

Good Friday

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[0 : 0 0] Good evening everyone. It's lovely to be with you tonight. It's also just lovely to hear everyone sing. This is the first time I've been back in a service since we've lifted the Mass.

And it's just wonderful to sing together on this, the most significant of days. So here's what we're going to be thinking about tonight. According to statistics, 51% of us in this room are petrified of this thing.

But it's okay because I've checked and 1972 was the last year that someone in the UK died from one of these things. What we're going to be thinking about tonight is snakes.

Now before you write that off as strange, and it is strange, let me just urge you that what we're going to be thinking about tonight takes us right to the heart of who this God is. It takes us right to the heart, if you like, of Jesus Christ.

If you're here today and you're thinking to yourself, I don't know who this God is. Let me urge you to check in with what we're going to be thinking about tonight. Maybe you're here tonight and you've gone cold in your heart, your affection towards this Jesus.

[1 : 1 2] Come and soak in who he is. We're going to be thinking about snakes tonight. John chapter 2 is where we are. Having thought about what happened on Good Friday, 2,000 odd years ago, we're going to be thinking about what it means.

What's the significance of it? It might surprise you to learn as you turn to John chapter 3 rather. It's just going to be one verse tonight, two verses rather, 14 and 15.

It might surprise you to learn that some 2,000 odd years ago at the outset of his public ministry, Jesus had a conversation with somebody that featured snakes.

You can read about it right here in chapter 3 of John's gospel. Now the conversation was started by this man who we meet in John chapter 3 called Nicodemus.

He's a man who, quite frankly, in the first century owned a spiritual CV to die for. I mean, when you consider them, his credentials are simply outstanding.

[2 : 2 1] They'd have religious recruitment agencies purring after him, right? He's an Orthodox Jew. He's part of this devout group called the Pharisees, this group of people who have fully committed themselves to external purity, religious legal observance, and Bible knowledge.

And to top it all, Nicodemus is part of the religious ruling council of the day called the Sanhedrin.

And you total that up, it means that this man, Nicodemus, is holding in his hands the equivalent of a religious royal flush.

And this is the man who comes to Jesus. I take it he's just intrigued by what he's heard about him, about who Jesus is, what people are saying about him, what he's teaching, what he's doing.

And I imagine probably first and foremost who he's meeting, who he's associating with. And Nicodemus comes to Jesus to suss him out. Maybe that's you here tonight.

I don't know. Maybe you're here and you're thinking there's something about this man, Jesus, which is warmly intriguing. And this conversation between these two revolves around a really simple theme.

[3 : 3 6] And the theme, the question is, how can anyone enter the kingdom of God? That's the question. How can anyone hope to enter the kingdom of God? And so here is a man who, if you like, represents the best that religion has to offer.

And yet Jesus tells him unreservedly and unmistakably that he is spiritually dead. Now, Nicodemus is no spring chicken.

He's likely an older man at this point in his life. And I imagine you get into this, he's probably spent his whole life here in the exact opposite of that. No doubt he's got to where he is because people have spent the entire, his entire adult life telling him that he's a man who is spiritually alive.

But Jesus says, no, you need God's Holy Spirit to give you life. You need to be born again. Now, the question is, how is that going to happen? It's not a biology question. It's a theology question. How can one be born again? And this is where the conversation about snakes comes in. [4 : 52] Because Nicodemus takes Jesus back in time to an episode in Jewish history called the wilderness years. Now, Nicodemus is schooled in his Torah, right?

He gets this episode. It's recorded for us in the book of Numbers. Now, here's the context. God has saved his people out of Egypt. And he's called them out of a world of multiple earthly gods to worship and know and enjoy him alone.

And enjoy living for him alone, with him alone. To follow him as he leads them, his people, towards the promised land, the place where he said he was going to take them. But the journey from Egypt to the promised land exposes the rotten hearts of God's people.

So often what bumps in the road do to us in life, isn't it? They reveal our true colors. They reveal what we're really trusting in, what we're really all about. So they're doing the journey around the wilderness.

They get impatient. They say, where's the water? Where's the food? We're bored of the same old food. The people grumble. They even get to the point of despising the God who saved them.

[6 : 08] And they're saying to themselves, why on earth would you take us out of Egypt for this? And to punish them and to teach them, God sends snakes among them.

And those snakes bite. And the people begin to die. And the people realizing what's going on, they cry out, Moses, would you do something?

Would you help us? And at this point in the story, if I were writing the script, at this point it would read something like, you made your own bed, you've got a lie in it.

It would read, be careful what you wish for. That's the kind of thing that I would write if I was writing this. But here's what I want you to see. That's not the God of the Bible. No. Because God in his mercy says to this disobedient people who do not deserve to be saved.

He says, I'm going to provide a way for you to be saved. I want you to make a bronze snake. Now given the geography of where they are at this point, this is likely just a mini statue made of red copper.

[7 : 17] Clock that one for later, okay? Red copper. Red. And God says, I want you to take that snake and I want you to nail it to a pole. I want you to lift it up for everybody to see.

And everyone who's been bitten and is dying, tell them that this is what they need to do. And the thing to see is that people would be saved not by being in proximity to the snake.

They wouldn't be healed by acknowledging the mere existence of the snake. Their only hope is to look to and trust what God has said is true about the snake.

All they need to do, this bronze snake that's held up in a pole, as they sit there writhing in agony, wondering when is life going to end. All they need to do is to look and live.

