

Sunday 16th May 2021
Glynde Lutheran Church
Sermon on John 3:1 – 17

Theme: “Nicodemus, his story, and what it means for us”
****Series on The Chosen (3)***

Introduction:

As I’ve said over the last couple of weeks, this is a series of messages about some of the people who followed Jesus in his earthly ministry.... It is based on the Bible, and the Gospels in particular, but it also includes insights from the YouTube series, “The Chosen”....

What is “The Chosen” series? And what’s its aim? Well in a nutshell, the series aims to provide a back story for the characters in the Gospel so that you and I will get to know the characters better, and in the final analysis be driven back to Scripture to read for ourselves about the characters.

Let me read what one commentator has to say:

The Chosen is the first multi-season show about the life of Christ.... The Chosen tells stories of radical transformation among the followers of Jesus.... The Chosen spotlights the real-life men and women who knew Christ....

The Chosen includes scenes and dialogue directly from Scripture, but it also includes scenes and dialogue not in the Bible. Viewers learn on the opening scroll that it is “based on the true stories of the gospels of Jesus Christ”. Some location and timelines “have been combined or condensed” and “backstories and some characters or dialogue have been added.

“However”, the scroll says, “all biblical and historical context and any artistic imagination are designed to support the truth and the intention of Scripture” (Michael Foust, 4 Things You Should Know about THE CHOSEN on YouTube).

Well, let’s continue our look at some of the followers of Jesus.... This morning we’re going to look at Nicodemus, his story, and what it means for us....

Part 1: “A Biblical view of Nicodemus”

We are introduced to Nicodemus by John in chapter three of his gospel. John tells us:

There was a Jewish Leader (Lit. “a ruler of the Jews”) named Nicodemus who belonged to the party of the Pharisees....

And later on, Jesus calls him “a great teacher of Israel”. Literally, Jesus says to him:

“You are the teacher of Israel, and yet you don’t know this?” (John 3:10).

So, in these couple of verses, we gain a picture of Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a very prominent Pharisee, *religious leader*, and someone who is highly respected as “a teacher” of the Jews.

The fascinating thing about Nicodemus is that he is willing to come to Jesus, someone who is regarded by most Jewish leaders as being a wandering preacher, and someone who is critical of the theology of the Pharisees.

Nicodemus is someone who has been startled by the miracles of Jesus. He says to Jesus:

“Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher sent by God.

No one could perform the miracles (Lit. “signs”) that you do, unless God were with him (John 3:2).

Nicodemus is willing to come to Jesus “at night” in secret to find out more about Jesus, and who he is, and to discuss theology with him. One commentator writes:

Nicodemus...represents the Jewish inquirer who, though he does not yet believe fully, seeks understanding of the meaning of Jesus (H. C. Kee, IDB, 3:547).

And what does Jesus teach him? Jesus teaches him about the Kingdom of God, *about the rule of God over all, promised in the Old Testament (Zechariah 14:9; Isaiah 11:1-9; cf. Wenham, Parables, p. 20-25).*

Jesus says to Nicodemus:

I am telling you the truth: no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born again....

No one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit (John 3:3,5).

Jesus is saying that God's coming Kingdom, *His rule*, will not come about by God using force to chuck out the Roman invaders, but by God making people new, *through His Spirit in them*. That's how God's Kingdom will come.

Jesus is here surely talking about Baptism as the way that all this happens. Jesus says:

No one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.

This new birth with the Spirit comes about with the washing of water. Remember that this is what John the Baptist said about Jesus: he called Jesus:

"the one who baptises, *who washes*, with the Holy Spirit" (John 1:33).

...And God's Kingdom, *his rule in the hearts of minds of people through His Spirit in them*, will come about through faith in Jesus as God's Son, as *God's Messiah*. Listen to what John tells us Jesus said:

As Moses lifted up the bronze snake on a pole in the desert, in the same way the Son of Man must be lifted up, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son so the everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life (John 3:14-16).

We are not told here how Nicodemus responded to Jesus' message. Did he believe in Jesus as God's Son and the One through who God's Kingdom comes, or did he walk away from Jesus unaffected?

Well, it seems that he didn't walk away unaffected from his meeting with Jesus.

