

'Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?'

- Do you see evidence of a new creation growing around us?
- How, in your own faith, do you hold together the beauty and the horror of life?

### Prayer

A is for intercession; B is more contemplative.

- A Remember and give thanks for those places where, in the last few days, you've glimpsed glory 'shining through the weeds'. Don't rush, take your time and pray for a greater awareness and recognition of those glimpses. In a group, you could share such experiences before praying.
- B Think of a person, place or situation that's on your heart, for whatever reason, and see that person, place or situation bathed in the glory of God, transfigured, healed. Hold that vision for as long as seems good and right.

## 3

'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?'

John 3.10 (1-16)

The day is cooling down as I slip out of the house quietly. The evening air envelops me like warm silk. I try not to look furtive but, equally, I really don't want to be seen as I set off for the other side of the city.

My name is Nicodemus. I'm a member of the Sanhedrin and some have seen me as a bit of a rising star. That's nonsense, of course, especially as I'm feeling increasingly out of step with my fellow Pharisees. Only Joseph, my friend from Arimathea, seems to feel like I do. Together we make up the entirety of the Sanhedrin's loyal opposition.

And I'm about to make the situation worse.

I pretend that I'm not keeping in the shadows of the old stone buildings but, to be honest, I am. I'm thinking, 'Is this wise?', but it's becoming increasingly obvious to my colleagues that I believe we're heading in the wrong direction. We're promoting a backward-looking understanding of the law, and defending it with increasing ferocity. I want so much more for our religion. The law is supposed to set us free, not tie us up in knots. We might be singing the right song but we're singing it to yesterday's tune.

Then there's this young teacher who seems to get it. Everyone says that he sings the song of our faith beautifully – so beautifully, in fact, that some of my colleagues are muttering that he's dangerous and has to be stopped, even got rid of. How ridiculous! I want to listen to this young man, talk with him, find out why he's so popular.

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That's why I'm on my way now, as the sun fades and the day slides into night. I want to hear him out, perhaps even see what I'm missing.

I turn left down an alleyway, then right. I don't know this part of the city very well. I feel a bit self-conscious, dressed as I am in my rather elegant day robes (I didn't have time to change). When I get to the address I've been given, it's almost as if he's waiting for me. He greets me with a smile. 'You must be Nicodemus. Welcome.'

He sits us both down in the quiet courtyard as the evening settles around us. He pours us some wine. He's not in a hurry to find out why I've come; he's giving me space. Instead, I stumble in without any subtlety at all. 'Rabbi' – I want to be gracious – 'we know that you're a teacher who's come from God. You couldn't be doing these extraordinary things otherwise.'

I pause. I'm not sure where I'm going with this. Why didn't I think it out properly beforehand? Anyway, I don't have time to frame a question because Jesus (that's his name) comes straight in with something that takes me completely by surprise. 'You know, don't you, that you can't see God's kingdom without being born from above?' I'm wrong-footed straight away – what on earth does he mean by that?

I stammer out the first thing that comes into my head. 'Surely you're not suggesting that we can enter our mother's womb a second time and be born again, are you?' It sounds pretty silly even as I say it. I take a quick gulp of wine to cover my embarrassment.

'No, Nicodemus; it's a figure of speech. I'm saying that if we're going to be part of the kingdom that God's designed for us, we have to be born not only in an ordinary human way but also in a spiritual way, with the life-giving Spirit of God himself. That's what I mean by "from above". It's that experience which raises our faith from rules and rituals to what God truly wants – for us to enjoy his presence, his life in us, with all that flows from this intimacy, such as love, peace, justice and so much more.'

I like what I'm hearing but he's going too fast for me. I try to look intelligent.

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'Come on, Nicodemus,' he grins. 'Try this. The breeze is gentle tonight, isn't it? But remember the other day, when the wind blew us all over the place? The wind blows when and where it likes. We can't tell it what to do. It's like that when we let the Spirit of God loose in our lives. It's wonderful, crazy, unpredictable, glorious! Don't you see? I know you do.'

I don't.

But I'm trying. 'How can that happen?' I ask lamely.

Then Jesus asks me a question that, if I'm honest, wounds me. 'Are you one of our esteemed teachers and you don't understand these basic things?' I don't think he means it maliciously; he's really simply being mischievous, but with a proper challenge beneath the playfulness. Anyway, the question hits me in both the head and the heart. All this great wisdom we Pharisees have accumulated over years of study, yet have we missed the centre of it all?

Of course, that's just what I've been suspecting. Which is why I'm here.

Fortunately, he doesn't press me for an embarrassed answer. He carries on helping me to see my religion through fresh eyes. He talks about what he believes is his part in God's work. He's also very keen to get across that God doesn't want to condemn the world through our religion. He's not a punishing parent, not an unpredictable tyrant. Rather, he wants to save the world from its troubles – to give us what he calls 'abundance' in our experience of life.

We talk on into the night. Nibbles are brought, humous and olives. More wine. I'm not sure which is more intoxicating – the wine or the wisdom that flows from this impressive young man. When I finally stagger out into the street, I'm dizzy from both. I wonder what to do with all these ideas buzzing through my head. I know one thing, though – I'm going to look out for Jesus. I may be able to help him in some way. He's certainly helped me tonight.

In the meantime, I'm going to have to work hard on that question he put to me in the middle of our conversation: 'Are you one of our esteemed teachers of Israel and you don't understand these basic things?'

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As I wander back through the dark streets, it feels like I'm a child, just at the beginning.

