

## NICODEMUS AND LENT<sup>1</sup>

**A sermon preached by Associate Professor Michael Horsburgh AM in St James' Church, King Street, Sydney, on the Second Sunday in Lent, 5 March 2023**

Have you heard about ChatGPT? Launched in November 2022, it is an artificial intelligence “Chatbot”, a program that allows you to converse with the machine rather than a person.<sup>2</sup> Because it can answer questions in an articulate way and at some length, it has worried educational institutions because of the opportunity for plagiarism. A student could enter an essay topic and receive a fully written response. The temptation for a preacher is evident. Could I get a sermon on demand?

I decided to give it a go. I entered the instruction, “Write a sermon on Nicodemus and Jesus”. After a few seconds, back came my sermon. I wondered whether it could produce a different sermon if I asked the question again. It produced a different set of words. If you look at the online version of today’s sermon, you will find both texts attached to it.

Were they any good? Yes and no. They were quite intelligible, but they were very short, 477 and 383 words. My sermons are usually at least three times that long. Depending on your point of view, that may be a plus.

Not surprisingly, both versions concentrated on the concept of being “born again”. In that sense, they were different versions of the same sermon. Their approach was both simple, a good thing, and naïve, a much worse thing. The exercise was fun but did not produce an acceptable sermon for St James, King Street. The text is not simple, and naivety will not help us.

This is not an automatically generated sermon, and it took more than a few seconds to write.

One of the most noticeable features of John’s gospel is the series of dialogues in which Jesus has discussions with individuals. In chapter 4, Jesus encounters the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well.<sup>3</sup> In chapter 5, Jesus talks with the paralysed man lying beside the pool of Bethsaida.<sup>4</sup> In chapter 9, Jesus has a very long conversation, 41 verses, with the man born blind.<sup>5</sup> In chapter 11, Jesus speaks at length with Mary of Bethany after her brother, Lazarus, has died.<sup>6</sup>

Today, we have heard the first conversation, that with Nicodemus, who, being afraid, sought Jesus out at night. He was a man of some substance, a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the principal Jewish governing body. John describes him as a “leader”,<sup>7</sup> while Jesus called him a “teacher”.<sup>8</sup> The secrecy of his visit protected his social status.

---

<sup>1</sup> Readings: Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17

<sup>2</sup> [ChatGPT - Wikipedia](#)

<sup>3</sup> John 4:1-42

<sup>4</sup> John 5: 2-14

<sup>5</sup> John 9:1-41

<sup>6</sup> John 11: 17-44

<sup>7</sup> John 3:1

<sup>8</sup> John 3: 10

The conversation has three distinct sections, each starting with the phrase, “Very truly, I tell you”. In some form this phrase appears in each of the four gospels. It marks the significance of what Jesus is about to say. His conversation with Nicodemus is thus quite significant.

In addition, each section involves a word with double meanings, which are used to make the point that people had difficulty in understanding what Jesus was saying. Jesus cleverly exploits the double meanings. What we have read this morning is a strikingly sophisticated piece of writing.

The first example is a Greek word used in verses three and four. Jesus says that, in order to see the kingdom of God, you must be born from above. Nicodemus asks how a person can be born again when old. The word that Jesus uses is “anothen” (ἀνωθεν). It means both “from above” and “again”. Nicodemus has taken the alternative meaning, not the meaning that Jesus intended. It’s not that Nicodemus is wrong, although I find it interesting that many evangelical Christians have concentrated on Nicodemus’s version and not on that offered by Jesus.

As Tom Wright comments, constantly proclaiming that one is “born again” is “like someone framing their birth certificate, hanging it on the wall, and insisting on showing it to everyone who comes into the house.”<sup>9</sup> We don’t need a birth certificate to prove that we are alive. It matters not how we became Christians but that we are Christians, which fact we experience without resort to formal proof.

But we shouldn’t feel bound to choose. That would be to ignore the subtlety of this conversation by reducing it. As Andrew McGowan said in a post during the week:

The interpretive answer lies then in maintaining the ambiguity of the phrase, not resolving it. What Jesus does mean is “your life must change in a way so radical that it can be spoken of as rebirth” *and* “the changed character of your life will reveal that your true identity belongs to a reality other than this world.” The two meanings support one another, showing that the change Jesus calls for and offers is not just incremental or partial (even though it may not be instantaneous), nor driven by our own initiative. We’re not in control of birth, after all. It is radical, and is his (and the Spirit’s [vv. 5-8]) work not our own.<sup>10</sup>

