

Revd Harriet Neale-Stevens – Lent 2, 2026

At Portsmouth cathedral, like many churches at this time of year, we're running a confirmation group, preparing a number of adults to be confirmed at Easter. It's an interesting group this year because none of our candidates are what we might call cradle Christians, instead, they are all approaching the faith for the first time in their lives. It's all new. And that makes for some very interesting and challenging discussions.

Last week, (in our confirmation group), we thought about what it might be like to meet Jesus face to face. What kind of things might we talk to him about, what kind of questions might we have for him. Curiously, the group found this quite a difficult thing to imagine. There was a lot of silence, no one had much of an idea of what they would want to say to Jesus in that situation.

And I think that's because there is still quite a journey ahead for this group. Jesus has not yet emerged for them as a person – he's an idea, a thought, a concept in the mind, but not yet someone they feel they could sit down next to and talk with. I've no doubt

that by the time they are ready to be confirmed, Jesus will be present to them in a way they can't yet conceive of.

In today's Gospel passage, we meet Nicodemus as he meets with Jesus. And I love the way John draws us in to this encounter, giving us a fly-on-the-wall position from which to look around and see what's going on. I imagine the room, dark but lit by soft lamplight, Jesus sitting in one corner, knowing that Nicodemus will come, and then the soft, almost tentative knock on the door as Nicodemus arrives, under cover of dark. Jesus opens the door to him, and gestures to Nicodemus to come in and take a seat, to make himself comfortable. And then Nicodemus begins to get down to business – he's come with a straightforward question – to which he wants a straightforward answer.

Rabbi – he says – we know you are a teacher, and one who has come from God – for no one can do the signs that you do if they don't have the presence of God with them. Jesus responds – mysteriously, confusingly – very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they have been born from

above. And it throws Nicodemus. What do you mean? What are you talking about? He says.

No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the spirit. The wind blows where it chooses, you hear its sound, you do not know from where it comes or where it goes. So it is with everyone born from above.

Poor Nicodemus. It doesn't get easier for him, as Jesus make more strange and startling statements about ascending and descending to heaven, being lifted up like the snake in the wilderness, and a promise of eternal life for all who *believe* in him. Which doesn't bode well for Nicodemus at this point, whose belief is tentative, and new, and only just stirring within him.

He reminds me of my confirmation candidates who at this stage in their formation are eager but confused. Why does God send his son to die? They ask. And why doesn't Jesus make things clearer for those who want to follow him? And how can we get to know Jesus better? Like a person?

John packs in a lot of teaching into the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus – it's like a crash

course in Christian theology! In their short conversation we learn that a follower of Jesus must be born again, through the gift and the working of the Holy Spirit. We learn too that the breath of the spirit steers and directs the life of the Christian. We learn that Jesus himself is the link between heaven and earth, between God and his people; and that like the Israelites in the wilderness who looked upon the bronze serpent and were healed, so we who look upon the risen Christ will likewise be healed and saved.

It's a lot for Nicodemus to take in, let alone to understand, Jesus is being very cerebral, and wordy. But the real fruit of this encounter with Jesus is not the teaching Nicodemus receives (however important that is) but that the search has begun for him, and that his desire has been kindled. Nicodemus's yearning to know more is his response to God, who is already there, fully revealed before him; it's his response to God who is at home, and who answers the door on that dark night, and who invites him into the lamplit room to be with him.

Jesus talks to Nicodemus mysteriously about a second birth – a birth which Nicodemus is undergoing as he listens and questions.

Jesus talks about the call of the spirit – which is already stirring and steering Nicodemus towards Christ.

Jesus talks about seeing the son of man lifted up and here Nicodemus looking at him face to face.

We hear about Nicodemus's encounter with God today in contrast to that of Abraham, who is commanded by God to "Go, from hi country and his kindred and his house, to a new land." Abraham's response is of course an extraordinary act of faith, and he remains a model of faith for us all. But not many of us will have an encounter with God that involves such a dramatic command and response. Though some will.

St Benedict, in his rule of life, suggested that for those who truly seek God, for the Nicodemus's and the confirmation candidates, and for me and for you, we should do so in the context of *stability*, in the context of the place and the time in which we live on a daily basis – in our work and our leisure, in our

family life, in our community, in our church. All of us are, of course, on a journey of faith, we are pilgrims, something we remember particularly as we journey through Lent, but Benedict reminds us that stability is important for safeguarding our search and our seeking in case it becomes more like aimless wandering, in case we start to follow our own agenda and not the call of Christ himself.

We don't hear of Nicodemus again until near the end of John's Gospel. And when he reappears, he's speaking out with an enormous amount of courage and commitment, offering a defence of Jesus in the midst of a heated debate among the chief priests and pharisees. And finally, we meet him assisting with Jesus's burial, bringing pounds of myrrh and aloes to anoint Jesus body before laying it in a tomb.

Nicodemus no longer knows Jesus as a teacher sent from God, but as a person whom he loves, as the God who has come to him.

Nicodemus shows us that *our* finding of God, our discovery of God, "in whatever form it may take, is not going to be a kind of triumphant, once for all breakthrough" (Mother Mary David). But rather, it is

a process which takes place right where we are, in which God gradually becomes less and less an abstraction, a concept, an idea, and more and more a person – one we can truly know and love.

Lent is the time for being especially committed in our search for God – and finding little ways in our daily lives – in the place and time in which we live – to stay loyal to him. Persisting with prayer, worshipping regularly, through our love and our service to others, through our work – these are the ways in which we will meet Christ and be drawn further into his presence.

Nicodemus found Jesus in the little front room of a house up the road, and that homely lamplit encounter led him to be the one who anointed Jesus and buried him in the tomb. Little did Nicodemus know that he was preparing the son of God for resurrection.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only son, that whoever seeks him, whoever dares to trust in him, whoever starts follows him, whoever believes in him, even just a little, might have eternal life.