

Not To Condemn But To Save - 31st October 2021

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[0 : 0 0] Good to be with you this morning and if you were here last week or you've caught up online on YouTube you'll be aware we were looking at the story of the time Jesus met a guy called Nicodemus and we're going to conclude that story today but as a reminder or if we weren't here a little recap of where we got to let's let's think about a little bit so Jesus is visited at night by this guy called Nicodemus who we're told was a member of the Jewish ruling council the equivalent of the Jewish supreme court of its day which met in the heart of the temple in Jerusalem so Nicodemus he's this this supreme court judge basically he's the heart of the establishment you know a senior judge but also part of that role meant that he was a teacher of the people too what did Nicodemus teach wow Nicodemus idea it seems of how to relate to God was based on who's in and who is out those who were in were the purest of people those who followed the rules who performed the sacrifices who who kept themselves separate if you like from being tainted by the rest of the world indeed we know Nicodemus was a particular type of Jew called a Pharisee and the word Pharisee literally means separatist it's what they're all about being separate was at the heart therefore of Nicodemus understanding of what God wanted and so as we've seen in other recent weeks we go back to the temple the temple system was all about keeping people separate in that only Jewish men could worship in the holiest bit of the temple let's zoom in a bit so this inner court there that was only men could go there whilst women could only go as far as that bit just a little bit further away from the action shall we say and then you got non-Jews you got those with disabilities those seen as richly impure and so on they were prevented from going further in than this wall they couldn't actually enter into that main sort of inner sanctuary area at all kept to that outer courtyard indeed that was the area that was the only bit that they were allowed to hang out with so the temple system which which Nicodemus represented was largely built on exclusion who could or couldn't come into certain places rather than inclusion and so when Nicodemus approaches Jesus obviously intrigued by what he's seen and heard about him Jesus welcomes him in but effectively tells him you got it all wrong my friend being in with God being part of God's kingdom says Jesus has got nothing to do with your learning your heritage your social or religious status nothing to do even with the football team your support no instead it's about your heart says Jesus about a willingness to start from scratch with God to be born again as Jesus puts it and allow God's spirit to shape us in ways which are all about love and the beauty of this is that it's a fresh start a rebirth which is therefore open and available to all it's inclusive of everyone who wants it so let's let's pick up the conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus from just about where we left off with it last time it happens at night so it's a bit of a gloomy eclipse we might just dip some of the lights to make it more cinematic for us all right but here's the continuation of that conversation from last week from John chapter 3 you should not be surprised at my saying you must be born again the wind blows wherever it pleases you

hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going so it is with everyone born of the spirit this year how can this be Nicodemus asked you are Israel's teacher is not said Jesus and do you not understand these things very truly I tell you we speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen but still you people do not accept our testimony about this I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things no one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven the son of man just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness so the son of man must be lifted up that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him 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 whoever believes in him is not condemned but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have not believed in the name of God's one and only son this is the verdict light has come into the world but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed but whoever lives by the truth comes into the light so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God in the sight of God here we go punchy stuff isn't it themes of good and evil light and darkness quite a topics I guess on this day no it is Halloween but we'll come back to those in a bit because first up it's worth unpacking I think the idea that Jesus shares with Nicodemus about the spirit of God as being like the wind as Jesus says he says the wind blows wherever it pleases you hear it sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going so it is with everyone born of the spirit now there's a little play on words here because the Greek word for wind and spirit is the same so it seems there's something Jesus wants Nicodemus to understand here about the way God's spirit moves indeed the spirit says Jesus is as uncontrollable as unpredictable as wild perhaps as the wind itself the spirit blows the spirit moves wherever the spirit pleases

