**Sunday 12 March 2017**

**Lent 2**

***Prayer before worship:***

*God of Jesus, wonder-full Friend, open the shutters of our lives that the Wind may flow through. Resuscitate us. Regenerate our precious likeness to God which is deformed by the glittering trivia of this egotistical age. Lure us out of both arrogance and apathy. Let us be willing to bear the pangs of rebirth, not counting the cost. Bring us out of the dark night into the light and joy of your kingdom. For your love’s sake. Amen!*

**Welcome**

**Call to Worship**

We have come here, not because we have all the answers

***but because Christ Jesus has made us scholars in his school.***

We have come, not because we are better than others

***but because we know that God does not reject fools or sinners.***

We have come, not because our lives always run smoothly

***but because by faith we journey together***

through highlands and lowlands

***towards a promised land.***

**Songs of Praise:** As we gather

Give thanks with a grateful heart

God of mercy, God of grace

(come among us Lord)

**Opening Prayer**

Mind-boggling God, our best Friend, we thank you that for all who walk by faith there is always light for those who truly want to see, and enough bread for those who hunger for goodness. In our little church, please stabilise our faith, and enlarge our love. May we who pause to worship you here in this quiet sanctuary, be happy in serving you out in the rough and rowdy world, as we encourage our fellow pilgrims on the long road ahead. In Jesus’ name we pray, Amen.

**Notices**

**Birthday Basket**

**Re-membering together** For the season of Epiphany we learnt Psalm 27:1

Can you remember it?

*The Lord is my light and my salvation—    whom shall I fear?  
The Lord is the stronghold of my life—    of whom shall I be afraid?*

And now we enter Lent, I am offering you a new Scripture to re-member...

It isMicah 6:8 –

*He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.  
    And what does the Lord require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
    and to walk humbly with your God.*

I chose this one because it is a great summary of the Lenten journey –a time in which we look at ourselves and how we are going with God. This text gives us a framework by which we can look at how we are going.

**Offering and Dedication**

Holy God, you delight in creating life and beauty. Thank you for the abundant grace that you freely give. Let our church be a community that lives by this good news: even our faith in Jesus Christ is a gift we receive. Use these offerings to further our church’s mission, providing opportunities for people to grow in your wisdom and to spread the harmony of your peace. We pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

**Time with the children** The mystery of Lent

Making disciples -Starting with Nicodemus –you are all loved

**Lord’s Prayer**

**Song:** God can do immeasura-bubbly

***Children leave for young church programme***

**Powerpoint Reflection:** Psalm 121

**Bible Reading:** Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17

**Prayer of Confession**

With quiet confidence in the silent grace and quiet power of God, let us confess our sins and accept renewal. Let us pray.

God our Holy Friend, we admit to each other and to you, that we are creatures in whom goodness and evil are untidily entwined.

Sometimes we set out to do what seems good, only to later discover that we have been manipulated by evil from within us.

At other times we have been afraid of our weaknesses, yet have achieved far better than we expected.

Sometimes we have relied on our education and worldly wisdom, only to find out how foolish we really are.

At other times we have trembled at our own ignorance, yet have acted in far wiser ways than we thought possible.

Sometimes we have pretended to be thoughtful and altruistic, yet in fact we have been pushed by nothing but self interest.

At other times we have been appalled at our chronic selfishness, yet have managed to rise above it and have altruistically served others wisely and lovingly.

God our Awesome Friend, we place in your hands the tangled web that is our human lives. By your lovingly ruthless, and ever patient, mercy in Christ, forgive and remove all that is sinful, untwist that which is tangled, free that which is knotted, mend that which is broken, and bring balance and harmony into our daily existence. In the name of Christ Jesus our Saviour, Amen.

**Assurance of Forgiveness**

Jesus said: you must be new-born by the Spirit of God.

My sisters and brothers, we have not been new-born to condemnation but to salvation.  In Christ there is forgiveness and healing for all who are ready to seek, and knock, and ask for grace. In his name I declare to you: Your sins are forgiven! Thanks be to God!

**Song:** God forgave my sin

**Bible Reading:** John 3: 1-17

**Sermon** Making Disciples 1: Jesus and Nicodemus

**Prayers of Intercession**

Response: send the wind of your Holy Spirit:

***and regenerate your people, loving God.***

It is a blessing to have others praying for us. It is also a blessing to when we pray for others. Let us bring our prayers to God.

God of infinite wisdom and intimate friendship, we ask that we may not squander opportunities either for increased faith or larger service of others. Please send the regenerating breath of the Spirit to those for whom we now pray.

