

JOHN 3:1-17  
GOING PUBLIC

Are you a member of the Flat Earth Society? The Flat Earth Society believes that earth is a flat disc centred on the Arctic, with an ice wall round edge of disc, that is Antarctica. They refuse to countenance the notion that the Earth is a globe; that is the “greatest lie ever told” and their logo suggests that earth is flat! This is not a new idea: in the seventeenth century the Chinese believed that the earth was flat and square, with corners! Before that, when people like Columbus went exploring on his voyage when he discovered America, some were worried that he would get to the end of the world and fall off and he and his crew would never be seen again! Those who suggested that earth was a globe were laughed at for their silly ideas, because “everyone knew” that the earth was flat. The Flat Earth Society’s website invites you to come to join debate about “the greatest lie ever told” i.e. that the earth is a globe! I suppose we look on the Flat Earth Society as flying in the face of all the evidence!

What does it take to change your mind? Imagine: you have been brought up to “know” that the earth is flat; everyone has told you that; your parents believe that the earth is flat, your teachers at school have told you that the earth is flat; all your friends believe it too; everyone says that when some fool goes off to explore the seas, he will fall off the end and we will never see him again! What does it take to change your mind? Some random scientist writes a book that says the earth is a globe: well you’re not going to believe him just because he says it, are you? An explorer returns from his round-the-world voyage and tells people what he saw and that he obviously didn’t fall off – that maybe sows one or two seeds of doubt, but you are not really convinced. It is really hard to change your mind, even if you want to, because you might be the only one who changes; all your friends, your family, your colleagues stick to the old ways and you run the risk of being the laughingstock. It is so hard to change your mind on something so fundamental to your view of the world and of life!

This is the kind of place in which we find Nicodemus. He has come to meet Jesus, coming at night probably because he wants to stay in the shadows, as we said earlier, but let’s look at the conversation. First of all, walk in Nicodemus’ shoes for a minute: he is a Pharisee, a member of the ruling council, so he is a leader, a man of influence, a teacher, a powerful figure in Jerusalem society. We can’t take this conversation lightly because if Nicodemus becomes a follower of Jesus, there would be shock waves! This is a big moment for Nicodemus and for the religious life of Jerusalem! For Nicodemus, the religious universe centres round a big idea: you please God by keeping the law; you please God by keeping the commands and all the rules of the law and the regulations about the temple and its worship and sacrifices – that’s how you please God. Nicodemus has been brought up with that idea; his parents believe that; his teachers believe that and taught him that big idea; his friends all live that way; his colleagues as Pharisees and on the ruling council all believe that; he has taught other people that big idea, and probably believes it passionately!

Nicodemus comes to Jesus. Is he curious? *“Rabbi, we know...”* (John 3:2) Jesus has caused a stir and does Nicodemus want to know more? He is not there as part of an official delegation, but there as someone who wants to know more about Jesus! He comes with all this religious universe in his head and his heart; this is who he is; this is what he believes! Jesus tells him something different: *“I tell...”* (John 3:3) Wow! That’s different! He has never heard that before! Nicodemus shows that he doesn’t understand what Jesus is talking about: *“How can...”* (John 3:4) He doesn’t understand the picture that Jesus paints of a new heart, living by faith; maybe he should! Jesus tells him that this is a picture of new life that God gives, the Spirit at work to create a new kind of life in the heart and mind of the believer. *“How can...”* (John 3:9f) Nicodemus doesn’t get it! He is full of questions, but he doesn’t appear to understand the answers that Jesus gives... for now!

“Nicodemus, here are two more things for you to think about, take these away and consider!” Jesus takes him back into his Bible, our Old Testament, and tells him a story about Moses: in Numbers 21 a plague of snakes is biting the people and poisoning them; Moses is told to make a bronze snake and set it on a pole and people were saved when they simply looked at the snake, an exercise of faith. “What does that tell you, Nicodemus? Take that away and ponder!” The second thing is one of the most famous Bible verses ever: “*For God...*” (John 3:16f) “This is why I have come, Nicodemus; I have come to bring life to the world in a new way; the life of age to come is here now!” All of this is happening because God loves world and God will save the world through Jesus and the work He will do. This is something new that God is doing; this is a very different religious universe than the one Nicodemus knows, with no mention of law or of doing good deeds, but only the mention of faith, and of love from God!