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You may not be a qualified teacher but the lives of all of us involve 'teaching' the faith every day. It's in how we do ordinary things, and how we live, love and heal the bit of the world we occupy with others. So the question Jesus asked Nicodemus could well be addressed to us as well. Do we understand the things at the core of our faith or have we done as Nicodemus did and gained much information and knowledge, but at the expense of what's really the heart of the matter? There's a case to be made that we've often missed the core of the faith by an inch that's ended up being a mile.

Of course, information and knowledge are important. I used to run a theological college, so I can hardly be uninterested in teaching the central beliefs of Christianity. I still read about the faith incessantly. I'm fascinated by the issues that make up a coherent and persuasive system of belief. This, though, is where the missing inch comes in. Is the Christian faith, essentially, to be found in a series of beliefs, doctrines and confessional statements or is it a new relationship with God that leads to the practice of love and the pursuit of justice? I read Jesus here as teaching his listeners not a system of belief but, rather, an alternative wisdom, a way to love God and neighbour from a new source.

He was teaching about a kingdom that had already arrived and encouraging his followers to live in the radical 'upside downness' of that kingdom. He outlined this world in the Sermon on the Mount, where he taught that everything – from money and relationships to conflict and prayer – should be done in a different way. It should not come from commands and prohibitions but from the reality of a new relationship with God.

American writer Brian McLaren makes a clear proposal:

What would it mean for Christians to rediscover their faith not as a problematic system of beliefs, but as a just and generous way of life, rooted in contemplation and expressed in

Grace: Love and mercy given to us by God because he wants us to have it, not because of something we've done to earn it. Unearned favour or undeserved gift

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compassion? Could Christians migrate from defining their faith as a system of beliefs to expressing it as a loving way of life?<sup>4</sup>

Such a proposal isn't new. Poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote in 1884, 'Christianity is not a theory or a speculation but a life; not a philosophy of life, but a life and a living process . . . Try it.'<sup>5</sup>

Again, this is not being anti-intellectual. I'm thrilled when I find people are engaging in theology or biblical studies and being excited by it. Again and again, I've found all that's necessary for this to happen is for someone's appetite to be whetted, and then they find that the pursuit of understanding in a taster course or training for some form of ministry is completely absorbing and life-changing. We can be deeply energized by the process of learning.

That said, the satisfaction of this hunger usually rests on a deeper need which has, in some way, been met or glimpsed or sought already, and that's the need for some form of encounter with God. It's this reality that the soul craves, and its practical outworking in the mess and muddle of ordinary life. Are these the things that we teach and learn – how to encounter God and live faithfully in response?

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Obviously, how we encounter God is difficult to teach or learn because it's a mystery lodged in the even greater mystery of God. For some of us it comes in the form of a profound response to the beauty of nature and an awareness of its divine imprint. Some of us experience an unfamiliar stirring of the spirit, a nagging need to look deeper. Others find it in the compelling words of Scripture that warm the heart and stir the will. For others of us again, it comes in a top-to-toe conversion experience that makes everything look different.

Acclaimed American writer Marilyn Robinson says, 'Religion is human behaviour; grace is the love of God.'<sup>6</sup> It's grace that we need to learn and teach; grace that we need to experience as the richest gift of faith. When I finally understood that, when it had

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finally got through the layers of trust that I still placed in the conventional securities of possessions and personal prestige, it was then that I came to 'the heart of the heart' of the Christian faith. It was all about grace. I was in my thirties before I got there, already ordained for a number of years. It isn't always easy to learn the simplicity that lies at the centre of complexity. I'd previously always majored on understanding. I thought that if people understood the Christian faith properly, they would commit themselves to it. I still want to understand, and for other people to understand. I still think it's of real importance and that we must never sell the faith short intellectually. It can captivate the deepest thinkers and the biggest brains. However, it's not the molten core of faith. Karl Barth, one of those 'biggest brains', was on his way to the United States of America later in life and he was asked how he would summarize the millions of words he had written as a theologian. He said, 'Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.' Grace, the love of God, received and lived out, is the core of the Christian faith.

New Zealand retreat leader and spiritual director Sue Pickering writes:

It's one of the saddest things to see elderly people who have been exposed to Sunday School or church for most of their lives, still not really knowing that God loves them and is with them. These people form a significant number of our current congregations, and the duty of care we owe them goes far beyond keeping them comfortable with more of the familiar until we take their funerals. We have a responsibility to offer them opportunities for spiritual growth, a chance to have their spiritual needs met, and above all, the comfort of knowing that God is with them all the way home.<sup>7</sup>

'All the way home' is a lovely way of imagining the journey of faith. We end as we began – in the heart of God.

As a teacher of Israel, Nicodemus had all the right motives. He wanted the law to guide and enrich people's lives, but the challenge

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of Jesus was that he had missed his goal by an inch that became a mile. That could be our problem, too, if we see the Christian faith as a repository of truths rather than a way of transformation.

Do we understand these basic things?

## To ponder

- I wonder if you've usually thought of the Christian faith as a set of beliefs or as 'a loving way of life'?
- What does 'encountering God' mean for you?
- How has your understanding of faith changed over time?
- What helps you go deeper in your faith?

## Prayer

A is for intercession; B is more contemplative.

- A Pray for any people you know (priest, minister, bishop, teacher) who have a responsibility for teaching the faith and helping people to learn and grow. Pray that each has a mind that's constantly being refreshed, and a heart that's set on Christ and the growing maturity of his people.
- B Imagine yourself 'sunbathing' in the warmth of God's love. Go outside (in your imagination), lie down and relax; let the sun do the rest. Be aware of the warmth of the sun permeating your whole being. Rest in God.