

A CONVERSATION

TEXT:- “Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.’”

-John 3:1-2 (NRSV)

INTRODUCTION:

1. Conversations happen every day of our life and we are involved in too many to count from the sleepy ‘good morning’ when we wake up to the loving ‘good night’ when we go to sleep. If there weren’t conversations then there would be no communication and communication is the essence of living because no-one is an island living completely to oneself. Some of the greatest conversationalists are taxi cab drivers, hairdressers, beauticians, even dentists who seem to have a captive audience. Our mouths can be full of dental instruments and equipment and yet it seems as though our dentist expects a muffled answer to his questions.

2. James McClelland, a former federal government minister and judge of the Land and Environment Court wrote a book called ‘Conversations in Cabs’. It is a collection of columns he wrote for the Sydney Morning Herald. He says: ‘Reality is hard to hold on to, especially for politicians and judges – and I have been both. When I was a member of federal parliament I would return from my sojourn in Canberra and give my wife my version of the week’s events in the nation’s capital. I was often surprised to discover that the matters of great pith and moment in which I had partaken were often quite differently interpreted by those, like my wife, who lived in the real world. Similarly, the gravitas that judges don with their medieval robes of office sometimes tends to immure them from salutary contact with ordinary mortals. The title of this book may be regarded as a metaphor for keeping one’s feet on the ground.’

3. We are never going to keep our feet on the ground, never going to find our information, never enter into the delights of the worlds of others without conversation. In conversation we can ask questions and find answers; we can gain insight into other people; we can find out more about the world in which we live; and discover so much more than we know now. We can ever find out more about ourselves. The whole of life is a learning process and we only ever begin to touch the edges of all the knowledge in the world no matter how great our expertise in our chosen field.

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4. Conversations can be superficial but they can be deep. Sometimes we may be so deep in conversation, so absorbed in the company of the other or others, so profoundly affected by the knowledge we are uncovering, that we do not note the passing of time nor the place where we are. These conversations are what we call ‘deep and meaningful’. Other conversations may be a hurried good day as we pass a friend or acquaintance in the street. Whatever they are, they are an acknowledgement of other people in our families, in our lives and in the community. Conversations are very important in the daily round of life.

5. We live our lives in the company of others. We live our faith in the company of others. We have our very existence in the lives of others. How else can we understand them or find out the truth or grow in life without conversations. Just before we left our previous parish my assistant had started a series of meetings as an outreach in the community. These were called ‘Conversations at Greenwich’ and sought to engage the community in conversations about faith and life. Being a follower of Jesus Christ means that we should do just this – engage in conversations in the community about faith and life.

NICODEMUS AND JESUS - THEIR CONVERSATION AS RECORDED IN JOHN'S GOSPEL:

6. Nicodemus was a man who was interested in discussing the deeper questions of life. He wanted to have a conversation with Jesus. He was an educated man, a Pharisee, someone steeped in the traditions of the faith of the people of Jesus' day. People who were looking forward with great expectation to the liberation the Messiah would bring as the fulfillment of God's promise to His people. This man was not interested in idle chatter nor in just passing the time of day, important as this might be sometimes, he really wanted to get down to the basics of faith and tease out the meaning of who Jesus was and what He was doing.

7. So he came to see Jesus by night. What a good time to talk. It is an intimate conversation with just the two of them. I was asked an interesting question after the service here the other day. If Jesus was alone in the Garden of Gethsemane and His disciples were asleep, then how does anyone know what He said in that last prayer with its famous words of 'If it be your will, Father, let this cup pass from me, yet not my will but Yours be done!' I guess the same question applies to the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus if there was just the two of them. Either someone overheard the conversation or Jesus Himself told them all that had taken place remembering that He had forty days after the Resurrection to talk to His disciples and other followers to confide in them.

8. Nicodemus' question was simple: 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the very presence of God.' (John 3:2 (NRSV)) This question leads on to a discussion about being born again and about the nature of the Holy Spirit. We celebrate Pentecost and hear the story again from Acts 2 about those remarkable events in the upper room and in the market place in Jerusalem after the Ascension, but how often do we talk about the Holy Spirit? The Westminster Confession of Faith does not have a chapter on the Holy Spirit and the Pentecostal churches seem to talk about nothing else but the Holy Spirit.