Later on in John's Gospel, we hear that Nicodemus 'sticks up for' Jesus, *defends Jesus* when other Pharisees were pouring scorn on Jesus (*cf. 7:47-49, 52*). John tells us:

One of the Pharisees there was Nicodemus, the man who had gone to see Jesus before. He said to the others, "According to our Law, we cannot condemn a man before hearing him and finding out what he has done" (John 7:50-51).

And then later in John's Gospel, we find out where Nicodemus' journey of faith ends: with Nicodemus helping Joseph of Arimathea to place the body

of Jesus in a tomb. Listen to what John writes:

Nicodemus, who at first had gone to see Jesus at night, went with Joseph taking with him about thirty kilograms of spices, a mixture of myrrh and aloes. The two men took Jesus' body and wrapped it in linen with the spices, according to the Jewish custom of preparing body for burial.

There was a garden in the place where Jesus had been put to death, and in it there was a new tomb where no one had ever been buried. Since it was the day before the Sabbath and because the body was close by, they placed Jesus body there (*John 19:39-42*).

Nicodemus has been so affected by Jesus that he acts for Jesus by helping Joseph bury the body of Jesus. By the way, Nicodemus is obviously a man of great wealth, and he expresses his relationship with Jesus by spending a huge amount of his money on the burial of Jesus. Thirty kilograms of spices was worth a huge amount of money, but Nicodemus was willing to spend this to bury Jesus.... (*Pfitzner, John, p. 316*).

Part 2: The story of Nicodemus in The Chosen

The writers of *The Chosen* use the facts from the Gospels, together with their imagination to craft a possible back story for Nicodemus. *As I've said to your before*, they do this to encourage us to read the Gospels for ourselves. Dallas Jenkins, a writer and the director of this series says:

“The ultimate goal is to get you to go back to Scripture, whether you are a believer or not”.

Let me share with you how Nicodemus is presented in the first season of *The Chosen*.

The series begins with us being introduced to Nicodemus as a Pharisee and a “Teacher of teachers” who has travelled from Jerusalem to Capernaum. There he gradually gets to know about Jesus....

In the first episode or two, Nicodemus meets Mary, *or Lilith as he knows her*, when he goes with bells and incense to try to drive the demons out from Mary, *or Lilith as he knows her*. He fails miserably, and the demons in Mary cry out to him as he flees:

“We are not afraid of you!”

Later on, Nicodemus sees Mary, *or Lilith as he knows her*, walking in the street healed and well. Mary is preparing for her first Shabbath meal in a long time.

Nicodemus says to her, "It's you!", and he says to her:

How long after my visit did you feel the change?"

Mary answer:

It wasn't anything you did. It was someone else!

...He called my 'Mary', *my real name*. He said that I am his.... I am redeemed"

So Nicodemus hears first-hand about a "miracle" of Jesus. Later on he personally witnesses a miracle of Jesus when Jesus heals a paralysed man in the home of Zebedee and Salome, the parents of James and John.

Nicodemus wants to know more about Jesus.... So when he sees Mary again, he asks her to arrange a secret meeting at night with Jesus. Jesus agrees to meet with him, and this happens in a house which the owner offers as a meeting place for Jesus and his inquirer, *namely Nicodemus*.

Episode seven of *The Chosen* is a powerful episode. The meeting of Jesus with Nicodemus is described with all the dialogue from our Bible reading and more, and Nicodemus leaves his meeting with Jesus wondering if Jesus really is "God's Son", and God's promised Messiah, *the One who will usher in God's Kingdom*.

Can I share with you part of the dialogue....

N: I don't know where to start. I have so many questions.... I have never heard anyone tell a paralytic to get up and walk, much less it actually happens.

J: So what is your conclusion?

N: I believe *that* You are not acting alone. No one can do the signs you do without have without having God in him.... Only someone who has come from God.

J: What else?

N: What have you come here to show us?

J: A Kingdom.... The sort of Kingdom a person cannot see unless he's born again.

N: Born again.... You mean like a new creature, a conversion from Gentile to Jewish...

J: No...

N: I hope you don't mean a return to the womb, because that would be a problem for me....

J: Truly I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God. That which is born of the

flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. That part of you, that is what must be born again.

And Jesus likens the coming of the Spirit in us to the coming of the wind. Jesus says:

That's what it is to be born of the Spirit. The Spirit may work in a way that is a mystery to you. And while you can't see the Spirit, you can recognise His effect *in the same way that you can see the effect of the wind.*

And in *The Chosen*, Jesus goes on to speak about the importance of faith in him. Jesus says to Nicodemus *echoing the words in John's Gospel*:

J: Do you remember when the children of Israel complained against God and against Moses in the wilderness of Paran?