The next section follows immediately, when Jesus says that the wind blows where it chooses. Here the word with the double meaning is “pneuma” (πνεῦμα). The two meanings are “breath” or “wind” on the one hand and “spirit” on the other. This allows Jesus to compare the movement of air with the movement of the spirit. What you know about wind is that you feel it, but you cannot control it. It’s the same with the spirit. As Tom Wright explains;

[T]he point of this is that God’s kingdom is now thrown open to anyone and everyone. The spirit is on the move, like a fresh spring breeze ... and no human family, tribe, organization or system can keep up with it. Opening the window and letting the breeze in can be very inconvenient, especially for the Nicodemuses of this world who suppose they have got things tidied up, labelled and sorted into neat piles.<sup>11</sup>

As W H Auden wrote:

We would rather be ruined than changed,  
We would rather die in our dread

---

<sup>9</sup> Tom Wright, *John for Everyone Part 1: Chapters 1-10* SPCK pp. 27-28.

<sup>10</sup> [Born again? - by Andrew McGowan - Andrew’s Version \(substack.com\)](#)

<sup>11</sup> Wright p.29

Than climb the cross of the moment  
And let our illusions die.<sup>12</sup>

Then we come to the third section with its double meaning word “hupsos” (ὕψος) “lift up” or “elevate”. It’s not that this word has two distinct meanings, but that Jesus uses it in two different ways. In the first way, Jesus reminds his hearers of an event during the Exodus when the Israelites were attacked by venomous snakes. Moses made a bronze serpent and placed it on a pole. Anyone who looked at it survived the snakes’ bites.<sup>13</sup>

Jesus then says that he likewise must be “lifted up”, partly a reference to his crucifixion and partly a reference to his glorification. Thus, being “lifted up” is transformed into being “elevated”. Then follows one of the most famous verses in the New Testament:

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.<sup>14</sup>

It is about here in the story that Nicodemus fades away and the focus turns from an individual to all of us. What we have here is a universal possibility. I find it strange that, just as some have preferred Nicodemus’s misunderstanding of “born from above”, many have changed this invitation into a warning, “those who do not believe are not rewarded”. A word of inclusion is changed to one of exclusion.

This is the Second Sunday in Lent. What do we take from this gospel into our Lenten journey?

David Ford comments:

Opening ourselves to the love and light of God is an ongoing daily challenge. It does not give access to anyone else’s encounter, response, or future ... or to any overview about how others relate to God. About anyone else, we need to be confident in the love of God for the whole world and aware that the Spirit is free to move however God’s love chooses, which is often in very surprising ways.<sup>15</sup>

The 17th century poet Henry Vaughan,<sup>16</sup> put it this way:

Through that pure virgin shrine,  
That sacred veil drawn o’er Thy glorious noon,  
That men might look and live, as glowworms shine,  
And face the moon,  
Wise Nicodemus saw such light  
As made him know his God by night.

Most blest believer he!  
Who in that land of darkness and blind eyes  
Thy long-expected healing wings could see,  
When Thou didst rise!  
And, what can never more be done,  
Did at midnight speak with the Sun!

---

<sup>12</sup> W H Auden, [From W.H. Auden's The Age Of Anxiety - Mockingbird \(mbird.com\)](#).

<sup>13</sup> Numbers 21:5-8

<sup>14</sup> John 3:16

<sup>15</sup> David Ford, *The Gospel of John*, Baker Publishing Group, pp. 99-100

<sup>16</sup> [Henry Vaughan | Poetry Foundation](#)

...

There is in God, some say,  
A deep but dazzling darkness, as men here  
Say it is late and dusky, because they  
See not all clear.  
O for that night! where I in Him  
Might live invisible and dim!<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> [The Night by Henry Vaughan | Poetry Foundation](#)

The full poem is:

Through that pure virgin shrine,  
That sacred veil drawn o'er Thy glorious noon,  
That men might look and live, as glowworms shine,  
And face the moon,  
Wise Nicodemus saw such light  
As made him know his God by night.

Most blest believer he!  
Who in that land of darkness and blind eyes  
Thy long-expected healing wings could see,  
When Thou didst rise!  
And, what can never more be done,  
Did at midnight speak with the Sun!

O who will tell me where  
He found Thee at that dead and silent hour?  
What hallowed solitary ground did bear  
So rare a flower,  
Within whose sacred leaves did lie  
The fulness of the Deity?

No mercy-seat of gold,  
No dead and dusty cherub, nor carved stone,  
But His own living works did my Lord hold  
And lodge alone;  
Where trees and herbs did watch and peep  
And wonder, while the Jews did sleep.

