

**SERMON: 27 MAY 2018 – Rev Brenda Robson****“Nicodemus and Jesus”****(John 3:1–17)**

Probably like me, you hadn't heard of Bishop Michael Curry before last Saturday. He is the head of the Episcopal Church in the USA, part of the Anglican Communion.

He preached a passionate sermon at the wedding of Harry and Meghan in Windsor Chapel last Saturday, a sermon about God's love and holy fire, a truly Pentecostal sermon

It took many by surprise as it was not a typical Anglican, royal wedding sermon in content or length!

There is divided opinion about the sermon – some favourable, some less so – but Bishop Curry had 13 minutes to declare the gospel – probably twice as long as it should have been – and he did declare the gospel.

As the Bishop said to the congregation, two young people fell in love and we all showed up. They came to see a wedding, not to hear from God. If statistics are true then about 95 per cent of the wedding congregation would not be regular church goers.

Wonderful opportunity for the Bishop and he went for it! Millions, in fact possibly over 2 billion, people heard the word preached.

They would get the message although they might not get all of it. One phrase that confused some was the Bishop's reference to what they thought was a bomb in Gilead. “Why was he talking about a bomb?” was asked by a number of people on internet chats. Of course we know, don't we, that he was referring to the balm of Gilead, but in an American accent, a bomb is pronounced a balm!

In case you don't know, the balm of Gilead is a rare and expensive perfume that came from Gilead, a mountainous region east of the Jordan. It was thought to have powerful universal healing properties.

It could make things right, make the wounded whole, cure diseases. It is mentioned in Genesis and in Jeremiah.

Jesus is the New Testament balm of Gilead, the one who heals all wounds and makes things right.

Nicodemus would have known about the balm of Gilead. He came to Jesus steeped in knowledge about God. He was one of the 6000 or so Pharisees of his day who studied the scriptures and interpreted the laws. In fact he was one of the 70 most powerful Pharisees, the elite, the rulers and judges who sat in the Sanhedrin or court. He was an aristocrat, a wealthy man.

Why did this man of privilege and power come in the night to speak to a travelling preacher who had no fixed abode, no status, no worldly goods, no education, no noble birth, who was considered by his colleagues in the Sanhedrin to be a criminal, a heretic?

Nicodemus should have felt confident that he would enter God's kingdom because he was a Jew, one of God's chosen race, he was circumcised, he lived by God's laws, he was devout – but Jesus would tell him that that was not enough, not sufficient.

But I think Nicodemus already knew in his heart that it was not enough, that there was something missing in his life, something unfulfilled. He was full of head knowledge but there was a spiritual hole in his life, that was what brought him to Jesus in the night.

Of course he had been waiting all his life for the Messiah just as the Jewish people had been waiting for generations. He knew all the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah and all the others about the one who would come from the line of David to be a King over the people. He would have been hoping that the Messiah would come in his life time.

His longing and his emptiness brought him to Jesus that night, this man who seemed to have it all. But in fact it was more than that. God brought him there. God wanted him to meet with Jesus, to recognise who he truly was, to be baptized and to become a leader in the new church spreading the gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ. All these things would come to pass when Nicodemus was born again in the spirit. But first he had to come to Jesus and ask his questions and be satisfied.

God creates an emptiness and a longing in the hearts and minds of people at a time when they are not even aware of his existence.

The great and the good gathered in Windsor Chapel last weekend. Many people of wealth and status and power and fame. Happy people? Contented people? Fulfilled people?

They came to enjoy a wedding and join in the celebrations and were confronted by the gospel of Jesus Christ. They were a captive audience. They couldn't leave – although they could look a bit bemused, uncomfortable, perplexed. But I am sure that seeds were sown in the lives of many inside and outside that chapel. Ed Milliband, from a Jewish family, tweeted that the sermon could almost make him a believer in Jesus.

The sermon was the most tweeted part of the whole ceremony.

Nicodemus had already encountered Jesus before his amazing conversation with him in the night. Before Nicodemus came to Jesus he had seen the miraculous signs Jesus had been doing – miracles, healing, teaching – and he already acknowledged

that Jesus was a teacher sent by God – but maybe not the Messiah. So he came to Jesus to check it out further.

Its okay to want to check Jesus out, we probably all do that on our journey of faith, especially when we feel called towards Jesus for the first time. We need to check him out for ourselves.

And later on in our faith journey, we might feel that Jesus is calling us into something new – and we need to check it out...and check it out...and check it out. Until we come to the point of saying, okay Jesus, I've checked it out, now I'll try it out, I'll take one step in this new direction and try it out.