N: Yes... And they were bitten by serpents and they were dying.

J: But?

N: But God made a way for them to be healed.

J: Moses lifted the bronze serpent in the desert, and people only need to look at it *to be healed*. So will the Son of Man be lifted up so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

N: Our people are not dying of snake bites, but of Roman oppression and taxes....

J: I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I didn't come to deliver the people from Rome.

N: Then from what?

J: From sin... From spiritual death. God loves the world in this way: that He gave His only Son so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. God did not *just* send His Son into the world, Nicodemus. God sent him to save it, through him. It's as simple as Moses' serpent on the pole....

Whoever believes in him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already (*Andrew and John are listening outside the window*).

Jesus then challenges Nicodemus to come with him and listen to him and learn from him.

Jesus says to Nicodemus:

Follow me..., and you'll see more.

Join me and my students.

In two days' time, we leave Capernaum. Come see the Kingdom that I am bringing into this world...

Well the writers of *The Chosen* then *in tune with the Gospel of John* portray Nicodemus as agonising over whether to take Jesus up on his offer. The title of Episode seven is “The Invitations”, referring to Jesus’ invitations to Nicodemus and Matthew to follow him. Matthew does, *as we will see next week*, but Nicodemus is portrayed as ‘sitting of the fence’, being undecided....

In *The Chosen*, Nicodemus doesn’t take up Jesus’ invitation to follow him, but instead shows his support for Jesus by leaving a large of gold for Jesus and his disciples as they head out to Samaria.

I look forward to seeing how the writers of *The Chosen* portray Nicodemus’ growth in faith in future episodes....

Part 3: “What it means for us”

Well, *as I’ve said before* there’s a lot of artistic licence here.... But remember that Dallas Jenkins’ ultimate aim is to get you to go back to Scripture and read about all the things that Jesus did....

What are we reminded of in the story of Nicodemus in the Bible, *and in this The Chosen series?*

Three things I think:

- * Firstly through the Gospel of John, *and through the imaginative interpretation of it in the You tube series, “The Chosen”*, we are reminded that to be part of God’s Kingdom we need to come to Jesus, listen to him, and learn from him....

This is vitally important for all us, regardless of where we are in life. We will have times of doubt, *when we doubt what we believe about God and about Jesus*. At such times, it is important to come to Jesus, to listen to him, and to learn from him.... In other words, it is important to spend time reading our Bibles, worshipping regularly, and getting together with other followers of Jesus around God’s Word in small groups (*e.g. our MAY STUDY GROUPS*).

And if we are going to share with others the good news of Jesus, we need to spend time with Jesus learning from him, so that we *how to approach people who are seeking answers to the mysteries of life, and what to say* (*cf. 1 Peter 2:8-10; 3:15b-16*).

- * Secondly, we are reminded of how vitally important it is to have “faith” in Jesus, to “believe” in Jesus. That’s what Jesus is emphasising in his conversation with Nicodemus: that just as the people of Israel were healed by looking up in faith at the serpent on a pole, *trusting that God would heal them of their snake bites*, so we will be healed and made whole by looking up in faith at Jesus, God’s Son, suffering and dying on the cross for us, “for our sins” (1 Cor. 15:3).
- * And thirdly, we are reminded by our look at Nicodemus that faith expresses itself in actions. In the Gospel of John, Nicodemus’ growing faith is seen in his defence of Jesus in John chapter seven, and most especially by him helping Joseph to bury the body of Jesus. As I said before, Nicodemus expresses his relationship with Jesus *and his growing faith in Jesus* by spending a huge amount of his money on the burial of Jesus....

I like, too, how the writers of *The Chosen* portray Nicodemus’ growing faith: with him leaving a bag of gold for Jesus and his disciples as they head out to Capernaum....

We are reminded that faith in Jesus involves more than just a expression of faith in words, but it also involves actions for Jesus.

How’s that going in your life? Does your life reflect who you are? Are you witnessing to the people around you who you are *not only by what you say, but by what you do*....

Conclusion:

Thank God for His ongoing forgiveness of us as we trust in Jesus as our Saviour. And may God empower us with His Spirit in us, so that more and more we live as His children in this world.