

We start a new sermon series this morning with the title 'Models for Mission'.

Over the last few weeks we have been thinking about how we share our faith and looking at some very practical lessons from Col 4:2-6. Now for the next few weeks we will range through the New Testament looking at how people did it and hopefully learn some tips from people like Jesus, Paul, Peter and the early church about how we can better be used by God in our evangelism which as we saw in the first of the previous series is defined as "Serving others so that they too may discover and respond to the good news of Jesus."

Today in this first of the series we look at this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus under the title 'Jesus taking the initiative'.

So do open the Bible to John 3 and if you are listening on download or reading this why not open your Bible as well?

'Jesus taking the initiative', how do you respond to that? Does it make you feel uncomfortable? Do you think, "I'm a background person not a leader. I respond I don't take initiative."

I think there is something for all of us here in the way Jesus responded to Nicodemus.

1. Nicodemus comes to Jesus v1-2

Have a look with me at v 1-2. To help us understand what Jesus said and why let's note

a. who this man was – he was a Jew, one of God's people, and a Pharisee, who put great emphasis on the law and being right with God through the law. This was his background. He would have seen himself as someone whom God looked on with favour because of the way he lived his life. Perhaps someone here this morning or listening on download thinks that. Perhaps you are feeling I've lived a good life even a religious life and so God is pleased with me.

b. what he said to Jesus – he said "we know" that is popular opinion amongst him and his friends was that.... The Daily Mail says.... What he said was, you have been doing some amazing things and so we recognise that God is with you. Nicodemus was aware of what Jesus was doing and had come to find out just who he was.

In September 2003, David Blaine did a 44-day endurance stunt sealed inside a transparent Plexiglas case suspended in the air on the south bank of the River Thames. During the 44-day period, Blaine went without any food or nutrients and survived on just 4.5 litres of water per day.

Thousands of people came to look at the spectacle and of course the media wanted to know more about the man behind the event. The Times reported that "1,614 articles in the British press have made reference to the exploit."

Jesus activity had drawn attention to himself and now this religious leader wanted to know exactly who the man behind the events was.

Note that Nicodemus didn't ask a question but rather made a statement along the lines of 'Jesus you must be a good teacher because of the things you are able to do.'

Now I wonder if someone were to say to you, "I see Jesus as a good teacher with some godly insights to add into the melting pot" I wonder how you would respond?

Would you enter into a debate on Jesus as God? Would you simply agree? Would you change the topic and talk about the weather?

2. Jesus' response to Nicodemus v3-8

The response of Jesus was not to answer his question but to make a statement that doesn't seem to relate to what Nicodemus said.

But in what he said Jesus firstly took the initiative and secondly he held Nicodemus for a while at arms length working out what was going on with him.

a. Jesus set the agenda.

If we look back to John 2:23-24, "Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all men."

Not everyone was really wanting to know Jesus and as we see later in the gospels many who saw his miracles could not see Jesus as God or his actions as bringing in the kingdom of God. In fact just the opposite they accused him of being of the devil.

I was saying a few weeks back that when people ask me questions I do sometimes ask one back to see where they are coming from.

That was in effect what Jesus did. Nicodemus came and told Jesus what he had seen, the miracles and Jesus said ""I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.""(John 3:3)

Nicodemus you can't see unless you are born again. Jesus said it three times to Nicodemus.

Jesus didn't go along the line that Nicodemus was suggesting. It would appear that Nicodemus was saying to Jesus they had seen some of his miracles and that suggested some things about Jesus ministry, Now if Jesus could supply some more information well then he and his friends could assess Jesus and make a decision as to who he was.

But Jesus refused to play that game instead he said to him simply that to see he needed to be born again. In one sentence Jesus swept away all that Nicodemus stood for. Later on another Pharisee Paul would experience the same as he came to realise that everything he had based his rightness before God on was in effect sand not rock. Nicodemus thought his obedience to the law, his religious activity was sufficient to please God but here Jesus said no "you must be born again". Nicodemus' agenda was religion and Jesus' agenda was God's power and grace.

Some months ago I was chatting with some friends and one guy said “I gave up on religion ages ago”. Clearly he expected me as a clergyman to defend the church. I simply said, “me too I’m not into religion”. He provided a way in and I tried to take the initiative but to talk not about religion and such like but about faith.

Some weeks ago we were thinking about having a framework to help us remember the heart of the gospel and of our own story. If we have that then we can feel confident to take the initiative and change the agenda so that we are talking about the gospel and not getting into debates about peripheral things.

b. Jesus spoke to Nicodemus

now that may seem obvious but he spoke differently to this man than he did to the Samaritan woman at the beginning of chapter 4 or the gentile official at the end of Chapter 4.