And so when trying to help Nicodemus comprehend, get his head around, how you can be born again, how you can enter the kingdom of God, how you can be right with this creator.

[8 : 34] Jesus says in John chapter 3, just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the son of man must be lifted up.

That everyone who believes may have eternal life in him. And that's where the conversation ends. You know, I'd love to know more about what happened there.

Talk about loose ends. Talk about a program that ended without any closure. Talk about a quick conversation when you come away with more questions than answers.

You can imagine that line and that scene bounce around Nicodemus' head for years and years.

Look at that phrase in Scotland, don't be ripping my knitting, means I just, I just, I can't get my head around it.

It's annoying me, it's bugging me. What's going on? You can imagine the guy, Nicodemus, can't sleep, lying awake. What did he mean? Like a crossword entry that you just can't get. Nobody likes a riddle they can't solve.

[9 : 32] And so Nicodemus is sitting here thinking for years, he's thinking, what was Jesus talking about? That is until one day, call it three years later, that first Good Friday, the penny drops.

See, in chapter three, I think Nicodemus is probably on the fence about this man Jesus. Maybe again, maybe that's you here tonight. Who is he? Just wants to suss him out, wants to test the waters, wants to ask a few questions.

Nothing wrong with that. That's a great thing to do. But you flick forward to chapter 19, and who's there as Jesus dies? Nicodemus is there.

He's no longer in the dark, he's in the light. As in, he is nailing his colors to the mask, saying, no, that man who died, I'm with him.

Nicodemus is there, he's taking Jesus' body, along with this man called Joseph of Arimathea. He's taking Jesus' body down from the cross, and seeing that that body gets a good tomb.

[10 : 49] And I wonder, as Nicodemus looked at Jesus, as he looked at him nailed and suspended on that cross, whether this conversation finally came home to roost.

As he looks at Jesus, his nail-battered, blood-stained body, and he says in his mind, and he believes in his heart, there's the red snake.

There's the place where I need to look and live. It's him. He's my look and live. And I take it that Paul, writing in Galatians chapter 3, and you can look at that in your own time, that's the theme that he picks up.

And I take it this is the place of beautiful, agonizing joy for every Christian believer as they look at their king suspended on the cross, that this is the place where salvation was won.

You see, all of us, every single human being has been bitten by something far more deadly than a snake. We are running a hell-bound race because of the sin that runs deep through our souls.

[12 : 05] It's way deeper than just the bad stuff that we do. That's just the tip of the iceberg. It's our hearts, the very core of us that lies in rebellion against our creator.

What do we deserve? We deserve to know his curse. Curse just meaning knowing the anger and the judgment of the God who created us.

And so here's what Paul writes as he contemplates the cross. And Jesus suspended there. He writes, Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse.

And here's your two words. For us. For us. For it is written, Cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole.

For us. That's what he did. He became sin. For us. He became the curse for us.

[13 : 02] He became the snake for us. And so all of us tonight, We need to look at Christ on the cross. And we conclude, There is the one who took my curse.

There is the one who took the penalty of my sin on the cross. You see, it wasn't so much nails that held Jesus to the cross. As it was a burning passion to carry out the will of his father.

And to love and to save people like you and me. That's what held Jesus to the cross. Because Jesus did that by faith.

What Jesus said to Nicodemus needed to happen to him. By faith it can happen to every single one of us tonight. What is the result of Jesus' work on the cross? For all who believe the curse is absorbed by Jesus on the cross.

And the blessing of the Spirit, God's very presence in us, Is poured out abundantly. That we might know the love of this father. Paul writes, You see, how can we enter the kingdom of God?

[14 : 29] There's one way. And it's by looking at the red snake. By looking at the one who became a curse for us. And it's what we do, isn't it?

As we take communion together. As we remember. The most significant and profound. Act in history.

Spent a whole week, haven't we? Thinking about a leader who thought he was above the law. And what do we do tonight? We remember a leader who had all the power in the world. To put himself under the law. And became a curse for us.

And this is our king. This is who he is. And by faith, believing and looking at him tonight. And knowing that he's paid for our every sin. Past, present, future. Whoever you are, whatever's going on.

That's who he is tonight. And looking at him and declaring and believing in our hearts. He's my look and live. I love how Stuart Townend captures this.

[15 : 28] And with this, we will close in just a moment. Have a moment's just reflection. But this is what he writes in his song. And I love how hymns have just got a wonderful way of poetically capturing truth.

Here's what he writes. Through the kisses of a friend's betrayal. He was lifted on a cruel cross. He was punished for a world's transgressions.

He was suffering to save the lost. He fights for breath. He fights for me. Loosing sinners from the claims of hell.

And with a shout, our joy, our souls are free. Death defeated by Emmanuel. Why don't we just be quiet for a moment.

And then I'll lead us in a short prayer. But this is your king tonight. Why don't we just take a moment and just savor him. And just recall what he's done for us.

[16 : 25] And then we'll move on together. And so we've thought about John 3, 14 and 15 tonight.

Of course, John 3, 16. And so tonight, Heavenly Father, by wonderful grace, we can call you that. We thank you for Jesus. The one whose passion demonstrates your throbbing and loving heart devoted to saving sinners.

And I just pray that by your spirit living in us, moving amongst us, that you would bring a fresh awareness of his sacrifice and his victory tonight.

Maybe even some of us here for the first time, help us, Lord, to look and live. We pray you'll be with us as we journey on the rest of this service on this the most profound of days.

[18 : 14] In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.