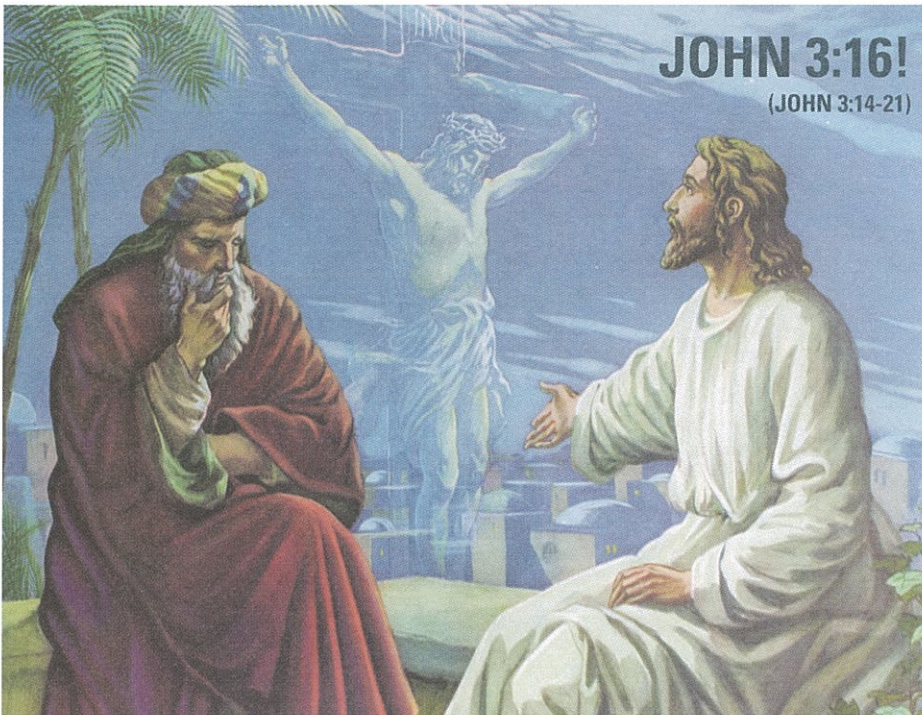


THE WORD

Year B • Season colour: Purple or Rose • Psalter Week 4

**JOHN 3:16!**

(JOHN 3:14-21)

Image of Jesus teaching Nicodemus, from Grace Church Chiangmai, Thailand

Nicodemus is a high-ranking leader within the Jewish community, a member of the Sanhedrin and a teacher in Israel. He comes to Jesus under cover of darkness, which indicates his state of mind regarding Jesus and his message.

His difficulty is that he realises that there is something important about Jesus, but he is unable to move beyond his own learning and imagine that God's love and self-revealing could be different – and greater – than his current understanding. He represents the person who wants to believe but who can't, at least at the moment. He is not refusing to believe, and later in the Gospel will find the courage to speak up in the Sanhedrin against the judging of Jesus without due process and finally to assist in the burial of Jesus' crucified body.

We might say that Nicodemus is unable to think outside the box. If he wants to move forward in his understanding of Jesus and what God is offering through Jesus, then he needs to make a decision and to take a leap of faith. At the moment, he is unable to see that the Spirit cannot be contained within the borders of the official teaching and tradition with which he is familiar. His thinking is confined to the things of earth; his faith in Jesus is partial. Once he allows himself to accept the gift of the Spirit from above, then he can be born again.

Today's section of Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus begins with the reference to Moses lifting up the bronze serpent during the wanderings of Israel in the wilderness between Egypt and Canaan during the Exodus. Jesus will be physically lifted up on the cross: In John's thought, this is the moment of his exaltation: the Israelites who gazed on the serpent were healed of the poisonous bites they had received as punishment; in the same way the person who believes in the revelation of God shown through Jesus' being glorified on the cross will receive eternal life. ■

REFLECT

Sometimes in the crowd at a sporting event you will see a placard held up which reads *John 3:16!* This refers to the verse in today's Gospel which reads "God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost but may have eternal life." This is often called 'the Gospel in miniature': if most of the New Testament were lost and all we had left were these four short phrases, then we would have the essential Christian message.

God's motive for reaching out to human beings is love, not judgment. This love is universal, it is not restricted to any particular group or institution, which is why John says that God loved *the world* to the extent of sending his Son as a *gift*. A person either accepts or declines a gift, and Nicodemus represents someone who cannot make up his or her mind so takes the parcel and leaves it in the cupboard for the time being. All we are asked to do is to keep an open mind and to allow the Spirit to lead us into a deeper relationship with the Lord. ■

LEARN

The bronze serpent is the means by which Moses, at the Lord's instruction, provides healing for the wounded Israelites during the Exodus journey.

In the Fourth Gospel, the crucifixion is not a painful, ignominious end to Jesus' life but the moment of his exaltation as the Son of God.

There is a play on words throughout John's version of the Gospel on Jesus' *being lifted up* and his *being exalted in glory*.

The judgment we receive depends not on our conduct, that is the sins we commit, but on the decision we make about who Jesus is and his place in our lives.

DO

Write *John 3:16!* on a card or piece of paper. Carry this with you for the next week, and when you notice it, say to yourself the verse from the Gospel.



SAY

God loved the world so much ...