

## Unhurried Presence of Jesus (1) HNBC 6 March 2018

John 3:1-16

Good morning everyone. Thank you, Genny, for putting together such an inspiring reflective service for today. Most of you know me as the Church Administrator: I live in the office and do practical stuff around the building. What you probably don't know is that I am passionate about studying the Word of God, trying in a small way to understand what the Father has revealed to us in the Scriptures and thinking about the context in which passages were written. I'm a history buff, so I love to look at the historical context. Last Sunday, Andrew Philips eloquently encouraged us to remain in Christ, to experience the presence of God throughout the activities of the day. For several months, I have been reflecting on the unhurried presence of Jesus, inspired in part by some of the fascinating characters we read about in the gospels. So today, we're going to consider the effect of spending that precious time with Jesus on Nicodemus.

We only read about Nicodemus in John's gospel. Perhaps, after the resurrection, John spent time with him and asked Nicodemus to talk about his night-time encounter with Jesus. Perhaps they even became friends. It is possible that Nicodemus was in the Upper Room on Pentecost Day and like the rest of Jesus' followers was filled with the Holy Spirit. But we don't learn from the New Testament how things turned out for him, and what part he played in the early church.

When he came to Jesus at night, Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council - a very important man of his time. Because faith was so important in Israel then, the Sanhedrin's duties were a mix of politics and religion. So we could think of Nicodemus' position as an amalgamation of something like a bishop and a cabinet minister. He came to question Jesus about his teaching, on his own and at night. He may have been afraid of being seen publicly with Jesus because of his position, or perhaps he just wanted to spend time with Jesus uninterrupted. He had already formed an opinion of Jesus - that he was a teacher inspired by the Holy Spirit and Nicodemus readily acknowledged that the miracles that he had witnessed were directly from God the Father. He called Jesus: "Rabbi". In those days, almost any man could set himself up as a rabbi, teach publicly and try to attract some disciples who wanted to study their particular type of theology. Jesus didn't qualify as a top Rabbi - He had been brought up in Nazareth in Galilee, not considered to be the best area for learning about the fine details of the Old Testament. In John 1:46, Nathaniel, who became one of the 12 disciples, asked whether anything good could come out of Nazareth. Jesus hadn't been trained to teach in one of the popular centres of learning of that time, nor had he been under the tuition of the best lecturers in the tradition of the Pharisees. Nicodemus came from a godly family, he wouldn't have had his role if he hadn't been able to trace his family line back to one of the 12 sons of Jacob. But Jesus challenged Nicodemus' perceptions and talked with him about a spiritual re-birth. This must have been

humbling for Nicodemus, he was, after all, a respected theologian of his time, but Jesus encouraged him to look for the heavenly truths in the scriptures rather than simply earthly ones. Then Jesus described to Nicodemus about the way that this spiritual re-birth was going to take place and which would lead to eternal life. Jesus was going to be “lifted up” on a pole, like the bronze snake during the Israelites’ time in the desert. You can read about that in Numbers 21:4-8. Then we have the beautiful verse 16. Jesus explained why this had to happen – because his Father loved the world so much. He also revealed his true identity to Nicodemus - the one and only Son of God. Nicodemus was warned in advance about the crucifixion, I wonder if and how often he thought about that over the following couple of years. Nicodemus spent a night in the unhurried presence of Jesus – what were the ultimate results of that encounter?

**Read John 19:38-42** Of the 4 accounts of the crucifixion and burial of Jesus, only John records that Nicodemus was with Joseph of Arimathea. Joseph was a fellow member of the Sanhedrin, and John says that they were secret disciples for fear of the consequences. But - their secret was well and truly exposed. Jesus’ disciples had gone their separate ways, John taking Mary the Mother of Jesus into his household, Judas taking his own life and the others fleeing, hiding and thinking that they would be the next ones to be arrested and executed as followers of a man who had been found “guilty” of rebellion and blasphemy. It was only as I researched this passage that I realised what a personal risk Joseph and Nicodemus had taken.

Joseph risked his life by going to Pilate and asking for Jesus’ body for burial. By custom, only close family members could do this, but perhaps Joseph’s position as a notable leader helped. The bodies of executed criminals were generally thrown into common graves, left in the open air to be dealt with by scavengers – not in accordance with Jewish burial customs (v 40). We know that Pilate had considered Jesus innocent of the charges brought against him, but he had been weak and had given in to the demands of some of the Jewish leaders when he had ordered Jesus’ death. Joseph’s request could have rubbed salt into the wounded pride of Pilate and resulted in his own arrest, but he went anyway. While Joseph was talking with Pilate, it seems that Nicodemus was buying myrrh and aloes so that Jesus’ body would be anointed and buried correctly. This was primarily to keep a body sweet-smelling for as long as possible, not an attempt to embalm the body in any way. I understand that about 75 pounds was a huge amount of spices – worth a small fortune. Such a large amount was used only for **royal** burials. They placed Jesus’ body in Joseph’s brand new tomb so that there would be no passing on of any corruption or decomposition. This fulfilled the last part of Psalm 16:10 “...nor will you let your Holy One see decay”.

For Nicodemus and Joseph, their public reputations were destroyed, their places on the Sanhedrin were no longer tenable because of their association with Jesus, who had been hated by the council and handed over to the Roman authorities for crucifixion. They were handling a dead body just before the sabbath of Passover week – one of their most important festivals and celebrations. This

made them unclean according to the law of Moses which they upheld rigidly. They would have had to go through ritual cleansing and not been able to worship nor have fellowship with their families and friends over part of the weekend. These two men risked their lives and gave up their careers and social standing to carry out a loving act of worship for their Lord and king, thinking that this was the only thing that they could do for him at that time. They gave their devotion to the one who had given everything for them.

Jesus' unhurried presence made a huge difference in the life of Nicodemus. He spent a night with Jesus, learning from him, debating and hearing his unique insights into his Father's heart and kingdom. Today Jesus offers us that same unhurried presence. He has all the time in the world to spend with us and he waits for us to come into his presence. It's easy, all we need to do is turn up. We have come into this place this morning - to worship, praise and pray, with open hearts around his word ready to receive his ministry by the Holy Spirit! We are God's people coming together, united in fellowship. It's how we grow together and remain connected to each other and to him, but unhurried time is something in addition. It's is devotional time, when we have nothing else to concentrate on. It's quality time, just us alone with Jesus. We may spend this time studying our Bibles, reflecting on what we have read, or simply sitting still before him. We may prefer to go for a walk in our beautiful countryside, sing or play musical instruments as an act of worship. We may decide to go away on retreat, or on a pilgrimage. We have studied how to pray - simply set aside time to be quiet to reflect on God's love, character and actions, but most importantly, remembering to listen to what he has to say to us. Unhurried presence with our Lord and Saviour is a spiritual discipline at which we need to persevere. Like Nicodemus and many other men and women of God, we will discover that there really is nothing like spending unhurried time with Jesus - it **will** change our lives.