now why might Jesus have chosen to make this point in particular to Nicodemus well if we recall what we were talking about with the temple system in which Nicodemus was so entrenched the idea of walls and boundaries of areas which were off limits and so on was so dominant so not only were certain people groups non-Jews, women, the blind, the lame and so on not allowed to go into that inner sanctuary of the temple but at the same time God's presence, God's spirit was reckoned to be contained within that inner, inner sanctuary this sort of central area there gold-fronted chamber known as the Holy of Holies so the temple was a place where certain people were kept out whilst God's presence if you like was kept in a controlled kind of spirituality but says Jesus to Nicodemus the wind, the spirit blows wherever it pleases you can't predict where it's going you certainly can't contain it with walls in other words, don't try to box God in or try to say who can or can't experience God or dictate the ways or the order in which that experience might come or be expressed and he says Jesus, everyone born of the spirit everyone is willing in some way to start again with God they're met by God in that unpredictable way because there's nothing formulaic about how God chooses to move you see I guess the moment we think we've got God sussed the moment we think we've got a formula or a system of theology a set prayer or a ritual established as a way of defining you know who's in and who's out who's born again if you like and who isn't that's when in my experience God does something which totally blows all those papers off the table in a way and says hang on a minute don't box me in and don't label other people either because my spirit is moving in all sorts of people's lives all the time for example, a couple of stories I'll share of recent lived experience for me so story one, you'll notice you've been here for a little while there's a bit of a theme with my stories but there's a mate I drink with Dan Levic we've had countless conversations now about God and faith especially after a few pints when the chat seems to flow a bit more freely now he wouldn't say in his words that he's a believer he's told me that but there have been various times over the years when nevertheless he's asked me to pray pray for loved ones of his or pray for something that he's going through equally there are times when

I've been sharing something about Jesus which seems relevant to what we're talking about not Bible bashing but just hopefully weaving it in because it's part of my life so it just weaves into conversation and as I'm talking about certain things sometimes he wells up, you know, he gets tearful which is not the easiest thing to do in your local where everyone knows you it'll well up as we're speaking sometimes and there's times when he'll put his arm in front of me and show me his arm and say God, my hairs are standing on end here with what you're saying what we're talking about and there are times at the end of the night often when he'll give me a hug and he'll say as he sort of got me a little bear hug you know, love you mate like that now what's interesting when he says that it's not a kind of drunken, you're my best mate you are, it's none of that kind of stuff going on no, it feels different and I've noticed that those times he says that usually come after we've been having a sort of deep and meaningful discussion about the stuff of life and faith so yes, he's my mate and I'm glad he loves me, that's nice but my kind of spiritual spidey sense

I suppose when he says that is that there's something more going on in those moments than just one friend telling another that he loves him it's almost as if he's finding his own way to express his appreciation for hopefully the care the compassion the reassurance he's received not from me from Matt but from what hopefully God's given me to say it's God giving him that reassurance, that care I would say speaking and working through me does that make sense?

[12 : 59] and so when he says love you Matt I think there's more going on than that it's not simply me that he's expressing that affection towards and in the other month he said to me something which has stayed with me which was this he said, you know I wish I had your faith I wish I had your faith and he didn't mean it in a kind of you're a mug for believing this kind of stuff no, it felt genuine almost like a kind of prayerful hope I wish I had your faith and when he said it I sort of immediately thought of the dad in that story in the Bible where Jesus is healing his son from an evil spirit and the dad says to Jesus I do believe help me to overcome my unbelief now in all this does he fit neatly into a formula of what it means to encounter God or how God works I don't think he does has he made a commitment of faith prayed a prayer asked Jesus to be his Lord and Saviour

I don't as far as I know I don't think he has but is God's spirit that wind moving in his life absolutely I'd say and will God honour his wish we might say that kind of tentative prayer almost to have faith well yeah I've got every confidence in God to do just that in his own way in his own time that's one story keep that one in mind but another one is from just before lockdown and the times when I've been into Chase View care home to lead a simple monthly communion service there with the residents now for some in Chase View there's kind of there's two floors and those on the upper floor are living particularly with pretty extreme dementia a lot of them I mean there's often when you do the service there's like 25 of us or so in the room there's often not a lot of visible engagement or apparent awareness for some of these residents of what's going on or what's happening around them and so in these services for example some are able to indicate that they'd like to receive bread and wine when I go around the room and see them and sit with them individually but for others there's one guy in particular

