

Sunday 1 March 2026
The Second Sunday of Lent

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Genesis 12:1-4a

NT: Romans 4:1-5, 13-17

Gp: John 3:1-17

Last week I was a guest at an Iftar. This is the meal Muslims hold as they break fast during the month of Ramadan, having abstained from all food and drink during the hours of daylight. I was invited along with another Christian, and several members of the Jewish community in Liverpool, to the home of a Muslim family, in a spirit of generous hospitality. We were there to build friendships and overcome some prejudices. The conversation ranged far and wide, as we ate together. And as the evening went on, and we grew more at ease, we turned to discussing matters of faith, observing the central importance of Abraham, and the story of Moses and the children of Israel, liberated from slavery in Egypt, in each of the religions we followed. At a certain point there was a flash of shared understanding between my Muslim host and the Jewish guests, when we turned from the safe ground of Moses, towards the person of Jesus. My host asked if Jews recognised that Jesus had existed, and it was agreed, yes, as a teacher; and we were reminded that in Islam, