



*Chaplaincy of All Saints' Marseille  
with Aix-en-Provence  
and the Luberon*

*8<sup>th</sup> March 2020  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent  
Nicodemus  
All Saints Marseille*

Sermon preached by Revd John Smith

I have brought this stool as I want to tell you a story. I want to tell you my story.

I really did want to see Jesus to find out for myself who He was.

He was making such an impact on our community, more than an impact I should say for only a few weeks earlier he had stormed into the Temple with a whip of cords and driven out the oxen, sheep, pigeons and goats; all the animals that people needed to make their various sacrifices. He also chased out the money changers with the same whip, emptied their coin baskets and overturned their tables. That in of itself was extraordinary but as he was chasing the money changers out of the temple he said *"Take these things away. Do not make my Father's house a house of trade"*. What He said struck me more than what He did. Was He really claiming to be the Son of God as the gossipers were claiming in the rumours they spread? When we questioned Him by whose authority He was doing these things, He gave us an obscure answer about rebuilding the temple in three days even though it had taken forty-six years to build it. Some of us thought He was a hooligan, some thought He was a comedian, and others thought He was mad.

I really did want to see Jesus to find out for myself who He was.

I am comfortably off financially. I am a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the supreme council or court in Israel. We meet every day except feast days and Sabbaths to discuss and decide matters of the Law. The Chief Priest presides over the Sanhedrin. I have studied the law many years and I am well respected and considered to be a leader in the Sanhedrin. I did not tell anybody that I was going to see Jesus. I chose to go and see Him after we had finished our business in the Sanhedrin for the day. There were less people around as I wanted some extended time with him and I did not want to be interrupted. Besides it was a cooler time of day.

When I met Him, I called him Rabbi for I truly saw Him as a teacher and a master. I told Him that He could only do the things that He was doing and have the wisdom that He spoke with if that power had come from God. His answer was most unexpected. He said *"no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born from above"*. Now I knew He did not mean that we have to be physically born again so I asked Him, "can a person enter into his mother's womb a second time?" in order to have him explain more. He then said that *"nobody could enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and spirit for what is born of the flesh is of the flesh and what is born of the Spirit is spirit."* I must have looked perplexed as I was perplexed and I asked "how can these things be?" to which Jesus said *"are you a teacher of Israel and yet you do not know these things?"*

I fell silent as He said quite gently, that He had told us earthly things but we had not believed those things so how were we ever likely to believe heavenly things? He went on to explain that just as our patriarch Moses lifted up the bronze serpent on a pole in the wilderness to save the people from dying when they were bitten by snakes, so the Son of Man must be lifted up so that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life. Now unlike the Sadducees who are in the minority on the Sanhedrin, we Pharisees believe in life after death. Jesus continued with the most striking words. *"God so loved the world that he gave His only begotten son that whoever believes in him may have eternal life"*. And that *"God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him may be saved. Those who believe in Him are not condemned but those that do not believe are condemned already"*.

This was all a great shock to me because I had kept the Ten Commandments and obeyed every aspect of the law every day since a child. I came to Jesus thinking my future on this earth and the next was secure but now Jesus was telling me that I am a condemned man and the only way to eternal life is believing that Jesus is the Son of God. That left me lots to think about

The next time I had anything to do with Jesus was when the High Priests wanted to arrest him. They sent the temple guards to get him but they listened to what Jesus was saying and were completely captivated by Him. They returned without Jesus. This got the High Priests excited and a little angry but I, being a student and respecter of the law, asked *"Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?"* As they could not answer my question without condemning themselves, they tried to insult me by asking if I was from Galilee too.

Eventually things got so out of hand with this man Jesus that he was arrested and brought before the Sanhedrin where he was found guilty of several offenses against our law. Jesus was handed over to the Roman authorities who ordered his execution and he was crucified along with two rogues. My friend Joseph who lived in Arimathea, originally a Levite city situated close to Mount Ephraim and the birthplace of Samuel the last of the Hebrew judges, came to see me. He said that he had been to see Pilate to ask if he could remove the body of Jesus from the cross. After Pilate had consulted the centurion to see if Jesus was dead, he agreed and Joseph wanted help to remove the body. I thought he was very brave so I decided I would help him. He also asked me to bring some myrrh and aloes to embalm his body. I took as much as I could, over 30 kilograms, enough to embalm a king.

I can't tell you what my feelings were as we removed the nails from the hands and feet of Jesus and we bore the full weight of Jesus as we lowered him from the cross. At that moment I remembered Jesus talking about the need for His body to be lifted up for people to have everlasting life. We carried His body less than a hundred metres from Calvary to a new tomb that Joseph had prepared some time ago. We wrapped the body of Jesus in strips of linen. As I looked at that very dead corpse I stopped and wondered whether I would see him again in this life or the next.

Oh, I am sorry, I realise that I have told you all my story but I have not told you my name. I am Nicodemus

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There is a lot we do not know about Nicodemus. But what a shock he received. A man who came to Jesus believing that he would enter the kingdom of God because he kept the Ten Commandments and obeyed every point of the law, leaves Jesus as a condemned man. What Nicodemus had not realized was that the law was a way of life for the redeemed not a way of salvation for the lost. We are not told whether Nicodemus was convinced, whether he was convicted and whether he was converted. In a way it does not matter whether Nicodemus was born again but it does matter very much whether we are born again, whether we accept Jesus as our only means of salvation.

And I would add one thing more. It took a while for Nicodemus to come out of the dark but God was patient with him. When you give your life to Christ, God does not expect instant perfection. He looks for steady growth. I don't know when each of you came to know Christ but my question for you today is: how well does your current level of spiritual growth match up to how long you have known Jesus?