

## **SERMON FOR LENT 2 | 05.03.2023**

Genesis 12: 1-4a; Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17; St John 3: 1-17

**I was talking to Keith, our organ building technical adviser. He and his wife Mandy are sailing around the world and he was FaceTiming me, amazingly, off the Indonesian coast! He was talking about the food on board and mentioned in passing that the couple they share a table with is big in the Civil Service and he couldn't say much about his work because he had signed the Official Secrets Act. You know the joke: I would love to tell you about this but I would have to shoot you afterwards...**

**Political secrets – or the lack of them – have been in the headlines again this week as Matt Hancock, Health Secretary from 2018 to 2021, had found that a collection of more than 100,000 WhatsApp messages sent between him and other ministers and officials at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic have been leaked by the journalist Isabel Oakeshott and passed to the Daily Telegraph. A vocal critic of coronavirus lockdowns, Ms Oakeshott got hold of them while helping Mr Hancock write his book, Pandemic Diaries. She said she broke a legal agreement by releasing the messages because it was "in the public interest".**

**But what of our own secrets? Are we the kind of people who have a heap of them locked away or do we carry very few?**

**And do any of the secrets matter; do they affect the way we run the rest of our lives – or affect the kinds of people that we are? Are there people whom we can trust to know what these secrets might be – and can help us move on? Would we be mortified if an 'Isabel Oakeshott' shared our intimate secrets.**

**In today's Gospel, St John sets the scene of a meeting between Nicodemus and Jesus 'in the dark'. Light and dark are favourite themes in the Fourth Gospel as we know: nearly all of our memorable quotes about light – at Easter for example – all comes from St John's pen.**

**So Nicodemus, a very senior member of the Jewish Council, comes by night – whether because he is afraid of being seen or because the darkness symbolises where his mind is: confused and in need of help – or perhaps more positively this was the time for many scholars to wrestle with big questions because they could be free of being interrupted. Whatever, Nicodemus needs help and he comes with something that he finds perplexing: what does Jesus mean when he says that someone must be 'born again'? Does this mean a return to the womb, or something else?**

The Greek word for this is *anōthen* and it can be translated as 'born again' or 'born from above'. In the smart hands of St John, Jesus invites Nicodemus to see that both meanings have something to teach us. While Jesus has clearly 'come from above', there is also the need for a 'new beginning'. So, Jesus continues, each of us needs to be born 'of water and the Spirit' if they are to be children of God. Like the theme of light, there is also a lot of water in St John: Jesus is baptised in it, he turns water into wine at the wedding feast and of course he offers it to the Samaritan woman at the well; he heals a man at the Pool of Siloam; he walks on it and washes the feet of disciples in it.

When Catriona was born, five weeks early and when Maria and I were 200 miles from home in the house of an unmarried priest friend in Durham, her waters broke all over his lounge carpet. What one never quite expects is just how much water there is to protect the unborn child! But once that has happened, the next thing is for the baby to take its first gasps of breath in the outside world. So, Jesus says to Nicodemus, do we: we too move on from our natural birth to the spiritual birth that enables to share in the Kingdom of God. 'That which is born of the flesh is flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to Spirit which, like the wind, comes and goes invisibly.' This is the new air, *pneuma* the spirit of the Holy Spirit which Nicodemus needs to breath to enable him to come out of the darkness into the light.

But if only it were that simple, we say, rightly! If only we could turn a corner and find ourselves released from sin and all those secrets which can so easily hold us back from being children of the light.

Another conversation this week with someone who felt deeply hurt, resentful and angry. How, they asked, can I overcome those emotions? They seem to be trapped inside me?

All I could do was to point them back to the psalms and to generations of experience. Rather than hide away the secrets, the pain and the evidence of fights won and lost, the advice is to spell out the difficulties, the mistakes, the sins and the crises. Tell God, tell a trusted friend – find someone to share these things with – as Nicodemus did with Jesus.

Only then can the Holy Spirit put them in context, transform them and make them the base for new growth in the light of God's healing power. Staying in the dark, keeping secrets – for whatever reason – stops us growing and stops us inheriting the Kingdom of light and, joy and peace.