

**Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> March 2022**  
**Psalm 40:1-10 & John 3:1-17**  
**Rev.Monica MacDonald**  
**Brightons Parish Church**

Sermon keypoints:

- 'God did not send His Son to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.'
- God is love!
- We are set free from a wrong perception of God
- We should recognise the times when God has been involved in our lives
- God is the one who changes us through His Spirit – not about what we do ourselves

Let us pray:

Father God, we pray that as we come around Your word now, that You will fill us with Your Spirit that You would open our ears Lord, so that we can hear You speaking to us, in Jesus' name. Amen.

'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him.'

These are words that summarize the entire Gospel for us. The core of the Christian message for us is 'God loves you' and God wants us to know that, and that is why Jesus was sent into the world to live among us, to suffer for us, and to rise again for us and, in some ways, this has a major implication for us because it changes the way in which we should see God, it changes how we experience God in our lives, Jesus' influence in the world.

But what he said and by what he did, established a foundation for all Christians and for the body of believers such as we are here today. The church and this foundation is all that Christians are to communicate to each other and to the world. God is love. In fact, the scriptures teach us that love is the very nature and being of God and it's this message that Jesus was communicating to Nicodemus and so, we see that in His conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus wanted to do a couple of things and the first of these is that Jesus wanted to set Nicodemus free from a wrong perception of God.

Nicodemus had everything going for him. He was in the inner circle of the Jewish leaders. He was wealthy. He had status. He was a member of the elite Jewish council and he was considered to be very knowledgeable. However, Nicodemus had a particular perception of God and how to enter God's kingdom, and that perception was not correct. As a Jewish leader, he had dedicated his life to this way of living. Nicodemus was traveling down a road of what he thought was important, of doing everything correctly, a road that suggests that unless you do everything 100% correctly, God will reject you forever. Nicodemus thought that God's biggest priority was to select the elite for a place in heaven and to reject everyone else. In other words, he thought that God was like a grumpy old judge boss who would severely punish anyone who didn't perform absolutely perfectly and there were no second chances.

I wonder how many of us have thought about God in that way? That God wants to condemn rather than to save? There are some folk who have a picture of judgment day, one where there is a huge television screen, let's call it, showing a DVD of your life and that you will be fast forwarding your story pausing every now and then to point out all the sinful parts of your lives, parts where you made wrong choices. Of course, this is certainly not so. Such a picture tells only a really small and distorted part of the story. On judgement day there may well be a showing of a film of our lives but I feel certain that, from what Jesus was saying to Nicodemus, that what we are told throughout the scriptures, that God will be highlighting those occasions when He has been at work in our lives, like when we were created, like when we were accepted into God's family in baptism, like when God gave us opportunities to develop as a person, as a Christian, when God molded us as a result of our experience of Him, experiences in worship, in prayer, Bible study, in fellowship with other Christians, and every time some of the perhaps not so good things of our lives are shown, Jesus will be standing right there saying 'I already paid for that. Don't worry, I already paid for that.'

Nicodemus had a completely different way of thinking about God. No doubt, he sought to keep all the main man-made rules of his religion as well as the law, of course, which God had given to Moses. Nicodemus was a religious man, he was an upright man, he was a teacher, and he was respected in society and yet, Nicodemus knew within himself that something was missing in his life, and so convinced by the miracles of Jesus that he had seen and those that he had heard of, Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cover of darkness and Jesus explains to him the nature of God's love, the nature of God's love for all of humankind, that God's love is not static or self-centered, but that *'God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.'*

Christ came to save. Christ did not come to condemn. Why? Because God considers mankind special, and that includes each one of us, and he calls us to come closer to Jesus and not just for today, but every day. God's love reaches out and draws others in, draws us in as well. God sets the pattern of true love. When we love somebody dearly, we are willing to give freely of ourselves, even to the point of sacrifice. God paid dearly with the life of His Son. The highest price that anyone could pay. Jesus paid the price for your sins and for mine, and then He offered to all of us, if we believe in Him, a life, a new life that He bought for us. And the message Jesus wanted to convey to Nicodemus was that he needed to allow God to be his influence and not all those other things in his life. Not the religious ritual he was accustomed to. Jesus wanted to set Nicodemus free from the wrong perception that he had of God, and then Jesus wanted to make Nicodemus aware of the radical nature of God's love and to emphasize to him that, in order to receive the gift of eternal life, one must be born again of the Spirit.

Jesus says to Nicodemus 'You are a respected Jewish teacher but I assure you no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born again. Humans can reproduce human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to Spiritual life.'