I'm thinking of who's unable to communicate and so instead I just say a simple prayer of blessing with him and this guy I'm thinking of in those months before lockdown when it would be a regular thing every time I've done it with this guy I said this prayer with him I hold him by his hand I make a point of looking him in the eye and I simply say words to the effect of you know may you say his name may you know how utterly loved and cherished you are by God may you know God's peace and blessing in your own way this day and always it's a gentle kind of prayer but you know what for someone whose face is otherwise almost stuck you know constantly expressionless each time I've prayed with him holding his hand looking in the eye his eyes well up and I know again in my gut in my spirit if you like that God's spirit is somehow moving in that situation and in that guy's life now I've got no idea this guy's faith background he's been wheeled in to the service so presumably his family have okayed it for him to be there but there's certainly no way for him to verbalize or rationally express whatever faith he may or may not have there's no doctrine there's no creed there's no commitment of faith that he can seemingly assent to but in my limited way of being able to speak of what I know and testify to what I've seen

I'd say God's got him God's got him God's spirit in some way is renewing this guy's spirit and again I've got every confidence in God to honour him and his faith journey as mysterious and as you know non-standard shall we say as that might be so two stories different kind of blokes and none of this is neat or easy to define and it doesn't tick the usual boxes perhaps of whether we call someone a Christian or not but for me both of these things they're pictures of the unpredictable but I'd say utterly inclusive way in which God is drawing all people to himself in all circumstances I mean I wonder for you if you think about people you know who is that person you know who but all those people you're in contact with that your hunch is that God might be doing something in particular with at the moment that God might be wanting you perhaps to reach or to share something of God's inclusive transforming love with and as with my mate down the pub as with this guy with dementia it may not be in ways that fit into neat straightforward categories of faith you know it might not even be spoken it might be the way we serve them could be all sorts of ways we don't have to have all the answers

I certainly don't and sometimes there's too many attempts to get answers which kind of gets it the way if you like of God doing what God's doing but God can work through us and the love that we're able to share I would say in profound if unpredictable ways indeed I'd say it was this kind of unpredictable inclusion which Jesus wants Nicodemus to realise and know and value for himself now towards the end of their conversation in this passage the writer John who is writing this gospel account he includes some words which are about as famous as they come in the bible words which start John 3 16 like this 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 famous words and yet because there are no speech marks or punctuation in the original Greek language in which this passage was first written it's impossible to know whether these are words spoken by Jesus in the conversation or whether they're kind of an editorial comment added by John you know the author of the gospel himself in the clip we saw

[20 : 15] I don't know if you can remember it's kind of left nicely ambiguous you know words which are spoken as Jesus shares bread and wine with Nicodemus hinting at an early act of communion almost between them but regardless of whether it's Jesus who says these or John who's responsible for writing them their truth remains as compelling as ever what's the truth we learn?

the truth we learn? well for starters it's clear that whatever interaction God has with the world is rooted in and characterized by love first line for God so loved the world that's the defining way God relates to us and yet what's curious is that elsewhere in the Bible this phrase the world the world is used as a short-hand way of describing everything that's wrong in life you know the world being something that we should avoid being tangled up with so for example in one of John's letters 1 John chapter 2 we're told this do not love the world or anything in the world if anyone loves the world love for the Father is not in them for everything in the world the desires of the flesh the desires of the eyes and the pride of life comes not from the Father but from the world and so which is it?

which is it? are we meant to love the world or are we not meant to love the world? now it seems to me we'd probably do well not to mix up these two ideas here so on the one hand say from that John 3 16 1 of course it's right we love the world both the world is created and cared for as a planet but also the world's inhabitants you know it's animals most of all it's people if God so loved the world as Ruth was saying in her prayer earlier that he came as Jesus to live in it that should tell us all we need to know about the depth of God's love for the world and yet on the other hand it seems it's also right that we don't love the world's systems you know the dominant world views that so often revolve around corruption and consumption I mean I don't know about you over the last year or more I regularly despair and I'm appalled at the way so much of our politics and the way countries are run is based around greed from the in parliament from the way that

