

**NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH
SUNDAY 3 JUNE 2012
TRINITY SUNDAY
Rev'd Ivan Poole**

“HOW CAN THIS BE?”

John 3: 1-21

Most of Jesus' ministry took place, it appears, during the day when it was light. But there are some episodes that took place at night. In the darkness, Jesus reaches out to people, and in the darkness people reached out to Jesus. In the dark, when we cannot find our way and are unsure of which way to turn, that's when Jesus is there for us.

Can I set a scene for you?

Year 12, class of 17 and 18 year olds at the beginning of the year.

They come prepared for their last year of school and perhaps more importantly, trying to prepare themselves to get the best results in their chosen subjects at the end of the year.

This class has chosen Biblical Studies as one of their final year subjects. The text to be studied is Genesis, chapters 1 to 24 and then later in the year, the Gospel of John.

The best way to start I think, is to read the text, so we start.

Remember that these students have been through our education system for 13 or so years and hopefully have acquired skills to not only see them through this last year of their secondary education, but in most cases to see them go on to Tertiary education.

We read the stories of creation as recorded in the first two chapters of Genesis.

How can we possibly believe that this is the way the world came into being??
How can we possibly believe that we human beings were created like this story tells???

This is real fairy tale stuff!!

Scene two: The discussion in the little church had been heated in response to a talk given by a learned Biblical scholar on the Bible.

Heated, yet quite thoughtful.

Then one person rose and said, "Well, all this academic stuff is OK. But I think it all can be summed up by a bumper sticker I saw the other day.

'The Bible said it, I believe it, that settles it.'"

End of discussion.

Now if your theology comes from bumper stickers, then today's story from the Gospel of John, the story of Jesus and Nicodemus, may not be for you. It needs a little more thought than bumper sticker theology.

I wonder whether, if we heard that same simplistic statement, which one of us would so glibly and simplistically speak of the Bible in such a way. Or would we, as those students did when they first read the Genesis story of creation, quietly snigger to ourselves.

And yet if we are honest, we too have the tendency to sheer off the grand reality of God, to fit the narrow confines of our modest modern mind.

It is so hard to think of God except through the recourse of our own experience, our social location, our prejudices.

Karl Barth, a great theologian, warned, " 'God' is not 'man' uttered in a loud voice." But it's awfully hard not to be guilty of getting our theology at the "GOD R' US" store!!

Those students and others could well ask, "How can any intelligent person believe that Jesus was conceived of a virgin?"

How can you respond?

Those students, like you and me, are living in a world where certain things happen with reassuring consistency. These predictabilities we call 'laws of nature'. For something more interesting to occur, it's like breaking a law.

He comes to Jesus, "by night", this Nicodemus. Night is, in the Gospel of John, more than just night. It is ignorance, seeing but not seeing, a time of confusion and not knowing.

Which makes it all the more odd to find a man like Nicodemus in the dark. Odd because Nicodemus **knows**. He is a "leader" of the synagogue, a knowledgeable person. Nicodemus is us; he **knows**! Remember his first words to Jesus? "Rabbi, we **know**...." He speaks out of an assured, self-confident, secure world where there are some who **'know'**.

He might have said, "Jesus, can we talk, teacher to teacher? Now... we know studies have proved that a recent book by a reliable authority has demonstrated that beyond doubt that... We know that **you** Jesus, must be from God. For your works seem certifiably divine".

Nicodemus is seeking a steady set of values and a firm law on which to hang his faith. He doesn't want any grey areas in his theology, or his life.

“Just give me the whole truth in a package I can handle and deal with”, he seems to be saying to Jesus. “No you don’t,” says Jesus. “Nobody knows what is possible with God unless one is born from above, reborn from top to bottom of the Spirit.” Jesus cuts him off short, sweeping aside Nicodemus’ need to **know** and to have the right answer.

Jesus strikes at the very core of the seeker. Only one thing matters and that is a new start, a fresh beginning, for anyone who is longing for the kingdom of God. “Truly, truly I say to you, unless one is ‘born anew’ or ‘born from above’ one cannot enter the kingdom.” Nicodemus is dislodged, dislocated. It isn’t what he expected. Nicodemus hears these words like a slap in the face. How can he go back? How can he start over?

As a Pharisee, he has built his whole life around a disciplined commitment to the law. He has disciplined his conduct, his speech, and his way of thinking. All have been shaped and informed by observance of the law and the Prophets.

“How can this be?” he asks. “What do you mean I have to be born anew? I can’t go back. Everything is fine just the way it is. Don’t make me change. I’m going in the direction I want to go. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea to come here after all!” Jesus is suggesting launching out into dangerously wild, unexplored territory ruled **not** by what we **know**, not by conventional wisdom, but rather by the Spirit. Like Nicodemus, we seek precise answers or directions, because we fear the mystery of who Christ can be for us.

Nicodemus completely misunderstands Jesus. He wants to put Jesus in a neatly defined box which he can grasp and understand. But Jesus defies all categories. He is outside the dogmas of our neat religious minds. He is completely free. Don’t you find it interesting that when Nicodemus comes to Jesus, asking what it’s all about, Jesus responds with two of the most uncontrollable, uncontainable of human experiences; the miracle of new life in the birth of a child, and the coming and going of the wind. That’s what the Greek word ‘spirit’ means, wind. *Pneuma*. You can hear Jesus say, “Oh my dear scholarly friend. Forget your officially approved definitions, the pneuma wind blows where it will. You can feel it, hear it, but you can’t predict or control it.”

Nicodemus feared confusion. He wanted Jesus to elucidate what he already knew rather than illumine all that was yet unknown. He was interested in a faith which was intellectually rigorous without embracing Christ’s loving and compassionate spirit. By searching for certainty rather than clarity, Nicodemus left feeling misunderstood and scratching his head in bewilderment rather than being comforted and embraced for the mystery of the journey of faith.

Jesus is busy moving Nicodemus, not just toward new thinking, but new life, birth even. The purpose of the discussion was not for Nicodemus to walk away with a bit more expansive knowledge of God, but rather to fall on his knees begging God to forgive him for his arrogance in thinking that he knew anything of the living, free, sovereign God.

We don't hear of Nicodemus after this night, until toward the end of John's Gospel. Jesus, the one to whom he came in the night with questions, is dead. Among the few daring to be near, was Nicodemus. He is there, at the end, not as an interrogator but as a disciple, not as a visitor in the night, but as a committed follower of the light. There, at the cross, there is none of that, "We know...." In fact Nicodemus doesn't say anything. He comes bearing spices to honour the body of Jesus. He now lives by grace and is prepared to follow this Jesus wherever he may lead.

"For God so loved the world....." even after the world proved itself to be so unlovable. God's love has nothing to do with our deserving, it is only through grace we are saved, as Nicodemus eventually found.

Today we share the mystery of our faith as we share the bread and the cup with each other in this common, but incredible meal of thanksgiving.

How do we live in this taut, tight, demanding world with fresh courage and new freedom? The life of those who claim to be followers of this Jesus, is not an easy one. There are no printed maps for the journey.

Nicodemus asks incredulously, "How can I be born again since I am old?" By being born of the spirit; by inviting Christ to be in your heart when you think of others; by inviting Christ to be in your mouth when you speak of others; by inviting Christ to be in your eyes when you see them, and in your ears when you listen.