

For God so loved...

Week 10 ~ Notes for May 8th

Steve Logan

Background

Event	John
Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night	3:1-21
Christ and John baptizing	3:22 - 4:2

Discussion

This week's texts include what is probably the most famous verse in the Bible - John 3:16. Entire books have been written on this verse. Sermons, T-shirts, inspirational posters, men holding up signs at football matches and much else quote these immortal words:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

It's a great text...

But, as we all know by now, a text appears in a *context*. And that context is a rather strange tale of an influential figure in the Sanhedrin coming to Jesus for a chat.

The wider context, too, is notable. Nicodemus was that influential member of the Sanhedrin. He is a Jew, male, has a name and he comes at night (*why?* is he doing this in secret?). The next story in the book of John is that of a woman at the well of Sychar. She is a Samaritan, female, has no name and is fetching water in the middle of the day (*who* fetches water at the hottest point of the day?). The stories are back-to-back in John 3 and 4.

These two tales are unique to the gospel of John. Do you think that the famous 'for God so loved the *world*' is so phrased to emphasise that Christ is here for all of us? For the folks who make the rules and run the show. And for the multiply married (and multiply disgraced) woman who collects water when no-one else is around.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves...

Nicodemus gets three mentions in the gospel of John. The first is here, in 3:1-20. "He came to Jesus by night" and his first statement is one of respect. 'Rabbi', he says, using a term that acknowledges Jesus' religious leadership, 'We know that you are a teacher from God because of the things that you do'. We don't know exactly what 'things' Nicodemus is referring to here, but I think we can presume that he's thinking of the healings and other supernatural events.

Questions:

- Do you think that 'signs and wonders' are a good enough reason to declare that someone is from God?
- Why do we not see more 'signs', if they are so persuasive?
- Is there a danger in looking for 'signs'? Explain your answer.

Jesus then replies with a statement, seemingly out of nowhere. "I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above", to which Nicodemus responds with a question about the literal meaning of those words. Verses 5 to 10 continue this conversation. We presume that what we read in John is an 'edited highlights' of the actual conversation (and it is unclear whether any of the disciples were present for this conversation, or if this story was written up afterwards). Nicodemus doesn't get to lead in this conversation. After his opening statement it is Jesus who is directing the conversation.

Questions:

- What is Jesus doing here? Why is he asking Nicodemus these questions?
- Karoline Lewis, in her [commentary on John](#) (p46), says ""One could see these episodes between Jesus and those who encounter him as a kind of theological trick, that Jesus is simply taunting his conversation partner when he knows full well how things will progress". Is that a fair reading? Why/why not?
- Lewis continues: "A more generous reading suggests that there is something theologically important in dialogue". In other words, this is less about the *substance* of the conversation but more about the fact that the conversation is happening at all. "Revelation, understanding, possibility, and openness happen in conversation. Conversation itself is indicative of theological curiosity and not doctrinal conclusiveness", continues Lewis. I find that statement extremely powerful. What are your thoughts?
- This conversation in vv4-10 is often used to establish some theological principles surrounding the doctrine of 'being born again'.
 - Is that really what this is about?
 - Do you think that if Jesus was talking to someone other than Nicodemus he would say the same things? In other words, is this passage supposed to be about the mechanics of 'being born again' or is it rather just a simple conversation?
- The Greek word translated 'born again' can be translated "*again*", "*anew*" and/or "*from above*". What is your understanding? Does one translation appeal to you more than the others, or is a mix of all three? What does 'born again' mean to you?

Verse 14 refers back to the events of Numbers 21:8-9 and the bronze serpent on the pole.

And the Lord said to Moses, "Make a poisonous serpent, and set it on a pole; and everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live." So Moses made a serpent of bronze, and put it upon a pole; and whenever a serpent bit someone, that person would look at the serpent of bronze and live.

No doubt Nicodemus will have been familiar with that story. Look at the serpent and live. Jesus then claims that for himself - look at me and live. Which leads us on to that most famous of texts...

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

If context matters we must look at the surrounding verses and we must remember that Jesus is not producing a polemical tract to be used in converting people. He is having a specific conversation with a specific individual.

Questions:

Karoline Lewis writes:

"There are three strategies for this verse [3:16].

- First, relocate it in its literary context. Why does Jesus say this, here, to Nicodemus? Why does Nicodemus need to hear this from Jesus?
- Second, that God loves the world will be the very next encounter in the Gospel. God loves the world through Jesus' going to Samaria to find the woman at the well. Where is God's world now? What world do we need to see?
- Third, that God loves the world demands the pressing question of what does *loving* mean? How does God love the woman at the well?

In other words, this verse may actually have new meaning if it is placed back into its narrative context, given specificity, and allowed to take on the flesh-and-blood reality into which it was first preached" (Lewis, p50).

We must read on. Verses 17-21 could be considered the 'small print' for v16. Jesus explains that the purpose of him being here on Earth was to save, and not to condemn.

- Again, is this comment specifically for Nicodemus, who, presumably, because of his background would be well equipped to do some serious condemning?
- An important question about this 'small print': Is this an *exclusive* offer? Does it only apply to Nicodemus? To the Jews? To anyone who reads it? What about those who never read it?
- Is this a statement about the 'mechanics' of salvation? Do we need to know about the 'mechanics'? Just as one can operate a mobile phone without the slightest clue about how such a device actually *works* can one achieve salvation without a clue as to how *it* works? Explain! And, as my maths teacher would say "show your working!".