

JOHN 3:1-17
HOW DO WE ENCOUNTER GOD?

An elephant – there is a famous poem in which six blind men come across an elephant and try to work out what it is. The first man puts his hands on the elephant's side and suggests "this is a wall!" The second man grabs the elephant's tusk and decides that the elephant is like a spear. The third man takes the trunk in his hands and declares that the elephant is very like a snake. Number four feels the elephant's knee and declares that the elephant is a tree. The fifth man chances upon the elephant's ear and decides that the elephant is a fan. Finally, the sixth man grabs hold of the elephant's tail and decides that the elephant is very like a rope. The poem concludes that "though each was partly in the right, and all were in the wrong!" Of course, what they needed to do was to pool their knowledge, because all of them has a sense of a part of the elephant that they had encountered, but none of them has understood all of it.

God – what's the best word you have for describing God, do you think? *Some people gave us their ideas – beauty, holy, awesome!* All of these words describe God in some way or another; we make our choice based on our experience of life or our understanding of what God is like. So some of us will happily describe God as Father, while for others the best word is shepherd, Rock, Light etc. There is a hymn in CH4 that reminds us of lots of these names and then in the chorus says, *"no single holy name, but the truth that feeds them all, is the God whom we proclaim."* God is far bigger than our minds can grasp; we understand that; the glory of the Bible story is that we see people encounter God in all kinds of ways and begin to grasp something of what God is like, even if never all of Him!

Take Nicodemus. He's heard about Jesus and has heard about the miracles He's done. Nobody could do these miracles unless God is with Him. But either he's shy or nervous about coming to Jesus, so he comes at night; or Jesus is busy healing and so the evening is the only time when Nicodemus can get access to Him. Either way, they meet at night and sit together to talk about life, faith and the kingdom of God. Nicodemus has ideas in his mind with which he grew up and later learned as a Pharisee, that the kingdom is at the end of time and is for Jews and those who keep the law perfectly. Jesus tells him that *"I tell..." (John 3:3)* Nicodemus is not sure what that means; we presume that at some point later, he managed to come to terms with it, perhaps by finding the old prophecy in Ezekiel where God talks about putting a new heart in His people, a new spirit living in them and that the kingdom is for people who put their trust in Jesus. *"For God..." (John 3:16)*

It's an ordinary conversation, two people chatting together about important issues and questions, and in that conversation Nicodemus encounters God in the person of His Son. The Son of God is sitting opposite him, talking with him. It is a scene that is repeated over and over again, Jesus sitting talking to people in the most ordinary way and these people encounter the living God, the eternal God in the shape and form of Jesus. Life is never same again! That encounter changed Nicodemus' life. We don't see it at first, but he appears on two more occasions in John's gospel. The first of these in chapter 7, Nicodemus sort of stands up for Jesus; the Council is about to condemn Him and without totally nailing his colours to the mast, Nicodemus sort of stands up for Jesus and is then quizzed about his allegiance. The second of Nicodemus' other appearances is at cross: it is Good Friday and Jesus has died and His friends are bringing his body down from the cross; the main player is Joseph of Arimathea, but right there beside him, Nicodemus demonstrates his love for Jesus just by being there. All of this began in an ordinary conversation round the fire, of an evening, and God was there.

Take Isaiah – this is a quite different encounter with God. What is this? A vision? A dream? Isaiah says *"I saw..." (Isaiah 6:1)* He goes on to describe this astonishing picture of God in all His glory. He is in the temple and His glory fills the temple like smoke; angels are around God as His servants and the temple shakes with the glory of God. It is a quite overwhelming experience for Isaiah and especially for his unclean lips; he is aware of his weakness, his

failure, and it is focused on his lips, but God comes to forgive, as a coal from the altar touches his lips and he is forgiven. This becomes a moment in Isaiah's life when he senses God's calling on his life, God's commission to serve and for Isaiah to be a prophet. It is a very different kind of experience from Nicodemus, but this is also an encounter with the same God; he sees God in all His glory, aware of the majesty and holiness of God, and again it is an experience that changes his life – *"Whom shall..." (6:8)*