Even John the Baptist checked Jesus out. John had prepared the way for the ministry of Jesus, he had baptized Jesus in the River Jordan, he told the people gathered "Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." Like Nicodemus, his followers told him about the things Jesus was doing, healing and raising the dead. But John was in prison and could not see for himself that the man doing these things was the same Jesus he had baptized. So he sent two of his followers to Jesus to ask "**Are you the one who was to come or should we expect someone else?**"

Jesus understood the doubt and the question. He described John as one of the greatest men ever born. And he replied in words that John would have recognised from prophecies about him –

**Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard : the blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." (Luke 7:22/23)**

And so John knew for sure that this man was the Messiah and these words from Jesus would sustain him and strengthen him until his death a short time later.

Similarly Nicodemus came to check Jesus out.

He had to be sure. He had so much to lose if he chose to follow Jesus – his status and power and reputation and maybe even his life. He had to be sure. I believe that he was strongly drawn to Jesus and was already on the point of accepting him as Messiah.

Nicodemus claims not to understand what it means to be born again. But it would not have been a completely new concept to him. He would have known that Ezekiel spoke about repentance and turning away from sin and Ezekiel said "**Rid yourselves of all offences you have committed and get a new heart and a new spirit.**" (Ezekiel 18:31)

On the same theme, Ezekiel later said **“I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.”** (Ezekiel 36:26)

And of course Ezekiel spoke about God breathing on dry bones and making them come alive again, a kind of rebirth.

Nicodemus already knew about the possibility of getting a new spirit and I think he wanted to hear it from Jesus’ own lips. The other Pharisees had asked Jesus many questions to trick him, to trap him, they weren’t seeking the truth, they had no intention of becoming followers of Jesus, far from it, they wanted to kill him.

Nicodemus wanted to believe, he came with an open heart, could it be true that all the prophecies of old had indeed come to pass in his life time? He was standing in the presence of the Saviour of the World and he wanted to believe, to be born again and receive this new spirit of eternal life – **whosoever believes in me will never die but will have eternal life**, said Jesus.

God creates an emptiness and a longing in the hearts and minds of people until they say “There must be more than this.”

I was speaking to a nurse last week about her faith journey – when she was in her twenties she seemed to have a full and fulfilled life, she had two degrees and a job and a supportive family and friends – but she thought “there must be more than this.” She felt an emptiness. Until she was invited to an Alpha course and found that Jesus completely filled the emptiness in her life. She was born again in the spirit and continues to live her life as a follower of Jesus.

A young woman called Cheryl was feeling empty and low when a relationship came to an end and she faced a number of changes in her life. She felt that there must be more to life than this. Her mum took her along to church one Sunday. A young man did the bible reading. She whispered to her mum “If all the guys in church were as cute as him, I’d come every week!” Well, she did come every week, she married the cute guy who is my eldest son, she was baptized and born again in the Spirit.

God has creative ways of drawing people to him! And it often comes from emptiness and longing and desire for something more.

Tim Hughes wrote a powerful song on this theme a few years ago – if you are already a born again Christian then let these words be a prayer for more of God’s holy spirit in your life.

***There must be more than this  
O breath of God, come breathe within  
There must be more than this  
Spirit of God we wait for You***

*Fill us anew we pray*  
*Fill us anew we pray*  
*Consuming fire fan into flame*  
*A passion for Your name*  
*Spirit of God fall in this place*  
*Lord have Your way*  
*Lord have Your way with us*  
*Come like a rushing wind*  
*Clothe us with power from on high*  
*Now set the captives free*  
*Leave us abandoned to Your praise*  
*Lord let Your glory fall*  
*Lord let Your glory fall*  
*Consuming fire fan into flame*  
*A passion for Your name*  
*Spirit of God fall in this place*  
*Lord have Your way*  
*Lord have Your way with us* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8iT0lvcEHjM>)

If you are not yet a born again follower of Jesus, then be born again in Jesus Christ today and be filled with his Holy Spirit. Find in Jesus the balm of Gilead. He can heal our open wounds and sores, physical wounds and emotional wounds. He sees our scars from old wounds and he can bring healing there too. He saw how these old wounds happened, he was with us in our past troubles and difficulties even if we did not see him there.

The Jews thought that an expensive perfume could heal all manner of disease and illness. They believed that perfume could heal broken hearts and disturbed minds. But they were wrong. God knew they had got it wrong. And what did God do about it? What did he always plan to do from the beginning of time?

**God so loved the world that he sent his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.**

Jesus now sends us to be the balm of Gilead to a needy world. I will close with three verses from 2 Corinthians 2:

**Thanks be to God who always leads us in triumphal procession in Christ and through us spreads everywhere the fragrance of the knowledge of him. For we are to God the aroma of Christ among those who are being saved and those who are perishing. To the one we are the smell of death, to the other the fragrance of life.**

**AMEN**