

How Can These Things Be?

Genesis 12¹⁻⁴; Psalm 121; Romans 5^{1-5,13-17}; John 3¹⁻¹⁷

*How can these things be?
[John 3⁹]*

The title for the sermon today comes from the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus. The meeting raises all sorts of questions:

- Nicodemus was a Pharisee and the Pharisees hated Jesus. Perhaps that is why he uses the cover of darkness to have this conversation.
- Nicodemus has already made up his mind that Jesus is the 'real thing' - **a teacher who is come from God** - yet seems unsure about how to move from his religion being a matter of the mind to being a matter of the heart.
- Nicodemus wants to be able to have everything tied down and struggles with the idea that God is free to do what he chooses.
- Above all, Nicodemus struggles with the idea of having to start all over again as a 'baby' in Christ. He takes it all too literally - **can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?**

How can these things be? It is the equivalent of saying, *I don't like this!* and *I'm not in control!* and I am not going to do it God's way!

The way that Lent is entered into today hints at the same approach - of being in control of the bits we like and don't like.

How many of us followed the tradition of the Church and confessed our sins on Shrove Tuesday so that we entered Lent with a clean conscience and then fasted from food and drink on Ash Wednesday? We can choose the pancakes, because that suits us, but not what that represents.

'Giving [something] up for Lent' has become similar to exchanging Christmas presents - something well intentioned, but stripped of any real meaning. Again, we are in control - we choose what we do and it more often than not has no more spirituality to it than Dry January or Movember!

How can these things be? Because God says so! Isn't that at the heart of the things we struggle against most often: our faith is one that has its beginning and its end in God and, while we are expected to live up to the faith we hold, it entirely depends on him and our part is to accept what he offers and to do so on his terms.

Take note from the readings:

- ✠ Abram, at the age of 75, heard God say, **go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.** After the promise from God that **I will bless you**, and then **in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed** the text simply says, **So Abram went, as the Lord had told him.**

Abram has 20 years on me and I would still have an initial response that would ask so many questions and all of them relating to my comfort. Would you be any different? Faith is learning to trust God enough to take a step in faith without knowing where it may lead.

- ✠ Paul, in the letter to the Romans, uses **Abraham** as an example to teach us that righteousness (literally, being declared acquitted from what we have been and done) depends on God, not us! Letting go of the idea that our place in God's kingdom are our **wages** for being good, but simply a **gift** of God.

When we approach the altar at communion we hold our hands in our personal 'altar' to show that we bring nothing but simply receive.

- ✠ What does Nicodemus choose to hear? That **God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life** and that **God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him?** Or, that the idea of starting all over again, as a newborn in faith, and not being able to carry all the credits and status that a life that other people regard as 'good' with you is difficult?

How can these things be? Can you hear it? **WHAT ABOUT ME?** Faith means we let go of what we can do to take hold of what God has done.

If you stand on the edge of faith, looking on, let go and let God hold you. If you are on the inside of faith but still wanting to be in control, let go and let God hold you.