As far as we know, that’s the where conversation was left! We don’t know what Nicodemus said as he left: “I’ll see you again”? Or “I still don’t get it!” We can be fairly sure that there was no great profession of faith, no conversion experience, no blinding lights, no lightbulb moments just yet! It seems that he left with more questions than answers. We don’t really know when this conversation took place, other than it seems to have happened fairly early in Jesus’ ministry. All we know is that at the time of Jesus’ death, Nicodemus is there, helping to bury Him; he is one who brings the spices to bury the body; here is an act of devotion from Nicodemus. Now he is showing his new-found faith in Jesus, a faith the seeds for which were planted in a night-time conversation some years before.

How hard it is for someone to become a Christian! We’re told that if Scotland 2020 were a village of 100 people, 51 of them would have no religion! Now imagine that one of these 51 people is a friend of yours, and wants to know more about the Christian faith and comes to talk to you, knowing that you’re a Christian and has questions to ask. Your friend is coming from a world in which religion has not been important at all; maybe none of her parents, or family, or friends have had any interest in faith of any kind and so this is quite outside anything your friend knows. She has questions, you answer her questions, she goes away pondering. The answers to her questions introduce her to a whole new way of understanding the world, life, herself, and relationships – do you expect her to change that all at once? It might take years for her to come to a place where she believes Jesus! Maybe she comes to church and is introduced to a whole new culture: singing in public (the only place where people sing in public now apart from church are football or rugby matches or karaoke bars!) praying, reading the bible, it is a whole foreign culture. How easy is it to change a way of thinking, a way of understanding? We pray for our friends; it might take years to change their view of life and the world and that’s hard!

What were you brought up to think about church? There was a Western European view that Church was a good thing to do, a social group that held communities together, and so we did sport or drama and that was good for society and for our community. Alongside that, we were brought up to think that doing good and being kind to your neighbour and to animals would see us into heaven! So when someone comes along with a different idea - “Jesus says follow me” and that somehow being a Christian is about a whole-life experience – some of us found that hard to understand. Our parents taught us a view of Church, people we were church with shared our view, the culture said “this is good!” But following Jesus, being a disciple – that’s new and hard to understand and perhaps a bit fanatical; this changed the religious universe for many of us and some people found it too much and walked away; others found it liberating because all of a sudden we hear that God loves us and saves us in Jesus! How hard is it to change your mind?

Let me tell you Mary’s story: Mary’s story comes at two levels – what she does and what’s going on inside. Here is what she does: Mary brings her baby to be ‘christened’; the preparation and the service mean little intellectually, but she senses a genuine welcome. She is invited to the mother and toddler group on Tuesday; they are a nice bunch and she makes

friends. She comes to church for a pram service; it is chaotic but her sense of belonging widens; she enjoys it. Mary comes to a family service in Church. She finds it fun but a bit strange; her child is now two. She takes part in a course introducing her to the Christian faith.

Meanwhile what is going on inside, in Mary's heart and mind: Mary is frightened to speak to the minister, but she wants the best for her baby; the minister is surprisingly nice and suggests she starts praying for her baby. She does start praying for her baby and God becomes a little more real; the welcome she receives makes her feel that the Church is 'hers'. She finds Church relevant to her needs; these are 'her' friends and they also see her baby as belonging to the church. God is real. She is intrigued and begins to pray more. She buys a children's bible from the bookstall and reads it herself. The words in church begin to make more sense; she begins to look forward to the service. She feels out of her depth, but knows she needs to follow it up; she makes close friends. She is challenged, happy, excited, stretched, confused.

Mary knows that somewhere along this 3-year journey she has become a committed Christian.

How many stories are there like Mary's? How many stories like Nicodemus's? Or like yours? Or mine? Pray for more stories to be written, for the Spirit to be at work again and again, just as He was in a conversation at night between Nicodemus and Jesus. Pray that we will always walk by faith, that our view of the world will always be faith-shaped. Pray for the courage to speak about our faith when the opportunity arises!