

Genesis 12:1-4a

Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

John 3:1-17

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.' Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son

of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

'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.

As many of you will know, I recently became engaged. It's been a delight to share this with you and it's also been a pleasure to be able to answer all the questions that come in the wake of such an announcement. For example: where did you propose? Did you go down on one knee? What sort of ring did you get? Significant moments in one's life tend to invite a raft of questions, and I can say that it's no different when you're preparing to be ordained: you very quickly get used to people asking you the same sorts of questions over and over again. One of those questions beloved of bishops and vocations advisors is: which biblical figure do you most resemble? In other words, what did you do when you felt God's call on your life? Are you like Jonah? Did you try to run away from God? Or are you like Moses? Moses, you may remember, needed a bit of convincing to go back to Egypt and lead God's people out of captivity: he makes various objections, but in the end he does what God asks, just as Jonah does in the end. Then again, perhaps you're like Abraham. We've heard about Abraham this morning. Abraham is called to leave his country and his wider family and go to a new land, and he does it. He doesn't make excuses. He doesn't question God. He just goes. God calls Abraham and gives him these amazing promises, that he will not only be father to a great nation but will be a blessing to all the families of the earth. Abraham may not know exactly what this means or how it will work out, but he trusts God and sets off for Canaan.

As models of biblical calling go, these examples are perhaps more obvious ones than that of Nicodemus. Nicodemus is an interesting, slightly mysterious character who we encounter from time to time in John's Gospel. He first appears in today's story, when he comes to speak with Jesus. He's clearly intrigued by Jesus, and he recognises that the miracles, or signs, that Jesus has been performing mark him out as someone truly special: 'we know that you are a teacher who has come from God'. But he's wary. He's described as 'a leader of the Jews' and a Pharisee, quite possibly a member of the Sanhedrin, the most important Jewish assembly. As such, he was someone who stood to lose a good deal by throwing in his lot with Jesus. This may explain why he comes to see Jesus at night. And in this encounter with Jesus, he remains cautious: he asks questions, hesitates, remains non-committal. To be fair to Nicodemus, Jesus's initial response seems a bit blunt and confusing: 'no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above'. Nicodemus doesn't understand this: he questions how anyone can be born a second time. But Jesus isn't issuing a statement, rather he's issuing an invitation. He's inviting Nicodemus into the new life of the kingdom of God, and the new life of the Spirit: this is what it means to be born from above, to accept this invitation to new life and become part of this great story. Because Jesus himself is the answer to Nicodemus's question: Jesus himself was born from above, and because of this Jesus invites us all to be born from above, to become children of God. 'The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes': this is how Jesus expresses the life that he offers, since this is the life of God, whose love, like the wind, has no bounds, and who cannot be contained by any limits we put on him. But Nicodemus needs more explanation: what does all this mean? And we may feel there's a contrast here between the faith of Abraham, and the more uncertain faith of this descendant of Abraham, is clear: Nicodemus is letting his mind put up obstacles, rather than opening his heart to Jesus and to Jesus's invitation. There's also, I think, a deliberate contrast with another person. Nicodemus asks Jesus, 'How can these things be?'

Where have we heard that before? It's very close, intentionally so, to what Mary said to the Angel Gabriel, in another conversation about new life: Mary is asking how all these things that the angel says can possibly come true. How can she give birth to the son of God? This reference asks us to think about how Christ's birth makes possible our new birth; it also contrasts Mary's openness to God's plan with Nicodemus' hesitation.

And yet Nicodemus may speak to our own experiences more than we might care to admit. The difficulties he had accepting Jesus in this encounter are the difficulties that we all know and face from time to time. We question God's plans. We ask how God could possibly do the things he promises. We don't always understand. Nicodemus arrives in the dark, and even after talking with Jesus he still seems to be stumbling in the dark. But let's not dismiss him out of hand. His first encounter with Jesus may not be a very promising one, but it seems as though it sowed some seeds. When we next meet Nicodemus, it's when the Pharisees try unsuccessfully to have Jesus arrested by the temple police: he alone speaks out against it. And we meet him again, at the end of the Gospel, when he joins Joseph of Arimathea in helping to prepare Jesus' body for burial. He brings a hundred pounds' worth of myrrh, a very large amount, and this was a risky course of action for someone who wasn't in some measure a follower of Jesus. He remains a peripheral character, but by the end it seems that he has let Jesus's words echo in his mind and in his heart. And if we contrast Nicodemus unfavourably with Abraham, we should acknowledge that there were plenty of occasions when Abraham failed to trust God. When, for instance, he fears for his safety in Egypt, and makes his wife Sarah pretend she's his sister in order to deceive the Pharaoh. This causes all manner of problems, and it all stems from the fact that Abraham doesn't trust in God's protection of him. And then Abraham and Sarah arrange for Abraham to have a child with Sarah's slave-girl Hagar, because they don't trust in God's promise of a child to them. Even Abraham found it hard to trust God, and his initial act of faith was not something he was consistently able to live up to.

This Lent, and every Lent, we're all invited to reflect on our relationship with God, and one of the ways in which we can do this is by reflecting on our own journeys of faith. Each one of us is called by God, and so the question with which I began this sermon isn't just for people with a dog collar. We can all be challenged and inspired by the stories of those God has called long before us; and we can all tell the story of how God has worked in our lives, perhaps in very dramatic and life-changing ways, perhaps in more subtle and gradual ways. We're all different, and our journeys with God are all different, because God comes to meet us where we are, and comes to us in the particular circumstances of our own lives. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could respond to God in as prompt and committed a way as Abraham did, and as Jesus' disciples did when they heard his call? Some can, some do. But for some of people, faith can a long, slow journey, and a difficult one, with questions, hesitations and doubts along the way. And that's fine too, because God is patient with us. And if like Nicodemus we struggle, let us not underestimate how God can work with rather than against our own struggles; let's remember how God worked in and through Nicodemus's life too, in spite of all his struggles. Let's remember, above all, those words that John gives us in today's reading, some of the most famous words in the bible: '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.' The invitation was there for Nicodemus, and it's here for us too, whoever we are. Though the road may be long, God is always with us on it: and like the wind that blows where it chooses, we can be sure that God is working out his purposes for us in ways that we cannot always imagine or predict.

[Hugh Reid]