

## **Sunday Morning talk given by Tim Coad on 21 June 2015.**

We've been reading and looking at John's gospel and if you remember last week we actually looked at chapter 4. We jumped to chapter 4, partly because I made a mistake for some reason and thinking where have we got up to? Oh, chapter 4 is the next one and realised I had missed out chapter 3.

But I think actually it was probably the right thing to do because there are close links between chapter 3 and chapter 5 that mean that we can make a particular point about Jesus today, drawing from those two chapters. So if any of you . . . I know of at least one person who picked up the prayer chain e-mail and has read chapter 3 and chapter 5, maybe others have too. The audience are nodding heads; oh, that's encouraging. So you will know where we're going roughly.

John's purpose in writing his gospel is that we might know about Jesus so that we can know Jesus. I may have said before but I remember many years ago doing some door-to-door work with a friend of mine from college when we were doing a college mission. We met a lady who I still remember her name was Mary, on a doorstep. And as we started to speak to her, we said we were from the local church and we'd come to share something about the Lord Jesus, she said, "Ah, I know all about Jesus." And both of us looked at her and one of us, I forget which one, said, "Well, you know about Jesus but do you know Jesus?"

There is a big difference and John wants us to know about Jesus in order that we can know Jesus. He wants us to know Jesus the life-giver, Jesus the Messiah, Jesus as God in the flesh, which is where he begins in chapter 1.

We saw from chapter 4 how Jesus brought in the excluded, the Samaritan woman who was left out because of her race, who was left out because of her gender. But Jesus made a specific point of going to find that woman, introducing her to the life that he could offer; the new spiritual life, the born again life that he had already spoken to Nicodemus about as we shall discover today in chapter 3.

So we are going to look at chapter 3 and chapter 5 today. I am not going to necessarily read all of them to you because that would take the whole morning anyway but I am going to hope that you've either read them already or if you haven't, could you perhaps go home and read those — well I would suggest you read all three chapters rather than missing out chapter 4. But they are very much about people that Jesus met and discovering the identity of Jesus, which as I say is John's purpose; explaining to us who Jesus is that we might know Jesus.

It goes something like this: Chapter 3, verses 1 to 21, is the well-known visit from Nicodemus that most of us know about. Most of us have read that story, the visit by night of Nicodemus, one of the Pharisees, who came to Jesus to question him apparently, or at least to discuss with him as we shall see in a minute.

And then in the second half of chapter 3, John the Baptist speaks of Jesus. He is asked questions again and he begins to declare what he believes about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

And then when we jump over to chapter 5, we find first of all the healing of a lame man, another one of the stories. We said last week that John introduces us

to Jesus by the words that Jesus says and the actions that Jesus carries out; the healings, the stories of Jesus's words and Jesus's actions, and he heals a lame man.

And then in the latter half of chapter 5, Jesus begins to talk more about himself and make claims about himself and begins to come back into that conflict with the religious authorities and the Pharisees.

So we are going to look at the identity of Jesus today. Did Jesus ever claim to be God? Well we'll look at that a bit later on but first of all I wanted to say, and thank you, Andy, for the next one, Jesus known by the signs, known by the signs.

Think of the story of Nicodemus coming to see Jesus. Generally the Pharisees were very much against Jesus and critical of Jesus; he undermined their authority, he broke their rules but clearly some of them, and I don't think it was just Nicodemus, some of them began to feel differently.

Think of the story of Nicodemus coming to Jesus. It says here in chapter 3: There was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. So he was quite an important guy, he had quite a role in the Jewish faith. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher come from God: for no one can perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

Nicodemus comes and finds Jesus and makes a statement to Jesus. I wonder why Nicodemus came? Why did he come to find Jesus? Was he curious? Was he beginning to wonder why all his colleagues on the ruling council and all the Jews and all the other Pharisees, why they were so anti-Jesus? What was the problem? He maybe came to find out. He maybe came out of sheer curiosity to check out for himself the things that people were saying. Did he come to express a growing belief in Jesus? That he was beginning to be convinced — had he examined the scriptures? Had he begun to understand that maybe this Jesus was something more than just a troublemaker, just a problem, just a revolutionary?

Because he makes this statement, he says, "We know you are a teacher come from God." I wonder who the 'we' are? It seems most of the Pharisees were anti-Jesus, so I am assuming that Nicodemus might have come on behalf of more than one. Nicodemus had the added courage maybe to actually come to Jesus, to actually ask questions.

Why did he come by night? Well it is suggested that he might have come by night purely because Jesus was so busy during the day and there were so many crowds you just couldn't get to him. I often say to somebody who wants to phone me, "If you want to phone me, try about 10 o'clock at night. You will probably wake me up out of the chair but at least you will catch me at night. I won't be out somewhere doing something."

Maybe that was the reason — maybe it was as simple as that. But more likely I think it was that Nicodemus didn't want anybody to see him coming. He could come under the cover of night. He could find where Jesus is. He must have known on the grapevine where Jesus was staying or where Jesus was living and he was able to come and he was able to find.

Now I also know that Rabbis and Pharisees loved to debate issues. So maybe Nicodemus thought I would like to debate with this guy. I'd like to hear where he's coming from, I'd like to explain where we're coming from, I'd like to debate with him and discuss the doctrinal issues. Probably that was what he came for. He came as a scholar to talk through the doctrine; to talk through who Jesus was, to talk through the words he was saying.

It's interesting isn't it that he starts with a statement and not a question. If it was you or me we might have gone to Jesus to say, "Who are you? Where have you come from?" We might have asked questions. But Nicodemus begins with a statement so I am kind of beginning to think he's coming from a position of some kind of belief. He is beginning to recognise there is something about this Jesus. There is something about the things he says; there is something about the things he does.

So he says to Jesus, "We know you are a teacher come from God." A statement. And Jesus comes out with a completely different response to the one that Nicodemus was probably expecting. Jesus says, in reply Jesus declares, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

And Nicodemus completely and utterly misunderstands, "How can I get back in my mother's womb? How can I be born again? How can that happen?" He is pretty flabbergasted by the answer he receives. It certainly wasn't the one he was expecting.

But you see Jesus has looked into his heart. He's looked beyond the statement. He has seen that there's something going on. There's a curiosity. There's an interest. There's a seeking in the heart of Nicodemus. He has seen something in him that recognises he needs something and this Jesus might just have what Nicodemus [lacks]. Jesus sees right into the heart of Nicodemus. He goes right to the heart of the issue. He doesn't beat about the bush with theological discussions; not at this point anyway, he goes right to the point and says, "Nicodemus, what you need is an inner spiritual change. You don't need to debate the issues. You don't need to talk about the rules and regulations. You don't need to get into a debating chamber. What you need is a change of heart."

And it might well be as we shall look later on, that he was thinking of some passages in Ezekiel, which we are going to look at later on about changes of heart but we will come to them in a minute.

But first of all look at things now that Jesus begins to say to Nicodemus. In verse 11 of chapter 3 he says, "You are Israel's teacher," and, of course, yes, Nicodemus is a Pharisee and a member of the council; he would have been a teacher of the Old Testament scriptures. "You do not understand these things. I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know and we testify to what we have seen but still you people do not accept our testimony." Nicodemus, you are supposed to be a biblical scholar. You, of anybody, should understand what I'm talking about. And he talks to him about being the author of life, about being the interpreter of scripture and that is where it links with chapter 5 as well.

Because in chapter 5 Jesus says something similar, "The Father who sent me has testified concerning me. You have never heard his voice nor seen his form, nor does

his word dwell in you, for you do not believe the one he sent. You diligently study the scriptures because you know that by them you possess eternal life. These are the scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to have life.” Nicodemus, you are a scriptural expert, you know the scriptures, you, of anybody, should know who I am. You should be able to see that by seeing it in the scriptures that you’ve studied. You’ve looked at them to find life. They talk about me. The Old Testament scriptures, Jesus is saying, talk about me. I am identified in those scriptures. You’ve seen the miracles. You’ve heard the words. You’ve read the scriptures. Nicodemus, you should know. You should understand.

I wonder why the Pharisees didn’t understand? I wonder why the Pharisees didn’t recognise Jesus? They knew the scriptures. They knew their bible. They knew their Old Testament, their Torah inside out but they still didn’t recognise Jesus. Did they simply miss the point? Were they so caught up with the rules and the regulations that they simply missed the point or did they deliberately ignore the evidence? Did they recognise that this Jesus was indeed who he claimed to be but deliberately ignored it because it was undermining their authority and their position and they didn’t want to accept him? I will leave that for you to think about.

But whatever it was, Nicodemus seems to have a different attitude. He has come because he wants to know. He has come because he wants to find out who this Jesus is. And Jesus says, “You should know, Nicodemus. You have seen the evidence. The evidence is clear for you in the scriptures that you know so well and the things that you’ve seen. Nicodemus, you if anybody, and your colleagues the Pharisees, should recognise who I am, who Jesus is.”

Nicodemus, though, wants to know. So the evidence about Jesus is clear. The evidence for the Pharisees, for Nicodemus is clear. The evidence for us is clear. It is there for them as eyewitnesses of the miracles. As eyewitnesses and ear witnesses, if there is such a thing, of the things that Jesus says and does. They know their scriptures, they should know.

You know, we have the privilege of being able to look at the life of Jesus in the Bible. We have the privilege of being able to see what he does in our world today. We have the privilege of knowing the scriptures and having them in front of us. The evidence about Jesus is clear. He is who he says he is.

Why does Jesus go on to say (thank you Andy), Jesus talks about bringing new life, you must be born again. Nicodemus might have been drawn to think about the words that God had said to them originally and the promises that God had made in Ezekiel, chapter 36, where he says, “I will take you out of the nations, I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back to your own land. I will sprinkle clean water on you and you will be clean. I will cleanse you from your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you. I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.”

Nicodemus might have been drawn to remember when those words came out that God had promised that he would change them from the inside. He would change their hearts, their thoughts, their motivations. That is what Messiah would do. That is what God wanted to do with the people. And now Jesus comes and says,

“It’s time. I’m here. This change can happen because you can be born again. You can be spiritually renewed and refreshed. Your heart can be made new, Nicodemus. It is not about keeping the rules. It is not about getting the theological position correct. Nicodemus, it is about a change in your heart.”

This is the gospel. Jesus’s solutions are spiritual, not material. He is not here to defeat the Romans. He is not here for a military victory. He is here to change hearts just like God said he would back in Ezekiel. And he comes to Nicodemus with this challenge, “Nicodemus, you must be born again. Nicodemus, something has got to happen in your heart. Something has got to happen in your inner being not just a theological debate.”

So Nicodemus hasn’t quite grasped it. I suggest later on you might find that Nicodemus does begin to get the point because he appears a couple of other times in the gospels later on, but we’ll point that out later on. But he should have known. He should have understood by what he saw, by the evidence in front of him. Messiah wasn’t what they were expecting but they should have known because the evidence about Jesus was clear and is clear.

Jesus then goes on to Nicodemus and introduces this life in well-known words, from chapter 3, verse 16 onwards. I am sure you don’t need me to read John 3:16 to you because you probably know it off by heart, but I’ll read it anyway.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” Sorry, whoever believes in him — I always think of my youngest, my Dad’s youngest brother, my uncle, when I read that verse because years ago when I was a little boy he came to our Sunday School at my Grandma’s church and he told us the story about whosoever’s heart house. And whosoever swept out his heart house and Jesus came to live in whosoever’s heart house and that was because the verse, in that version, used to say ‘whosoever believes in Him,’ so nowadays we’d have to tell the story of whoever’s heart house. But it’s fun isn’t it, that sort of little thing reminds me and still sticks with me to this very day.

But John 3:16 is probably, is it not, the best-known verse in the Bible? I don’t know if you see it now but you used to see people with banners up at football matches, with John 3:16 on. It was, it’s one of the most well-known verses in the Bible. But those few verses that Jesus speaks there to Nicodemus are probably one of the best summaries of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel of salvation that there is in the whole Bible.

It points out that God’s desire, God’s first of all love is for the world. Eunice wondered what I was up to yesterday because I was listening to one of my old sermons. Martin has kindly put some of my messages from the past online on the website. There are three and I was listening to one of those there and it was about this very subject.

It was from Malachi; where Malachi begins his message with God’s message that God says to the people of Israel, “I have loved you.” And that’s where he begins his message. And this is where Jesus begins his message to Nicodemus, “God so loved the world.” And again, when we used to preach the gospel, when the gospel

used to be preached to us as children, we were always encouraged to put our names — put your name in that space. Instead of God so loved the world; there's a few of you nodding, you used to do that as well. God so loved Sue, God so loved Hilda, God so loved Moira, Jean, Gareth, Elspeth, all of you, each one, put your name in the space we used to be encouraged.