Dear night! this world's defeat;  
The stop to busy fools; care's check and curb;  
The day of spirits; my soul's calm retreat  
Which none disturb!  
Christ's progress, and His prayer time;  
The hours to which high heaven doth chime;

God's silent, searching flight;  
When my Lord's head is filled with dew, and all  
His locks are wet with the clear drops of night;  
His still, soft call;  
His knocking time; the soul's dumb watch,  
When spirits their fair kindred catch.

Were all my loud, evil days  
Calm and unhaunted as is thy dark tent,  
Whose peace but by some angel's wing or voice  
Is seldom rent,  
Then I in heaven all the long year  
Would keep, and never wander here.

## ChatGPT Sermon 1

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Today, I want to reflect with you on the story of Nicodemus and Jesus, as told in the Gospel of John. This encounter between these two figures is one that reveals much about our relationship with God and the nature of faith.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee, a member of the Jewish ruling council, and a man of great knowledge and influence. He was curious about Jesus and his teachings, and so he sought him out one night, under the cover of darkness.

When Nicodemus arrived, he greeted Jesus with respect, calling him "Rabbi" and acknowledging that he was a teacher who came from God. Jesus, in turn, spoke to Nicodemus about the nature of the kingdom of God, explaining that one must be born again to enter it.

Nicodemus was perplexed by this statement. He thought only of physical birth and could not understand how one could be born again. Jesus explained that this new birth was a spiritual one, a transformation of the heart and soul that comes from believing in him as the Son of God and receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Nicodemus struggled with this concept, but Jesus continued to teach him about the love of God and the power of faith. He spoke of his

---

But living where the sun  
Doth all things wake, and where all mix and tire  
Themselves and others, I consent and run  
To every mire,  
And by this world's ill-guiding light,  
Err more than I can do by night.

There is in God, some say,  
A deep but dazzling darkness, as men here  
Say it is late and dusky, because they  
See not all clear.  
O for that night! where I in Him  
Might live invisible and dim!

own mission to save the world and how all who believe in him will have eternal life.

In this encounter, we see a powerful example of the transformative power of faith. Nicodemus was a man of great knowledge and influence, but he was still searching for something more, for a deeper understanding of God and his purpose. Jesus offered him a new way of seeing the world, one that was rooted in faith and love.

This story challenges us to examine our own lives and our relationship with God. Are we content with what we know, or are we open to the possibility of something more? Do we seek out Jesus and his teachings, or do we keep our distance, afraid of what we might find?

Like Nicodemus, we too can be transformed by the power of faith. We too can be born again, not of the flesh, but of the Spirit. We too can find new life and purpose in Christ, and we too can experience the love and grace of God in a profound and life-changing way.

So let us pray that we may have the courage to seek out Jesus, to ask him the hard questions, and to allow him to transform our lives. Let us be open to the possibility of new beginnings, of second chances, and of the abundant life that comes from faith in him.

May God bless us all on our journey of faith, and may we continue to grow in his love and grace each and every day. Amen.

## **ChatGPT Sermon 2**

Dear brothers and sisters,

Today, I would like to reflect on the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus as recorded in the Gospel of John. This encounter is significant because it reveals to us the essence of the Christian faith and our relationship with God.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Jewish ruling council, a man who had devoted his life to the study and practice of the Jewish law. He came to Jesus at night, seeking to understand the meaning of his teachings. Jesus responded by telling Nicodemus that unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

Nicodemus, like many of us, struggled to understand this concept of being born again. He asked Jesus, "How can a man be born when he is old? Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!" Jesus then explained to Nicodemus that being born again is a spiritual rebirth, a transformation of the heart that comes through faith in God's love and grace.

Through this encounter, Jesus taught Nicodemus, and all of us, that the path to eternal life is not through strict adherence to the law, but through faith in God's love and grace. Jesus told Nicodemus that "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."

This encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus challenges us to examine our own faith and the depth of our relationship with God. Are we relying on our own efforts to earn God's favour, or are we placing our trust in the grace and love of God revealed through Jesus Christ? Do we truly believe that Jesus is the Son of God who died for our sins and rose from the dead, or are we simply going through the motions of religion?

As we reflect on the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus, let us remember that Jesus calls us to a deeper, more intimate relationship with him. He invites us to be born again, to be transformed by his love and grace, and to live our lives as his disciples.

May we all have the faith and courage to respond to Jesus' invitation and to follow him wherever he leads us. Amen.



Christen Kobke - Christ and Nicodemus (c. 1840)



*Moses & The Brazen Serpent* (c1609)  
Pieter Paul Rubens (1577-1640),  
The Courtauld Institute, London