To the very old and infirm, who fear that they are no longer of any use to friend, neighbour, or even to You Lord,

send the wind of your Holy Spirit:

*and regenerate your people, loving God.*

To the young, especially any who are already setting their feet on a road that leads to self destruction,

send the wind of your Holy Spirit:

*and regenerate your people, loving God.*

To the timid, who are afraid to launch out in faith and dare the slings and arrows of a selfish, sceptical community,

send the wind of your Holy Spirit:

*and regenerate your people, loving God.*

To the scarred, who in the name of Christ have long fought against prejudice and injustice and now are on the point of giving up,

send the wind of your Holy Spirit:

*and regenerate your people, loving God.*

To the deeply sad, who after the death of one most dear to them cannot see much point in going on with life’s duties,

send the wind of your Holy Spirit:

*and regenerate your people, loving God.*

To parish-weary ministers and priests, whose enthusiasm for the Gospel appears to be ebbing away,

send the wind of your Holy Spirit:

*and regenerate your people, loving God.*

To any in this congregation, whose faith and love seems to be very small and fragile at this time,

send the wind of your Holy Spirit:

*and regenerate your people, loving God.*

To these and all your people, O God, send the Wind of your refreshing Spirit and bring us into that robust and resilient faith which you alone can give us.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.

**Communion Hymn:** Here O my Lord, I see Thee face to face vv 1-3,7

The Lord be with you.   
***And also with you.*** Lift up your hearts.   
***We lift them to the Lord.***Let us give thanks to God.   
***It is right to give God our thanks and praise.***  
We praise you, O God, and give you thanks for creating people, male and female, in your image and giving them the responsibility of caring for your beautiful world. When they strayed from your ways, you spoke through the prophets to remind them of the signs of your presence both around them in creation, and within them in the strength you give to the powerless, and the energy with which you lift up the weak and exhausted. When your words went unheeded, you broke into our history in the person of Jesus Christ. Through his death and resurrection he overcame evil and restored us to you, giving us the assurance that your love and your power would be woven  into the fabric of our lives forever. And so, with all the company of heaven and earth we praise your holy name saying:   
***Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of  power and might,   
heaven and earth are full of your glory.   
Hosanna in the highest.   
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.   
Hosanna in the highest.***  
  
At this table we are forever reminded of your love for us, O God, for here we remember that night when Jesus washed his disciples' feet and sat down at a table to share the meal with them. On that night - the night of his betrayal - he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This symbolises my love, poured out for you  and for everyone.  Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.  
  
Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us, O God, and upon these gifts of bread and wine, that they may be for us the life of Christ and that we may make that life visible through our faithful witness to the gospel.

**Distribution**  
The bread we break and the cup we now take are a sharing in the life of Christ.

The gifts of God for the people of God.

**Prayer after Communion**

Gracious God, we give you thanks, for refreshing and renewing us in this meal with the life of Jesus, your Son, our Lord.  Strengthened by his life - the food of eternal life -we go from here to be eager bearers of his word and willing followers of his way.  In Jesus' name we pray Amen

**Hymn:** I feel the winds of God today

**Benediction and sung Amen**

Being here together has been a re-birthing place on the long journey of faith.

Move on from here with your spirits renewed and your heads held high.

Exactly where this week will take us, each of us is uncertain.

The one thing certain is that we shall never travel alone.

And now may the grace of our Saviour,

the love of our Creator,

and the fellowship of our Counsellor,

be with you now and always, Amen.

**Sermon**

Today is the beginning of our 4 weeks exploring the area of making disciples. The way into this topic is using the lectionary gospel readings for the next 4 Sundays that involve Jesus relating to 4 different people in four quite different situations.

Each situation offers us insights as to how Jesus responded in a variety of ways.

So our first situation is a glimpse into the relationship between Jesus and Nicodemus.

So what do we know about Nicodemus and this situation?

We know this is happening right near the beginning of Jesus’ ministry... leading up to this was Jesus’ baptism, then going into the wilderness to be tempted, turning water into wine at a wedding, a short visit to Capernaum and the first cleansing of the Temple.

We know it was the time of Passover –we also know that it was party time in Jerusalem. The streets were crowded. Flocks of sheep for sacrifices, crates of birds. sellers of all possible wares from pottery to food for the feasts would be everywhere... Noise filled the air. Private conversation would be difficult, as would finding people amidst the daytime crowds. The temple would be no less crazy with so many people coming to make their sacrifices and many others simply using it as a shortcut through the city.

Sellers would be shouting the merits of their animals, sheep would be bleating and cows mooing, the money changers kept busy. It was like the great yearly fair of Jerusalem, a time when the population of Jerusalem skyrocketed from 600,000 to 2-3 million.

We know Nicodemus was a Pharisee –a group of Jews who were fastidious in keeping the letter of the Law. He is well educated, probably a critical thinker who likes to take time to think things through carefully. He knows what he believes. And he is on the look out for the promised Messiah.

We know Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body of the Jews. Each city could have a Sanhedrin, which functioned as lower courts. At the time of Jesus the Jews were under Roman authority, but they were allowed a measure of self-rule. The Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem was the final court of appeal for matters to do with Jewish law and religion. It was the body that would condemn Jesus, although they would also have to go to Pilate to approve the death sentence. Already it would be a group of men wanting to check out this new rabbi in their midst –political activists who proclaimed they were the Messiah were not uncommon, and often meant trouble. This Jesus had already caused an upset in the temple and shown he was a miracle worker.