9. And yet here is Jesus adding to the concept of the Old Testament of the Spirit of God which blows where it wills and no one knows when it will come from or where it will go. About 3 years ago I visited my second brother who lives in Kansas City, Kansas, in the United States. As I left New York City to fly to Kansas City there came over the TV news pictures of the devastation caused by tornados in that area of the United States. My brother told me of someone they knew where the tornado had just come up part of their side of the street almost in a straight line and left a trail of destruction. It came and went just as suddenly as it had come. The Holy Spirit comes and goes but instead of leaving a trail of destruction it leaves a trail of hope, strength and power to do the will of God in the world.

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OUR CONVERSATIONS ABOUT GOD AND WHAT THEY MEAN TO US:

10. It is easy to greet someone each day, to utter pleasantries to the people we meet in the street or with whom we work, but it is not so easy to bare our souls and particularly to bare our souls about spiritual things. Nicodemus was earnestly seeking for himself but perhaps he was also earnestly thinking outside the theological parameters of his day. The church has always had people it regards as heretics – the modern day Hans Kungs – but they are generally people who want to think outside the square, they want to probe deeper outside the conventions of belief to seek the truth. We should never be afraid of doing what Nicodemus was doing and seeking after the truth.

11. It is in doing this that we find the light of truth. Jesus is the Light of the World and His revelation about God takes us beyond written words and existential experience into the realm of simply putting our hand into the hand of God and going out into the unknown. Perhaps it was this aspect of faith that the people of Jesus' day were looking for and that the conventional ways of believing theologically and organizationally as the worship centres of His day had forgotten. This aspect of faith needs to be renewed in every generation.

12. In every age the Church has had people it regards as heretics because their teaching stretches the imagination and the boundaries of theological orthodoxy. The Church needs its heretics. I knew a man whose father was a Methodist minister in Redfern in Sydney in the 1950's. This minister was criticized by his conference time and time again. Once a critic wrote stating that he had seen a boxing ring in the church hall and that there was even blood on the floor. These young men should content themselves with playing table tennis and badminton rather than be taught how to defend themselves. Here was a man who was stretching the theological and mission parameters of the church and yet others could not see it. He was a heretic to them.

13. After discussing the power and the ways of the Holy Spirit Jesus says to Nicodemus: 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?' This was after Nicodemus had said to Jesus 'How can these things be?' It may be that the theological mists obscure the power of the Holy Spirit from our hearts and our minds and we need open discussion, intelligent conversation and spiritual dialogue that plumbs the depths of our faith. Such it seems to me was the conversation Nicodemus had with Jesus that night so many years ago.

14. Jesus had not long begun His ministry. Already the crowds saw the signs He was doing and believed but Nicodemus added another dimension to this. If it was only about signs then we reflect the temptations Jesus underwent in the wilderness where the devil tempted Him by saying throw Yourself down from the pinnacle of the Temple and God will stop You falling and being dashed to death on the rocks below. This would be a sign the temptation said that would make people believe in the power of God. But Jesus knew better than that and did not tempt God. Faith is not just about signs and wonders it is about a life-long quest for God of which our faith conversations are a part.

CONVERSATIONS AND RELIGIOUS FAITH AND TRUTH IN THE COMMUNITY OF FAITH:

15. But these conversations are not just the province of two people, they are also the province of the community of faith. These conversations take place in the dialogue of worship; in discussion in Bible Study groups; in questions that are asked of the preaching or the Bible as was asked the other day. They are asked over morning tea and over lunch; they are asked and conversation continues when our hearts and souls agonise over suffering and pain, disillusion and despair. These conversations take place when we rejoice and are over the moon about life.

16. They take place wherever Christian people gather together and wherever people are searching for an individual faith and for an experience of God. ³ We all have our Nicodemus conversations with Jesus as we search our hearts and souls and want to come closer to Him. Jesus helped Nicodemus find the answers to His spiritual questions and to find a deeper understanding of God and of His own mission and message to the world. In the middle of the conversation come those familiar words: '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 the world might be saved through him' (John 3:16-17 (NRSV))

17. Where does that leave us? It leaves us trying to build a community of faith that seeks the truth by conversations with God and with others to find the truth of our faith and of our spiritual experience. It brings us to search the scriptures and find in them, particularly in the Gospels, the roots of our faith, the sort of questions that brought Nicodemus to Jesus.

18. Our worship this morning directs us in our spiritual walk. It opens our hearts and minds to the power of the Holy Spirit and it brings us before God in a special way as we rest in Him for an hour and then go out into the world again to live our lives and share with each other.

CONCLUSION:

19. May this be our aim as we engage in the conversations of faith in our lives.