

8 March 2020: Genesis 12:1-4a, John 3:1-17, Romans 4 1-5 and 13-17, Psalm 121

Shining a light in the blurry bits

You may have heard of the film *Night at the Museum*? Well, in Cambridge, during the February half term, there was an event known as “*Twilight at the Museum*”. For one night only, museums across the city opened to be explored in the dark by torchlight.

We went to the Scott Polar Museum. This is a popular event and to ease the flow of visitors, we were directed to the back entrance. We switched on our torches and entered the dimly lit building. By using the back entrance, we approached the exhibits out of order. This, together with the fact that we could only focus our torches on small areas of the information boards, left me feeling that I had only glimpsed the stories of these intrepid explorers. I decided that we would need to come back and look again properly. Perhaps this was the intention of those who put on this event.

We don't know why Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. He was a Pharisee, a teacher of the Law. Maybe he didn't want others to see that he had taken an interest in this unorthodox teacher. He may have recalled the recent upset in the Temple when Jesus had confronted the moneychangers. Maybe it was hard to get Jesus attention amongst the crowds in Jerusalem and Nicodemus wanted to make sure that he would have the time and space to discuss his questions properly. Possibly it was a bit of both.

Whatever his reasons, he came to Jesus under cover of darkness. He would have needed a lamp to navigate the streets at night and he needed a metaphorical light to shine on his partial understanding of who Jesus was.

It seems to me that Nicodemus had seen that Jesus spoke and acted with God's authority. He may have sought confirmation that he was correct, guidance about what he should do and perhaps a pat on the back for insight that his colleagues had failed to grasp.

But Nicodemus had understood only a part of the story. Jesus was not simply from God. He was, and is, God. A bit like our torch lit trip to the museum, Nicodemus found that there was something more to comprehend. A spiritual awakening, that didn't sit well with his need for order and clarity of understanding. You can almost feel his frustration as Nicodemus grapples with the idea of birth in the flesh and birth in the spirit. By the end of the encounter, he is left chastised for his failure to understand. It is comforting to note that this is just the start of a journey. Nicodemus is mentioned twice more in John's Gospel, but more of that later.

Like Nicodemus we are all on a journey of faith. Like Nicodemus, we may believe we have an understanding of the Gospel. But often, the more we learn, the more we realise there is to understand. I will refer to this as the “*blurry bits*”. The things on the edge of our spiritual vision that we don't quite grasp.

In the familiar passage in 1 Corinthians, Paul says that we see in a glass darkly, as it says in the Message Bible;

“¹² We don't yet see things clearly. We're squinting in a fog, peering through a mist. But it won't be long before the weather clears and the sun shines bright!”

So, what can we learn from Nicodemus to help the sun shine on our blurry bits?

Nicodemus's stumbling block seems to be his failure to engage with the Holy Spirit. His understanding was fact based. He was concerned with things one could see, touch or do. Jesus requirement was for a gesture of faith and trust in the things that cannot be seen. It is very easy to be drawn into a way of thinking like Nicodemus. Society teaches that rewards are there to be earned and it can seem counter cultural to accept that the greatest reward, that of salvation is given freely and generously.

This was not only a problem for Nicodemus. A similar message is given to the Church in Rome by Paul. A difficult message for the mainly gentile congregation in a city thriving on power and acquisition. A city where locals worship meddling and vengeful gods. Paul's message is clear, it is not what you do that puts you right with God. It is your faith, what you believe and who you trust. It is a message to remind us that God gave his only son so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life. We did not earn this gift, we do not deserve it, but the things we do and the way we engage with others and with God's created world, should be a response to this act of love and grace.

Nicodemus's later actions suggest such a response. A few days after he had snuck to see Jesus under cover of darkness, Nicodemus stood up for him at a meeting of the Sanhedrin urging that Jesus had a right to be heard before being condemned. (John 7: 50-51) A few days after that, he was with Joseph of Arimathea, bringing spices to prepare Christ's body for burial and helping to place it in the tomb. (John 19:39-40) On both occasions Nicodemus put himself in danger to act on his faith.

In the letter to the Hebrews, faith is defined as

"the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." (Heb 11:1)

It is the light shining on our blurry bits helping us to align our wills with that of God.

The letter continues with a summary of the faith of the people of the Old Testament from the moment of creation. Reflecting on this, put me in mind of the Live Lent resources which some of us have been following. This material is based on the book *Saying Yes to Life* by Ruth Valerio. The future of our planet is in jeopardy. There is much information about what we should or shouldn't do to put it right. Sometimes conflicting, often challenging. This is another area steeped in "blurry bits" and understanding which can be hard to grasp. Through these resources, we are encouraged to engage with God's plea to care for creation. We are to reflect on the condition of the planet and all those that live in it, using the opportunity to give up something, or do something differently. Together, we are to seek God's plan for the world. Not just as individuals or even as a group of people, but as the whole of creation. I encourage you to shine your torch of faith into this situation. Pray for clarity in your response to the challenges and guidance about what you could do, however small, to play your part.

In the film *Night at the Museum*, all the exhibits receive "new life" when they come to life during the hours of darkness. At first there is chaos and carnage as each exhibit tries to fend for itself, behaving in the way that suits it best. In time, trusting in the guidance of the night watchman, they learn that by cooperation and acting together, they can thrive. We need to act similarly. This requires faith, not in a night watchman equipped with a torch and a need to hold onto his job at all costs, but in Jesus Christ, the Light of the World, God the Creator and the Holy Spirit through whom we too are born to eternal life.