.

When the chief priests and the Pharisees sought to have Jesus arrested by the temple police, Nicodemus could keep quiet no longer. He spoke up, reminding his colleagues that the law required a person to be heard before being judged.

Finally, once Jesus had been crucified, Nicodemus found the courage of his convictions. He had not been able to help Jesus in life, had not been able to stop his colleagues from their cruel actions, but now he did what he could to show Jesus the respect in death, which he had hidden in life. He brought a hundred pounds of myrrh and aloes to help Joseph of Arimathea to embalm his body.

It was his act of love. Nicodemus had indeed been born again of the spirit.

We have also heard this morning about Abram's journey many centuries earlier. He was an old man when God asked him to leave his country and set out with only a promise of God's blessing and protection. Abram and Nicodemus trusted in God, and their journeys were fruitful not just for themselves but for all of us who follow on.

We are all invited to participate with God and his love for the world as we travel through Lent, and throughout life. The way is not always clear, but let it be our prayer to be blessed with the courage to step out on the journey God has in mind for us, for you, for me, for our church community, and for all who love and trust him. Amen.