



Lent 2023 Gospel Conversations Session 2

Nicodemus John 3. 1-17

Opening Worship

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. *An abrupt start to the story. Nicodemus appears only three times in the gospel: here, 7.50 where he speaks up for Jesus against some other Pharisees, and 19.39 where he is one of those who bury Jesus and is described as a secret disciple 'out of fear.'*² He came to Jesus by night (so nobody would see him) and said to him, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs (note John talks a lot about the importance of Jesus' signs.) that you do apart from the presence of God.' (A clear and dangerous statement of faith.)³ Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' (Note how Jesus answers a question Nicodemus has not asked. Above can be translated *again, anew or from above.*)⁴ Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?'⁵ Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, (note the formulaic introduction) no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. (Perhaps a reference to baptism but not necessarily. Jesus offers himself as the source of living water in ch 4. Faith has to be earthly and heavenly)⁶ What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." (This may be more of an invitation than a command.)⁸ The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.'⁹ Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' (these are the last words of Nicodemus in this story.)¹⁰ Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? (Misunderstanding is more usually attributed to the disciples, especially in the synoptics. Jesus may be being sarcastic or humorous here.)

¹¹(The encounter/conversation is now between Jesus and the readers/listeners.) 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹²If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell

you about heavenly things? ¹³ No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. ¹⁴ And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness ([Num 21. 9 Moses' serpent of bronze preserved the Israelites from death](#)), so must the Son of Man be lifted up ([for crucifixion, resurrection and ascension](#)), ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life ([eternal life occurs 15 times in the gospel, and life 15 times more.](#))

¹⁶ 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ([Note that faith, for John, is never a noun but always a verb. Note that God so loved the world, not the church.](#))

¹⁷ 'Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. ¹⁸ Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already ([this may be the result of living in the dark – not an active threat](#)) because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. ¹⁹ And this is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. [Light and darkness are major images in John.](#) ²⁰ For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. ²¹ But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.' ([note the clear dualism implied here: light v dark, good v bad. Note the importance of doing, not just saying you believe.](#))

Context

There is no exact locale given for where this takes place, though we are told Jesus is in Jerusalem during the Passover feast. At the end of the chapter, Jesus and the disciples are reported as going into the land of Judea. The woman at the well in the previous chapter moved from a place of misunderstanding to a place of enlightenment but Nicodemus seems unable to do this, continuing to take things literally – or perhaps he does understand only too well but cannot risk his job/status/reputation.



1. We have continued to the end of verse 21 as Jesus is still speaking but the lectionary often stops the reading at v 17. Why do you think that is?
2. Have you ever felt like Nicodemus – wanting to be more upfront about your faith but being scared about what that might mean?



On the left: *Christ and Nicodemus (1863)* by Eduard Von Steinle (Austrian, 1810 – 1886)

On the right: *Pieta with Saint Nicodemus, the Virgin Mary and Saint John the Evangelist* by Bartolomeo di Giovanni

3. What would you say *body language* tells us about the way the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus is unfolding in the painting by Steinle?
4. What might be going through Nicodemus' mind in the painting by Bartolomeo?



Time for reflection

Share one feeling and one thought at the end of the session.

Finish by reading this poem and then saying the Grace together.

You will say I am ancient and cautious as a tortoise:

Yes, and you would be right. But can he help

Being a tortoise? And can I help being I?

Is it possible to cast one's nature like a snakeskin

By desire and will, by an act of the imagination?

He said men could, and I once believed him.

Though, in my character, only cautiously believed.

Custom, I suppose, dictates: a sheltered childhood,

Comfort and servants; every move prescribed,

Every request forestalled. And later, in scholarship,

Walking along the carefully-trodden paths,

Fitting my sandals in the approved footprints.

To others, no doubt, an object of admiration,

But to me, who lived closer to myself than they did,

Lacking one last possession, I lacked all.

For you see: though I could quote the Scriptures,

Arguing for hours on the minutest quibble,

My philosophy was valueless. I could discuss life,

But life itself, the final mystery,

Always eluded me. What was its purpose?

Could man, incomplete, complete himself?

Unsatisfied, find satisfaction?

The first part of 'Nicodemus' by Clive Sansom in the Witnesses

The Grace . . .

Excursus: Eternal Life in the gospels

In the synoptic gospels, we find only **four** examples (though some are repeated.)

Matthew 19.16 the young man cf Mark 10.17 and Luke 18.18

19.29 Jesus to Peter cf Mark 10.30 – see below

25.46 When did we see you hungry or sick or in prison . . .? The righteous will go into eternal life.

Mark 10.17 What must I (the young man) do to inherit eternal life? Sell all you have and give it to the poor, then come and follow me.

10.30 Jesus to Peter: those who have given everything up will get back a hundredfold in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.

Luke 10.25 The young lawyer - love the Lord your God . . . followed by parable of Good Samaritan.

18.18 cf Mark 10.17 'A certain ruler.'

In **John**, we find many more examples

3.15/16 as above in Nicodemus' story

3.36 at the end of the discussion re JB; whoever believes in the Son has eternal life

4.14 Woman at well story. 'The water that I give them will become in them a spring of water gushing up into eternal life.'

4.36 Jesus says 'the reaper is gathering fruit for eternal life.'

5.24 'Anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.'

5.39 'You search the scriptures because you think in them you have eternal life and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me . . .

6.27/6.40/6.47 'Do not work for the food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life.' (after feeding of crowds.) and 6.40 this is the will of my Father . . . whoever believes has eternal life . . .

6.54 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life

6.68 Peter says 'Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.'

10.28 After good shepherd discourse: My sheep hear my voice. I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they will never perish.'

12.25 Those who love their life lose it and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

12.50 Jesus says 'And I know that his (God's) commandment is eternal life. What I speak, therefore, I speak just as the Father has told me.'

17.2/3 ch 17 is Jesus' long prayer to the Father. He says 'since you have given him (ie me, Jesus) authority over all people to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God . . .'

