

Sermon Archive 486

Sunday 26 May, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Readings: Romans 8: 12-17

John 3: 1-17

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



Nicodemus in the flesh; Jesus in the Spirit

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In the flesh, Nicodemus has a body. It came from his mother's womb a certain number of years ago. I don't suppose it asked to be born, but it was - so its existence is kind of a "given". The body can be nurtured; it can also be damaged. And whether it's cared for or damaged in a day is kind of what has been. The body can't start again. It can't say "let's have another go, and be born again". It doesn't work that way. Being made of stuff, the body fits into time and place - it's that through which we are present to one another. It is that by which we explore the world - hither and yon, to and fro, bound by perspective, observing the heavens only from below. It is that also by which we are taken away at the end - when we breathe no more. In the flesh, Nicodemus has a body.

In the flesh, Jesus also has a body. It's going to serve him for thirty three years only - not a year more. In the Spirit, he says of the bread with which he feeds the people "no, **this** is my body". He says to them who take the bread "now you are my body too". This is a body that will fit in a tomb - but just for a while. It will be a body missing, causing all sort of mystery and wonder. Jesus has a body - as he lives in the Spirit.

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In the flesh, Nicodemus has eyes. Through them he sees the world, and how it works. He sees the deeds of charity - except for those that are done in secret. He also sees the deeds of charity's opposite. It's not hard to see those - they draw an unpleasant attention to themselves. Lately he's been seeing things of healing and connection that suggest that God is present. Not that he sees **God**, of course - we don't **see** God. But he's seeing things happening around the rabbi from Nazareth.

"Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who comes from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with them". He sees the signs - just can't yet work out exactly what they mean. It's not a case of seeing and believing, although he'd like it to be. It's more like seeing and thinking. Or seeing and wondering. Or seeing and praying. May the mind of Christ my Saviour live in me from day to day . . . In the flesh, Nicodemus has eyes.

In the flesh, Jesus also has eyes. Through them he sees people as sheep without a shepherd - and is moved. We sometimes pray that we might see the world as through the eyes of Christ, but we'd better be careful what we pray for. Through his eyes he sees the need of the world, the distress. Through his eyes, he sees Judas coming into the garden. Through his eyes, he sees the daughters of Jerusalem, and sheds them a tear. Alive to the vulnerability of the world which God loves so much, in the flesh, Jesus has eyes, as he lives in the Spirit.

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In the flesh, Nicodemus has a brain. It's a good one, well trained through reading and listening, reflecting on the wisdom left by those who went before him. His brain has won him respect in the community as a teacher - a "teacher of Israel" he's called - and a ruler. With the other members of the Sanhedrin he makes declarations about God and the religious duties of the people. He hears disputes and applies to the dilemmas what others call the "judgments of God". He's a bearer of religious light. Funny then that when he enters our story, he's coming in from the dark - as if maybe we're getting the feeling that his light isn't reaching everywhere it needs to. There are limits to what this brain can do - famous, but also capable of saying "how can these things be" and "how can one be born after having grown old?" This great brain is capable of missing the metaphor - figuratively "in the dark". In the flesh, Nicodemus has a brain.

In the flesh, Jesus also has a brain. With it he invents stories for telling to the people - delightful stories, disarming stories (prodigals sons, good Samaritans, Lazarus and Dives). With it he thinks up the cleverest of escape routes - "let you who has no sin cast the first stone". As the stones drop from their hands and they go away defeated, it's a victory for his brain. With his brain he comes up with his curious comparisons - "it's like the wind" he says - "you never know where it comes from or where it goes; so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit".

Fascinating insight - the brain is working well, cheekily, with spirit, as it were. In the flesh, but living in the Spirit, Jesus has a brain.

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In the flesh, Nicodemus has feet. With them, he can sneak out from where he lives, to visit strange rabbis at night. They can tip toe, those feet, to do things in secret - as if he doesn't want to be seen in the presence of someone controversial, whom eventually he will come to admire, if not actually love. Those feet will take him somewhat less secretly to a meeting with Pontius Pilate, where with Joseph of Arimathea, he will claim the body. These feet were made for walking - walking the road of someone discovering something new. In the flesh, Nicodemus has feet.

In the flesh, Jesus also has feet. They will be washed by the tears of a sorrowful woman surprised by forgiveness - it's a beautiful thing, it is - how beautiful are the feet . . . Definitely out of the realm of the flesh, these feet will tread the waves. They will know the sharpness of nails. They will be that last thing disciples see when their Lord is taken from their sight - remember the gormless of Galilee! Most of all, these feet will kick up the dust of the Middle East. They will be feet on the ground - a wild claim that God isn't stuck in heaven, but is someone called "God with us". There is something quite profoundly incarnational about dusty feet on the ground. In the flesh Jesus has feet - as he lives in the Spirit.

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In the flesh, Nicodemus has a voice. Today he's using it to ask questions that out him as ignorant (not yet born of water and Spirit). But in time he'll use it well. When there's an suggestion in the Sanhedrin that Jesus ought to be arrested, it's the voice of Nicodemus reminding them that no one should be judged without first being given opportunity to explain themselves. The voice finds the right thing to say at the right time. This voice is "finding its feet". It will, of course, fail to say anything a little while later that will save the day when everything's turning bad. The voice of the Sanhedrin will declare a verdict of guilty to the charge of blasphemy. And maybe the failure of the voice will leave its speaker with a sense of having blood on his hands. Yes, in the flesh Nicodemus also has hands - "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather the multitudinous seas incarnadine, making the green

one red'. The voice may have to learn to say "sorry". It may need to frame the phrase "Lord, have mercy". In the flesh, Nicodemus has a voice.

In the flesh, Jesus also has a voice. With it he expresses one of the deep, high and wide truths of the mystery of God's love. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that through him the world might be saved."

In the flesh a voice speaks good news of the world being loved and saved. Don't go looking for God in the condemnation. Look for the love, and be born to something else. In the flesh Jesus has a voice - living in the Spirit.

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The Apostle Paul says "brothers and sisters, we are obligated not to the flesh, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the flesh, you will live."

And so *I* say, people of Knox, of course we live in the flesh. Born we were, our feet are planted on the earth. Just like Jesus, we kick up the dust of our place and time. We see, we think, we speak. We wonder, we pray, we cry - just like Jesus. Also just like Jesus, then, let us cultivate in our life together a "living in the Spirit". Let us chase the wind and squint for the kingdom - as grass in the paddock blows. Let us love what God loves. Let us save, and not condemn - in the hope that somehow we will find ourselves having been born once more. All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God - and we shall live.

A moment of quiet.

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