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. Jesus goes on to point out that God's desire is for our salvation because God loves the people of the world; not just the Jewish people but every person in the world.

He goes on to point out that God doesn't come, didn't come to condemn the world; the world is already condemned by its own sin. God says, "I've come to a world that is already condemned by its behaviour. Sin has done that already. The offer is simple — belief equals life in Jesus Christ."

Now we don't read any more response from Nicodemus. We do know in a couple of other places in the Bible that Nicodemus gradually became something of a more open disciple. And at one of the Pharisaic meetings, one of the Jewish ruling council meetings, he spoke up for Jesus. And at the end when Joseph of Arimathea came to anoint the body of Jesus, Nicodemus was with him.

So Nicodemus's belief in Jesus I believe began to grow from this point onwards. He had come for a theological debate maybe but Jesus saw right into his heart and said, "What you need is the very spiritual change that I've come to bring the people. I've come to bring my people. Because God loves the world I've come to change the world. I've come to change the people."

So the evidence again about Jesus is clear. It is clear from the things he says. It is clear from the things he does. It's clear from the scripture. It is clear now because he offers life, spiritual life, new life, renewed life to individuals who will believe in him.

But we move on, we move on into the next chapter because Jesus now is breaking the rules that the Pharisees have set. In chapter 3 he meets Nicodemus, a Pharisee. In chapter 4 he meets a woman at the well, a foreigner. In chapter 4 again he meets a Jewish royal official.

In chapter 5 at the beginning he meets a man who has been sick for, it says here, 38 years and he's been sat by a pool where regularly, the story says, an angel comes and troubles the waters and people are healed and for the last 38 years this guy has been trying to be first in the water to be healed. And for 38 years he's been pushed back time after time after time after time. Can you imagine how that feels? He's been seeking God for 38 years and has failed to get an answer time after time after time after time.

And you were moaning yesterday because there was something you'd been praying about for the last couple of weeks and it hasn't been answered yet. And you read this story and you think of this guy and he's been there 38 years. And Jesus asks him actually what is an amazing question, he says, "Do you want to get well?" Well I think I might have said, "No, I'm just sitting here because I like the ice creams they serve," or "I'm just sitting here because it's comfortable, I like the

company.” He says, “Well yeah, I want to but I just can’t get there in time. I just can’t do anything about it. I want to get well but I can’t do anything about it. There is nothing I can do. I’ve tried but I can’t do anything about it.” And Jesus steps in and heals him.

And really what Jesus is saying is, “When you couldn’t do anything about it, you couldn’t heal yourself, you couldn’t get down into the water, you couldn’t heal yourself — I’ve come to heal.” And what did the Pharisees say? The Pharisees say, “Fantastic, this man has healed a man who has been seeking God for 38 years, he’s been healed. Hallelujah, let’s have a praise party.”

Is that what the Pharisees say? No, they come back and they say, “Jesus, you have broken the rules. You have made this guy carry his mat on the Sabbath.” Hang on a minute, the last 38 years all he’s been able to do with his mat is lie on it. He’s been healed. Okay, it’s the Sabbath. Shouldn’t you be delighted on the Sabbath that he’s been healed after 38 years sick? But all the Pharisees are bothered about are the rules and the regulations.

So they say to the healed man, “Who is this guy that has healed you? Who is this guy that has caused you to break the rules?” And you hear the man, the healed man say, “Well I don’t know who he was. He just appeared, told me to pick up my mat and off I went.”

And Jesus comes and seeks him out; and he says a slightly strange thing to this guy, he says, I’ll read it to you. You might think this is a bit of an odd statement that Jesus makes to him. He talks about the Sabbath law for a bit, talks about the Sabbath law for a bit. Jesus goes and finds the man and he says, “See, you are well again, stop sinning or something worse may happen to you.”

That is a bit of an odd statement. It is as if Jesus is saying, “Well you’re sickness was the result of the bad things you did and if you don’t stop sinning you will get some worse things and you will be even worse.” No, I don’t think Jesus is saying that at all. I really don’t think that is what Jesus is saying.

I think what Jesus is saying is, “You need to believe in me.” Because when he points to the man he says, “What you need now, having had your physical healing, you need to develop that by believing in the one who has healed you, believing in the Lord Jesus Christ because otherwise your physical healing will be useless because your spiritual life will not be renewed.”

