**Church Sermon – 8th March-20**

**May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord and Redeemer. Amen**

In World War II, a fictional patriotic soldier, Steve Rogers, recipient of the "Super Soldier Serum" became the living symbol of freedom, **Captain America**. Left for dead while frozen in ice, the star-spangled hero with an indestructible shield awoke years later to continue his never-ending battle for liberty.

In the Marvel movie, the Winter Soldier, a friend suggested that Captain America listens to a Marvin Gaye song called “Troubled Man”, because he felt despite his strength and quest for liberty, honesty and justice, he was a troubled man. **He was a war-monger who, without war and conflict, would never know what to do with himself.** But was Captain America the first troubled man? I don’t think so, there were many who carried the burdens of their role in real life before his fictional story was ever written, one of whom was Nicodemus.

**Nicodemus**

Nicodemus, a Pharisee, a teacher and leader of the powerful Jewish Council. He was presumably a member of the synedrion, a legal assembly of 70 members comprising chief priests, elders and scribes.

The Pharisees were responsible for the laws, living traditions, part of the continuity of right behaviours in relation to the laws, had interests in ritual purity and tithing. They also believed in the after-life of judgement. However, they were criticised by Jesus and John the Baptist as hyprocrites (although that is not representative of the Jewish nation now). Most Pharisees were jealous of Jesus because he undermined their authority and challenged their views.

But Nicodemus was different, he was a troubled man. Like most people of Jerusalem, he was impressed by the Jesus signs, but he still had to learn how Jesus came from God. This meant setting aside those earthly Jewish laws, interpretations and rituals studied as a Pharisee to understand the words of Jesus. This also meant giving up on those assumptions carried for most of his life. Nicodemus could no longer rely on them as he recognised their limitation in contrast to Jesus’ wide perspective on God and the Spirit. He was searching and he believed Jesus had answers.

**Nicodemus was a troubled man!**

Nicodemus came to Jesus personally although he could have sent one of his assistants. He wanted to examine Jesus for himself to separate fact from rumour. Perhaps, Nicodemus was afraid of what his peers, the Pharisees, would say about his visit after dark.

Today’s Gospel reading states that Nicodemus visited Jesus late one night and said “**Rabbi” we all know you’re a teacher straight from God. No one could do all the God pointing, God revealing acts you do if God weren’t in on it”.**

Jesus responded: you’re absolutely right. He then goes to say that **unless a person is born again from above, it is not possible to see what I’m pointing to – to God’s kingdom**.

Nicodemus questioned: **“How can anyone be born again who has already been born and grown up? You can’t re-enter the mother’s womb?**

Jesus responded: You’re not listening. Let me say it again. Unless a person submits to this original creation – the wind hovering over the water creation – it’s not possible to enter God’s Kingdom. When you look at a baby, it’s just that: a body you can look at and touch. But the person who takes shape within – is formed by something you can’t see and touch – the Holy Spirit, and so one becomes a living Spirit. So, don’t be surprised that you have to be born again from above – out of this world. Jesus then says that everyone is born from the wind of God, the Holy Spirit, who breathes life into us.

Nicodemus asks once more and Jesus qualifies his earlier points and speaks of his relationship with His Father.

**What did Nicodemus learn about the kingdom?**

* **He knew that it would be ruled by God and restored on earth**
* **It would incorporate God’s people through their hearts. The Kingdom of God is within us!**
* **That no one could enter the Kingdom of God without being born again through the Holy Spirit**

Jesus revealed to the devout Pharisee that the kingdom would come to the whole world, not just for the Jewish nation and that Nicodemus would not be a part of it unless he was born again.

This was controversial. Something that Nicodemus hadn’t heard of before. Because the kingdom of God is not personal, not national or limited by ethnicity and its entrance requirements are repentance and spiritual rebirth. The new age Jesus was announcing was not to be bound by the old cycle of physical birth and death. It was to be a radical new beginning, a new quality of life – eternal life. *(Later in the gospels, we will have read the words of Jesus that the kingdom of God is in our hearts and had already begun. It will be fully realised when Jesus returns again to judge the world and abolish evil.)*

**So, who was the Holy Spirit?**

God in three persons in one – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God became man in Jesus so that Jesus could die for our sins. Jesus rose from the dead to offer salvation to all people through spiritual renewal and rebirth.

When Jesus ascends into heaven, his physical presence left the earth but he promised to send the Holy Spirit **(better known as the Spirit of Truth)** so that His spiritual presence would still be among His people.

So, let’s return to Nicodemus. After his encounter with Jesus Christ, he left a changed man, **no longer a troubled man**. Nicodemus came away with a whole new understanding of God and himself. **Everything made sense.**

Nicodemus next appears as part of the Jewish council **during the trial of Jesus** and **before the crucifixion**. As the group discussed ways to eliminate Jesus, Nicodemus raised the question of justice **because everything made sense**. Although his objection was overruled, he had spoken up **because everything made sense**. He had begun to change.

Our last picture of Nicodemus shows him joining Joseph of **Arimathea** in asking for Jesus’ body after his crucifixion in order to provide for his burial. Realising what he was missing, Nicodemus made a bold move, **again, as everything made sense**.

**You see, Jesus knew that Nicodemus was attracted by His character and miracles, but Nicodemus was a troubled man!**

But Jesus was patient. He carefully took Nicodemus through the relevant truths and challenged the limited wisdom held to open up his understanding of the Kingdom of God leading to a positive outcome from the encounter.

**The relevance of today’s sermon is are we troubled? Do things about the gospel truth in our hearts fail to make sense?**

**Are we suffering from one or more knotty issues that we can’t resolve or get rid of?**

**Is the story of Jesus at odds with our belief, faith or something beyond our grasp?**

**Then it is time to have the boldness of Nicodemus and seek Jesus for ourselves in order for such truths to make sense. We may have to do this secretly, maybe at home or elsewhere! But it is time for that personal encounter with God like Nicodemus, a personal 121 on our knees.**

**Jesus Christ was patient with Nicodemus and, yes, he can be patient with us! It doesn’t matter how many troubling questions we have; He is there to affirm us in our circumstances with the Father’s Love, the Father’s assurance in the absence of one and the Father’s affirmation – in order that everything make sense in a similar way to Nicodemus**

**Today’s 121st chapter of Psalm and song reminds us that our help (in troubled times) comes from the Lord who made heaven and earth! He will not let us stumble; the one who watches over us will not slumber. In fact, he never sleeps nor slumber! The Lord himself watches over us and stands as our protective shade. And the Lord will keep us from all harm and watch over our life. Does this make sense? It does to me!**

**This song of Psalm expresses assurance and hope in God’s protection day and night. He not only made the hills but heaven and earth as well. We should not trust a lesser power than God Himself. But not only is He all-powerful, He also watches over us – you and me. Nothing diverts or deters him. We are safe. We never outgrow our need for God’s untiring watch over our life. And that’s a blessed assurance!**

**So, like Nicodemus and a stuntsman, am I willing to face an uncertain troubling future? The answer must be yes (today, tomorrow and the future) because everything now makes sense. I am now confident to stand up for justice. I am now confident to object to unfairness.**

**The bargain is greater than the cost, the outcome greater than what we put in, the added value exceeds the original purchase because something is different. God is watching over us. Everything made sense for Nicodemus and so it will for us. Jesus is waiting patiently to engage in a 121 on our knees in fulfilment of His Father’s commission found in the 16th and 17th verses of the third chapter of John’s Gospel:**

**For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.**

**Everything, everything now makes sense!**

**Amen**