Saudi regime is able to take over Newcastle United the whole thing seems corrupt so often even the way we govern seems devoid of truth both here and out in America at times under Trump and so on devoid even of basic decency and how can we love a political, social and economic system system in the world which punishes the poor whilst rewarding the rich goes against every instinct every principle Jesus spoke about but even if we rightly reject those world views we're not to reject the world itself God's good creation and his people who are eternally made in God's image indeed loving the world means that we care about it too much to simply separate ourselves from it no that's the way the Pharisees to be separate rather the way of justice the way of joy the way of Jesus is that God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life and then here's the crux of it that second bit which often gets left out but which is key that God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him that's the vital verse right there

God doesn't condemn the world God doesn't give up on the world and therefore neither should we rather God comes to save the world through Jesus offering an alternative vision of what could be you know a kingdom a reality a world built on love and inclusion and grace and so that's why how we live as individuals matters that's why what we do as a community matters that's why how we vote what we consume how we treat our environment how we structure society and so on it matters because we're called to work with God in reshaping and rebuilding this world in a way which all too easily often slips from life light if you like into darkness whilst the passage says that God isn't in the business of condemning the world for its shady practices does say those who reject God's ways of love and light stand condemned already simply through their own choices and their own actions there's nothing malicious in that though it's simply the reality of choosing a way of life a way of life which doesn't work which doesn't fulfill which doesn't last and yet the good news is it's not as bleak as perhaps that sounds the good news is this self-condemnation if you like is not the end of the story because with Jesus there's always hope there's always light at the end of whatever dark tunnels we might find our way stumbling down passage continues with this verse but whoever lives by the truth comes into the light so that it may be seen plainly that what they've done has been done in the sight of God do you see how we come into the light whoever lives by the truth comes into the light and that gives me hope for all people because regardless of whether they may or may not be able to name Jesus as the one who moves them like my mate down the pub regardless of whether or not church or you or I might have put people off the very idea of God which I'm sure I certainly have over the years for numerous people regardless of whether or not dementia has robbed them them of the ability to verbalize their sense of who God is if people are responding to the truth of love in their lives they are coming into they are moving towards the light the light of Jesus the light of the world and I'd say even Nicodemus himself was on this journey towards the light there was something in Nicodemus which caused him to seek Jesus out a night time visit yeah but nevertheless he still made it and that was always going to be a step in the right direction for him but interestingly after this initial account that we've been looking at last couple of weeks

[27 : 32] Nicodemus he pops up again on two other occasions in John's Gospel saying in John 7 when the rest of the Jewish council were seeking to bring Jesus down Nicodemus Nicodemus has the courage to defend him saying does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he's doing Nicodemus here is encouraging his fellow Pharisees to instead have an open mind about Jesus indication perhaps of the impact that Jesus words on inclusion have had on him but then more intriguingly perhaps John gives us this detail one of a second little clip following Jesus death on the cross the cross later Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders with Pilate's permission he came and took the body away he was accompanied by Nicodemus the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night

Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes about 35 kilograms taking Jesus's body the two of them wrapped it with the spices in strips of linen this was in accordance with Jewish burial custom at the place where Jesus was crucified there was a garden and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid because it was the Jewish day of preparation and since the tomb was nearby they laid Jesus there all right so Joseph of Arimathea was a secret disciple of Jesus we're told which kind of suggests by this stage that Nicodemus was too otherwise why would they together so carefully so extravagantly be caring for Jesus body Nicodemus was jointly responsible for laying Jesus in the tomb tomb from which the risen Jesus would emerge just three days later so who knows maybe Nicodemus may well have become a more public disciple of Jesus following his resurrection presumably it was Nicodemus himself who was the source of these stories in John's Gospel giving John the writer the details of his conversation with Jesus and so on which again suggests the positive faith journey which Nicodemus was following you see Jesus through the light of his truth has this compelling effect on people an effect which is as unpredictable and as uncontainable as the wind itself but this effect this light this truth is one which Jesus himself was certain of stating again in John's Gospel this that I when I am lifted up from the earth will draw all people to myself all people and so my prayer my hope my belief is that both we and all those who we live alongside will in time be moved by the Spirit to come to know for themselves to come to know for ourselves the compelling transforming love of Jesus the Saviour of the world of the world