He is saying the same thing he said to Nicodemus. He said to Nicodemus, “Nicodemus, what you need is an inner spiritual change.” What he is saying to this guy is, “You need to be spiritually renewed not just physically renewed. Your healing will be useless unless you turn, unless you believe in me.”

So once again the evidence about Jesus is clear. This man says, “I was ill for 38 years. Look at what this guy has done? Look at the evidence, this is somebody from God.” And Jesus said to him, “Yes, if you accept that because of what you’ve seen you need to accept more than your healing, you need to believe. You need to trust in me that you might find salvation otherwise this healing that you’ve had will be useless, worthless and of no point.”

So really for all of them, for all of the characters in these stories, Jesus is pointing out that what is needed is inner spiritual change. Yes, he's come to demonstrate who he is by what he does, by what he says, by the very scriptures.

Finally as we come to chapter 5 our question, did Jesus ever claim to be God? A lot of people have talked about this. It's an interesting discussion because a lot of people have said Jesus never actually claimed to be God. But if you read chapter 5 and these chapters particularly, the things that Jesus is saying are understood by the Pharisees — you know, my mother use to say to me sometimes, “You are not as green as you are cabbage looking.”

And I think he would have said that to some of the Pharisees; they weren't as slow as they might have appeared to be. They understood an awful lot and it made them annoyed because it undermined their authority and position.

But Jesus goes on from 5 verse 19 onwards, “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself. He can only do what he sees his Father doing because whatever the Father does the Son does.” And he goes on to make claims about his relationship with Father God; he goes on to claim to be the one who can bring the life of God into people's lives. What he has already been talking about. “I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes in He who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned. He has crossed over from death to life.”

In other words, he is saying to the Pharisees, “If you want eternal life, if you want this new life that God promised back through Ezekiel, you need to come to me. I am the one who is carrying it. You need to trust me.”

John the Baptist has already made that claim about Jesus in John chapter 3 where he says, “Whoever believes in the Son,” pointing to Jesus, “has eternal life. Whoever rejects the Son will not see life for God's wrath remains in him.” Jesus goes on in these passages to claim equality with God. The Pharisees are recognizing exactly what Jesus is saying.

Verse 26 of chapter 5, “The Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself.”

Verse 39 then in chapter 5 as well, “You diligently study the scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to have eternal life.” Pharisees, you are looking for eternal life, you are looking in the scriptures, the scriptures point you to me, but you ignore that bit. So Jesus is claiming to be one with the Father. He is claiming to be the one who brings the very life that God had promised back in the scriptures.

So he is, the Pharisees understood, he is claiming equality with God. He is claiming deity. He is claiming to bring into the world the very life that God promised, the very thing they were seeking. He is the answer to what the Pharisees had been seeking.

So the evidence about Jesus is clear. Jesus' words clearly point to his deity. They point to his equality with God. They point to his claim to be the Messiah. Although Jesus never actually says those words, “I am God,” his claims, his behaviour and



everything point to the fact that he is indeed claiming to be equal with God. He is claiming deity and the Bible teaches that he is God. One with God and we believe that, we believe that whole-heartedly.

The Pharisees began to reject that but some like Nicodemus began to recognize it. And so in chapter 3 and chapter 5 we see Jesus making his claims very, very clearly and the evidence for us is clear about Jesus. His person is seen by words, actions recorded by John, deliberately for that purpose. He brings the new life that God had been promising right from the days of Ezekiel.

Jesus said, "I am here to bring it, the thing you've been expecting, don't miss it." He breaks the rules in order to offer salvation because the rules that the Pharisees made were blocking them from seeing the truth about Jesus. He exhibits his deity in words and actions.

For us today looking into the Bible, the evidence about Jesus is clear. It was clear for the Pharisees. It was clear for Nicodemus. It was clear for the healed man. It was clearly there; they could see it. We too could see it. I trust that like Nicodemus, we too will accept that life from Jesus. If you haven't already accepted it, if you haven't put your faith in Jesus already, do it now. Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. He is who he claims to be. He is exactly equal with God. He is the Saviour. He is Messiah.

We are excited about that aren't we? Aren't we? And we believe it. If you haven't received him, if you haven't put your faith and trust in him already, do it now and begin to walk with him. You may be a gradual disciple like Nicodemus was. It may be a gradual dawning and a gradual understanding but I trust that, like him, you will find new life in Jesus. Amen.