

**SERMON – 8/5/22****'Nicodemus and the Woman at the Well'**

Mark 2:13-17

John 3:1-12 and John 4:1-26

Jesus said, "People who are well do not need a doctor, but only those who are sick. I have not come to call respectable people, but outcasts." (Mark 2:17)

This morning we continue our series of sermons looking at some of those who had significant and usually life-changing encounters with Jesus in John's Gospel and considering what encountering Jesus might mean for us today. So far we have seen in chapter 1 how Nathaniel was challenged to be more open to the evidence, and what happened in chapter 2 when Jesus' own mother, Mary, brought a practical problem to His attention.

Today I want to introduce you to *two* characters we meet in chapters 3 and 4, Nicodemus, a high ranking leader in the Jewish establishment in Jerusalem, and a nameless woman from a little village across the border in Samaria. Although we usually read the stories separately, I don't think it is accidental that they appear one after the other in John's Gospel, and what I would like to suggest to you this morning is that although these two individuals are very different – opposites in fact – they are both in need of what only Jesus can offer, and so are you and I.

I won't read you the whole account of each of the encounters but here is a flavour just to remind you and perhaps to whet your appetite to read it all this afternoon or in the coming days.

"Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.' Jesus replied, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again.'

'How can someone be born when they are old?' Nicodemus asked. 'Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother's womb to be born!'

Jesus answered, 'Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, "You must be born again."

'How can this be?' Nicodemus asked.

'You are Israel's teacher,' said Jesus, 'and do you not understand these things? I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?' (John 3:1-12)

"So [Jesus] left Judea and went back once more to Galilee. Now he had to go through Samaria. So he came to a town in Samaria called Sychar. Jacob's well was there, and Jesus, tired as he was from the journey, sat down by the well. It was about noon. When a Samaritan woman came to draw water, Jesus said to her, 'Will you give me a drink?' (His disciples had gone into the town to buy food.) The Samaritan woman said to him, 'You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan woman. How can you ask me for a drink?'

Jesus answered her, 'If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.'

'Sir,' the woman said, 'you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you get this living water? Jesus answered, 'Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life.'

The woman said to him, 'Sir, give me this water so that I won't get thirsty and have to keep coming here to draw water.'

He told her, 'Go, call your husband and come back.'

'I have no husband,' she replied. Jesus said to her, 'You are right when you say you have no husband. The fact is, you have had five husbands, and the man you now have is not your husband. What you have just said is quite true.'

The woman said, 'I know that Messiah is coming. When he comes, he will explain everything to us.' Then Jesus declared, 'I, the one speaking to you – I am he.'" (John 4:1-26)

These two individuals couldn't be more different. Nicodemus is an insider while the woman is an outcast. He is a man and she is a woman. He is a Jew, an expert in the Law and a Pharisee, albeit one who is unusually open to Jesus. She is a Samaritan, that is to say a heretic in the eyes of the Jews, and even shunned by her own people as a woman of ill-repute, albeit she too is waiting for the Messiah. It's as if John wants to emphasise the differences between them. For good measure, he tells us that Nicodemus came to Jesus under cover of darkness, perhaps scared in case his respectability would be compromised if he was seen with the Nazarene, and he also tells us that the woman came to the well at high noon when no-one else would be there because of the heat.

They are both looking for something that will satisfy them. The point is that they are both looking in the wrong place for it. The woman is looking for satisfaction in the arms of men and has been disappointed time and again. In place of the water she has come to draw from the well, Jesus offers her the living water of the Spirit that wells up to eternal life. She needs a new beginning. Nicodemus on the other hand thinks he has found satisfaction through his own moral and spiritual accomplishments, but in fact he has put himself in place of God and built his life on his own pride. He needs to learn that just as he contributed nothing to being born into this world in the first place, he needs to submit to being born again, born anew, born from above. He too needs a new beginning.

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God," the apostle Paul writes to the Romans. The outcast woman at the well has sinned – of course she has, that's why she is considered an outcast – but so has the respectable insider Nicodemus. And so, my friends, have all of us. If we are not ready to acknowledge that then Jesus is nothing to us. If we are prepared to admit it then Christ offers us a new start that we may be born again to eternal life.

In the words of our text this morning: "People who are well do not need a doctor, but only those who are sick. I have not come to call respectable people, Jesus said, but outcasts." We might be tempted to think that we are more like respectable Nicodemus than the outcast Samaritan woman, but what these two stories make clear to us is that no matter what *our* opinion may be of ourselves or of others it is Jesus' opinion that matters. For Him there is no-one who is beyond the pale – He has time for the Nicodemuses of this world and He also has time for those who feel they are outcasts from society for whatever reason. But for Him everyone requires salvation and He doesn't only challenge the woman with her string of sexual liaisons, He also challenges the revered teacher of Israel. You must be born again.

"People who are well do not need a doctor, but only those who are sick. I have not come to call respectable people, Jesus said, but outcasts." Here we are this morning at worship in the company of our brothers and sisters in Christ, revelling in the presence of the living Lord Jesus. If we are confident of our own righteousness, then we have no need of a Saviour and there is no point in our being here. If we come because we think we have somehow earned the right to be here, then we have entirely misunderstood what it is to follow Jesus. The church is for sinners, sinners who know their need of redemption and are humble enough to ask for God's help. And if we know ourselves to be sinners, then the only difference between us and the coarsest rogue who ever walked the earth is that by the grace of God we have also come to know the joy of salvation.

"I have not come to call respectable people, but outcasts." You and I are here this morning not because we are anything special of ourselves, and if we think we are, then we are hypocrites. We are here to celebrate the gracious and unmerited welcome that Christ gives to us, and if we do nothing else in life, we must make the good news of that welcome known to everyone. Let the call go out; let the invitation be extended; and may we be surprised and delighted at those who accept, from the highest of establishment figures to the lowest of nobodies. Come with me, says Jesus. Then go and make disciples of others.