Take the crowd on the Day of Pentecost – we talked about this crowd last week and Peter preaching to them about Jesus; and about the Spirit taking Peter's words and convincing the people of two things: first, that they have a need and so they are *"cut to the heart"* and second, that Jesus is the salvation of the world and so they put their trust in Jesus. Here's another kind of encounter with God, by Peter's preaching. As he preached, lots of people in the crowd encounter God as the Spirit convinces them that Peter is right, and that Christian faith is a good thing. Many people in the crowd respond and 3000 people become Christians that day. Their encounter with God is through Peter's preaching, the invisible Spirit working to lead them to Jesus.

There's a conversation that you're having, with a friend, with the minister, and the talk turns to faith and what faith means, or to a question that you have to which you want to find an answer; this is just an ordinary conversation in your front room with a cup of tea in your hand and yet at end of that conversation your questions are answered or your faith is made stronger, or you have discovered for the first time that you believe in Jesus when you didn't before. In that ordinary, everyday situation, we encounter God.

Or maybe it is a conversation with God as we read the Bible or pray on our own. We are reading a bible passage and something of what we read stands out in a way that we've never seen before, or it makes a huge impression on us and we learn something new about God or our faith or life; we commit to put it into practice. We pray and in that conversation with God we pour out our hearts to Him, or we pray a prayer we've prayed over and over many times. In that conversation where maybe it seems as if nothing happens, we encounter God.

It's Sunday and you've come to church. We're singing a hymn or sitting quietly as we pray. The words of the hymn strike a chord in our hearts and words that maybe we've sung many times before resonate with us and we see what they mean, we grasp something of God in a new way and as we sing there is something of an encounter with God. The preacher talks about the Bible; he tells us what the Bible means and it does something to us, or in us; the preacher is in the most privileged position of opening up important, life-giving words and the people hear these words and the Spirit convinces us that these words are true. John Wesley sitting in the little chapel in London 280 years ago this weekend, listening to the preacher, spoke of his heart being *"strangely warmed"* as the Spirit took the preacher's words and made them come alive for Welsey. CH Spurgeon, the great Victorian preacher sitting in the back of a small chapel in Colchester, listening to the preacher who barely did more than repeat his text over and over, yet that was the time when he became a Christian and so began a ministry that would influence Victorian London in huge way. We encounter God in worship and by the preaching.

Let's go back to Nicodemus. There were two things that he came away from the conversation with Jesus having in his heart. *"I tell..." (John 3:3)* It is his heart that matters, what he believes, what he thinks, and above all that in his heart there is a love and passion for God that touches his heart and his soul. That's what it means to be born again; it's having a heart that loves God. The second thing he came away with was this: *"For God..." (John 3:16)* This is what God is like; here is something of God to take away, God who loves and because He loves has given His Son to believe in. Two things that still stand for us as life-shaping truth to know: it is what is in our hearts that counts most, that in our hearts we love Lord; it is not about being religious or keeping the rules, dotting the i's and crossing the t's, but a heart that loves God.

We love God because He loved us first and gave us His Son. Here are two life-changing things to know.

Nicodemus encountered God in a simple conversation with Jesus; Isaiah encountered God in a vision or dream that overwhelmed him with the glory and holiness of God. 3000 people encountered God by the invisible Spirit on the Day of Pentecost as Peter preached his sermon and they were convinced to believe in Jesus. In ordinary conversations when we talk about faith, when we pray or read the Bible, in worship as we sing, as the preacher preaches Bible truth – in all of these ways and in so many more, we encounter God! Have an open heart and an open mind, ready to accept the possibility of encounter with God, ready to accept that these encounters take place, ready to be shaped by what we read or hear of God, ready to see something more of God. Nicodemus saw Jesus and God's love; Isaiah saw God's glory and majesty; 3000 people at Pentecost saw a preacher and believed the Jesus of whom the preacher spoke. What have you encountered today?