Unfortunately, Nicodemus was struggling with a concept of being born. He finds it really difficult to grasp this way of thinking so we hear him saying to Jesus in verse 3 to 11 'How can a man be born again when he is old? Surely he can't enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born.' See Nicodemus was looking at Spiritual matters from an earthly perspective. When Jesus speaks about being 'born again' Nicodemus is scratching his head, trying to work out how it might be possible to crawl back into his mother's womb. The thing is that, Nicodemus was too focused on what he had to do to receive the gift of eternal life/ Of course, that's part of our nature. We find and it was part of his nature too. We find that really difficult to understand and probably most people on their faith journey will struggle with that concept too, because, most often in our faith journey, we are overly concerned about what we do, and what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus and to us today, it's not about what you do, it's about what God is doing for you, and what God does for you, changes you, changes your status with God. For each of us it begins and ends with a baptism based on faith. The day we were baptized is the day that we can say God claimed us for His own, it is the day we began being influenced by God, it's the day we can say we are committed to being in a relationship with our triune God, it is from then on that we make God the influence of our lives. This relationship is absolutely important because without it we are allowing things other than God, to influence us and the influence of God has, that in the influence God has on our lives is to constantly remind us and to demonstrate to us He loved the world so much that he gave His one and only Son that when we believe in Him, we will not perish but we will have the gift of eternal life.

The message of Jesus is clear. It's a message that will transform us. It's a message that will allow us to take a careful look at ourselves. It's a message that, when we give our hearts to Jesus, we will take on a new road a road of recovery and discovery, where we will find so much joy in knowing that we are loved by God. It is this message that transformed Nicodemus and we see this in John chapter 7 and verse 50 where Nicodemus tries to defend Jesus. We also see it in John chapter 19 when, after the crucifixion of Jesus, Nicodemus goes with Joseph of Aramathia to wrap the body of Jesus with spices and sheets of linen cloth. In fact, we are told in the scriptures that Nicodemus brought 32 kilograms of perfumed ointment with which to provide for Jesus burial.

Jesus had made it clear to Nicodemus that only a radical change in following God can lead to eternal life and certainly the message of Jesus took Nicodemus away from the road where he was primarily focused on himself and what he was doing the things that he thought were important to gain that space that elite space in God's kingdom. The message of Jesus took Nicodemus to a place where he allowed Christ to do the work for him, to save him and to grant him eternal life.

But the concept of being born again remains difficult to grasp and, while most of us may have had a really good understanding of God's message through Jesus Christ, as a body of believers, as the church of Jesus Christ in Scotland, our task is also to do all that we can in order that people can hear and experience the message of John 3,16

and that of verse 17 that God did not send His son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through Him.

When I hear how people came to join the church, to join a congregation, or came back to church after being away for a lot of years, it's often as a result of something, something new that they have experienced. In most cases, it was how another Christian brother or sister had related to them or treated them. How people were patient with them in answering their questions. How people were displaying the fruits of the Spirit which we find in Galatians chapter five – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control. These are not actions that we have or that we are born with. These are actions that arise out of having a strong relationship with God and in this relationship we are influenced by God as a result of our earnest prayer times, of regular Christian worship, of Bible reading, Bible study and a fellowship with other believers and when we serve the church, when we serve our families and the various communities in which God has placed us, giving of our time and our talents and our money for God's work, we are also encouraging others to grasp hold of the message of Jesus Christ, to set aside the things of the world and be born again.

A question we can ask ourselves today - Is the message of John 3 16 to 17 being clearly communicated in every experience people have with a church in which we serve? Are the people experiencing the message of John 3 16 to 17 when they cross our path? Are they experiencing that God loves them, that God welcomes them, wants them to be safe and wants them to be in heaven with Him? Are they hearing that God came to save them, not to condemn them, or to forget about them, because He considers them special? Are we, as a church of Jesus Christ, vehicles of God's love?

In John chapter 4 and verse 9 we read '*God showed his love for us by sending his only son into the world so that we might have life through him.*' The love of God is expressed through His offer to us, of a chance to join His Spiritual family and to live forever.

The starting point though, the starting point is to receive the gift of Christ and thereby taking up the offer of eternal life. So, how does this transformation happen in a believer? It is nothing less than the work of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God who is love and for those who obey his word 1 John 2 verse 5 God's love is truly made complete in them. And this is how we know we are in union with Him: whoever claims to live in Him, must walk as Jesus walked. God's love is not just expressed in the fact that Jesus was willing to die for mankind, for you and for me, but that He lives for us, that He is in us and that is also, through us, God's love is expressed on how much we live like Jesus, and that is the plan of God. You see, the plan of God in the world is that the kingdom of God should grow, that is why God's Spirit works through us and we must be really attentive to that. God's love originates and finds its birth in the stable of our hearts. God's plan to put love in the world started with the birth of Jesus Christ but includes the rebirth of you and of me and our task is to keep ourselves in God's love as we wait for the mercy of our Lord to bring Jesus Christ alongside of us and to take us to be with Him for all eternity. To Him who is able to keep us from falling and present us

before His glorious presence, the only God, our Savior, be glory, majesty, power and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.