We also know Nicodemus was educated, wealthy and well connected –as was John, the writer of this gospel. There is suggestion that Jesus was staying at the home of John in Jerusalem and this could have been where Nicodemus was able to meet him. Perhaps Nicodemus was also staying there for the Passover...perhaps they spoke on the rooftop of John’s home, in the cool of the night.

We know that Nicodemus sought out Jesus at night time. There are a number of possible reasons why... probably not wanting to be seen, perhaps also because it is simpler to have a conversation away from the daytime crowds. -Perhaps also due to fear of being seen or shame. It does seem though that Nicodemus had a genuine desire to learn more of the Galilean, whose works could not be ignored. He is willing to take the compromising position of meeting with Jesus. -To go against his own prejudices.

We know that Nicodemus comes to Jesus and starts with those exact words... “Rabbi, we know...” Nicodemus is an educated man, and what he knows is important to him. He has already decided that this man is a teacher from God –that is why he refers to him as Rabbi. And he explains why he knows –because he knows of his miracles. And Jesus takes this intellectual man, and starts to talk to him about things he doesn’t really know about... he talks about the birth of a baby... and the blowing of the wind... that he needs to be born a second time... that the Spirit blows where it will... Jesus is placing Nicodemus in this place of mystery and unknowing. I imagine it is an uncomfortable place for Nicodemus. He doesn’t understand. So he asks how can this be? -Jesus doesn’t make it easy for him. But just when I imagine Nicodemus is starting to feel inadequate... Jesus seems to turn the conversation around –with these amazing words, words that I suspect we too easily forget were first directed to Nicodemus...

*For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.  For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.*

So that is the story... that is what we know...

But what do we learn from the story about making disciples?

1. Coming by night is okay –we are not told why Nicodemus goes to see Jesus at night time... we can guess that he did not want to be seen –perhaps by the other Pharisees who by now are all talking about this new man in town... perhaps out of fear or shame... perhaps out of a desire for privacy... perhaps due to the busyness around Jesus during the day... perhaps simply because he wanted answers without others seeing. But what we discover is that there are some people who choose the night time to seek out Jesus. Not all want to come and see him at the temple on the Sabbath... not all want to come along to an Alpha course... not all want others to know they have questions of faith.
2. Knowing and not knowing –Nicodemus starts with what he knows but is invited by Jesus into a place where he does not have clear answers... He is offered a space where he can acknowledge the what ifs and the buts and the how cans... Jesus takes time to help Nicodemus move from theological certitudes that were devoid of the wind and breath of the Spirit to a more open unknown space. In the face of the “we know” of Nicodemus, Jesus proposes another way –a way of not knowing, but of being born again from above –becoming a child again... a child of God, a new person, listening to the Spirit of God. And when we follow the Spirit, it is not all clear cut –it is like the wind blowing where it will –no one knows where it comes from or where it goes. As William Temple back in the early 1900s said, we cannot wait until we know the source of the wind before we let it refresh us. We cannot wait until we know the destination of the wind before we spread our sail to it.
3. Not judged but loved –Nicodemus learns from Jesus that he does not have to be clever, powerful or successful in order to be loved, in order to live in truth and be led by the Spirit of God. Right in the midst of Nicodemus not getting it, not knowing, not understanding, Jesus tells him he is loved –utterly.
4. We don’t get a neat happy ending to the conversation –at least at this time in the story... yes, we can guess at a growth in faith by his response after the death of Jesus, but certainly Jesus does not seem to get an instant convert out of this conversation in the night. We have the conversations, and we let the wind of the Spirit blow where it will. We let the questions be raised, we offer something of the mystery of the kingdom, we allow the space where there are no simple answers, and we ensure they know they are loved.

So you see, it seems to me that Jesus wasn’t a 4 spiritual laws kind of evangelist. It just wasn’t his style. He didn’t approach Nicodemus with the list of things he needed him to know. This conversation was started by Nicodemus... Nicodemus chose the starting time and the venue... and he starts the conversation... and then Jesus was able to take the conversation to a new place –a new depth, to new questions for Nicodemus.

There is a lot in this story to unpack –and I hope lots of you will want to keep unpacking it in small groups.

It’s not too late, and it doesn’t matter if you can’t get to every session.

One is better than none.

For the first study I am asking those attending to do an online quiz at <http://www.humanmetrics.com/personality> to find your general personality type –it shouldn’t take more than half an hour... and then –if you can- print out the description of your “type” and bring it with you to your small group.

If this doesn’t make sense, please come and talk to me...

I look forward to hearing how the small groups go.

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**NEW BIRTH**

Birth is never easy,

not for the baby,

certainly not for mother.

Birth is a travail

of blood and tears,

a pain-joy like no other.

Birth is an ending

of speechless darkness

and unrealised limitation.

Birth is a beginning

of the new world

and the songs of liberation

Birth is not possible

without the gift

of profound maternal pain

Yet it’s not our doing

but the Spirit’s blessing

as free as springtime rain.

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