

A Question of Love

(Sermon by Cheryl Williams, preached at Footscray Baptist on March 1st, 2026 – John 3:1-17)

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Nicodemus. A teacher. A respected leader. A theologian. A person with questions, someone seeking for truth. Curious. Risk taker. We find this man sneaking out in the night, afraid his friends and colleagues might see him as he seeks out Jesus. He is trying to understand who this young rabble rouser causing quite a stir, is. This young Rabbi who is gaining quite a following with his teaching, his miracles, his reaching out to those on the margins, his healing, his questioning of the status quo, his acceptance of all. Curious, yet afraid, he doesn't want to compromise his reputation, his standing in the community, so he seeks Jesus out at night, walking amongst the shadows, down darkened streets so as to avoid anyone catching him and having to explain what he is up to.

Like many in his generation, Nicodemus, would have been waiting and hoping for a Messiah to come and liberate the people. He would have had questions about when God would save the people from the Roman occupation, when they would be free. Perhaps he wanted to discover if Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah. Perhaps he wanted to better understand what Jesus was really trying to teach the people about God. Perhaps he wanted to understand why Jesus insisted on upsetting the religious leaders. Perhaps he was unsettled by the battle lines being drawn between Jesus and the religious leaders and was seeking a way of compromise between both groups.

We don't really know what Nicodemus was going to ask Jesus, because once he finds Jesus and before he asks any questions the conversation takes a different turn. Initially he compliments Jesus, saying, it is clear that Jesus is a teacher who has come from God, otherwise he couldn't do the things he has. But before he can begin his own questions, Jesus makes a cryptic statement, about needing to be born from above to see the kingdom. This seems to derail Nicodemus and his questions. He takes Jesus' words quite literally and asks how is this possible? Jesus then speaks to him about things of the Spirit, a parable about the wind blowing where it wills but felt, a comparison between the things of God/Spirit and things of the flesh. Puzzled and confused perhaps but also interested, Nicodemus asks how this all works.

Jesus rebukes him a little, and suggests such a learned and holy man as Nicodemus should understand these things. That if he and his colleagues had actually tried to understand Jesus rather than run him out of town, they just might have seen what he was saying. Jesus then speaks about God's inclusive love, alludes to how the long awaited Messiah or Saviour would suffer and what the purpose and task of the Son of God would be.

Jesus challenges Nicodemus to look beyond the categories he is used to thinking about. He challenges him not to think so literally all the time. He challenges him to not box everything up neatly but to give room for new understandings.

So, what answers does Nicodemus find to the questions he did and didn't ask? (As an aside, my brother used to say to me all the time, the trouble with you academics is you always answer a different question to the one being asked!)

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- Firstly, that you don't enter the kingdom of God just by going through all the rituals and ceremonies, there is more to it, it involves a change of heart, it requires more than just obeying the rules, it needs both your actions and thoughts to coincide, entering the Kingdom of God needs both head and heart.
- Secondly, God's love is not just for a special group of people, it is for everyone, everywhere, at all times. God's love which is revealed in Jesus is inclusive, no one is left out.
- Thirdly, Jesus, the Messiah the one for whom they waited, came not to condemn and judge but to save. This would have been hard for Nicodemus to hear, a man who strived to live by the laws in a system that judged those who did not.

Jesus challenged all of Nicodemus' ideas of God and of God's relationship to humankind. No wonder he went home confused.

Nicodemus teaches us that it is okay to be curious and have questions about faith. Jesus shows us that asking questions is okay, as he doesn't turn Nicodemus away, rather he engages him in conversation and helps him see things in a new way and in his own time. Nicodemus is challenged in this exchange, but, at all times was welcomed and loved.

Nicodemus may have left in the dark that night, still with his questions and somewhat confused, but in time the shadows disappear and the light breaks through.

This is not the end of the story for Nicodemus, later in the gospel we will find him defending Jesus when his colleagues would have him arrested and got rid of. Then later, after Jesus has been crucified, bringing spices as he joins Joseph of Arimathea to give Jesus a dignified burial. I think this night in the shadows marks the beginning of a journey for Nicodemus, a journey that begins with secrets but ends with a disciple no longer afraid to hide, no longer afraid to hide his newfound faith in Jesus as the long-awaited Messiah.

So, ask your questions of faith, of Jesus, of God and allow others to ask theirs. Be prepared to listen to the answers, some of which might be challenging and uncomfortable. Allow yourself to have doubts and let them lead to further exploration. Remember however that God sent Jesus into the world because he loved it. Remember that God sent Jesus into the world not to condemn or judge it but to save it.

Receivers of such love, go out into the world and show those in the world such love and do not judge or condemn them but love them. In so doing you might just be entertaining the Spirit who blows where it will, changing the hearts and lives of many. Amen.