Jesus was aware of the background and beliefs of Nicodemus and he spoke into that context. We may well look at v5 where Jesus spoke about being born of “water and the Spirit” and wonder what he was on about. Indeed the writers have had a field day trying to explain it and I don’t claim to be able to give a definitive answer. However, I think he is taking Nicodemus back to Old Testament images, which he as a Pharisee would be familiar with and perhaps to passages like Ezekiel 36:25-27, “I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.” Jesus was speaking of a new birth that cleanses and renews but doing it in a way that Nicodemus would understand.

The response to the Samaritan woman when Jesus took the initiative was very different because he spoke into the context of their background and beliefs.

So with my friend he was speaking of a background of upbringing in the Roman Catholic church and that gave me some background to speak into even if I was not going to follow the agenda he was giving. Just think for a moment of the people you are in contact with. What do you know of their background? How might that affect what you say?

There is a story how in the late 19th Century Thomas Huxley the great agnostic was at a house party and on the Sunday as most of the members got ready to go to church he approached a man known to have a simple Christian faith and said to him, “suppose you don’t go to church today. Suppose you stay at home and you tell me what your Christian faith means to you and why you are a Christian.” For a change Huxley didn’t want a debate but to hear about Jesus. But clearly what the man had to say was bound to be different that say to someone of perhaps a less intellectually frame of mind.

Apparently the man stayed there and shared about his faith. The story tells that when he had finished there were tears in Huxley's eyes as he responded "I would give my right hand if I could believe that". However I would think that being aware of Huxley's background would have made the man think carefully what to say. Think about who you are speaking to.

c. Jesus got to the heart of the matter

Here we come back to what Jesus said to Nicodemus, "you must be born again". That was the heart of the matter for Nicodemus. That was what he needed. Yes he came perhaps wondering who Jesus was. Perhaps wanting some more information so that he could put Jesus in a nice safe box and then carrying on living his life as he saw best. But that was not on offer when he came to Jesus. What Nicodemus needed was not some more information but a change of heart and only the Holy Spirit could do that. That was what Jesus told him.

When I was in the scouts and we sat by the campfire we sang all sorts of songs including one which had the refrain "Oh you'll never get to heaven...." then followed by a mode of transport, so for example "Oh you'll never get to heaven on roller skates cos you'll roll right past the pearly gates" or "Oh you'll never get to heaven in an Austin car cos an Austin car won't get that far".

Well Jesus was saying to Nicodemus that he'd never get to heaven, he would never enter the kingdom of God through religion. It was not by obeying laws and keeping festivals that he would be acceptable to God. His own righteousness, his own good works was never going to get him there. What was needed was a radical change to be born not just of the flesh, the human birth but of the spirit a spiritual birth.

The same is true for us today and for those whom we would like to see come to know Jesus. Yes we can debate many things and I am always up for facing questions and discussing issues but if anyone would wish to be part of God's kingdom, know themselves as a child of God and a follower of Jesus then it will only be as God the Holy Spirit works in our hearts to convict us of our rebellion and sin against God and point us to Jesus and his death on the cross as the penalty which removes that sin, washes us clean and opens the way to God the Father. You can get to heaven through Jesus and only through Jesus.

Ultimately that is what we all need to hear and what your contact person needs to hear be it from you or later on through one of the team from Oak Hill at one of the discover events.

Nicodemus wanted something didn't he or else he wouldn't have come to Jesus. If he hadn't wanted to know more about Jesus he could have stayed at a distance and probably with the other Pharisees have denounced Jesus as a trouble maker. There was something drawing him to Jesus. The phrase that came to my mind was wistful longing. It would seem that this man, who would, as a Pharisee, have been steeped in the law and the traditions of the Jewish faith, was beginning to think that

perhaps there was more to it than that. Perhaps one or more of your contact people is in the same boat they are on a journey and being drawn towards Jesus. However, if they are to Discover and respond to the good news of Jesus then they need us to be their servants and signposts helping to point the way – that is evangelism.

Just to encourage us if we follow the life of Nicodemus through John's gospel in John 7:50-51 sees him speaking publicly in favour of Jesus and 19:39-42 he with Joseph of Arimathea wrapped his body and placed it in the tomb. So perhaps these public displays suggest he was on the way to faith, which reminds us that the path to faith can be a long journey but is only fruitful if we are journeying with and to Jesus.

I can still remember my first time at Wembley Football stadium. My friend and I went together and we walked down Wembley way with thousands of others and got under the twin towers. Now what? Where do we go how do we get in? Be sure we wanted to get in we had come along way although the people round about didn't know that. So wanting to get in we asked someone and they showed us where the gate was. We got to the gate and we had the right ticket and in we went. I think there are many people around like Nicodemus who are wistfully longing to find a way into the Christian faith. Although we may not know it they have travelled along way along the path already and just need us to be willing to help them that last little bit. But if we show people the way then we must be sure they have the right ticket the ticket of faith in Christ in Christ for no other ticket will gain entry into eternal life. With that in mind, let's be ready to take a bit of initiative and help our contact people in the right direction as Jesus did for Nicodemus.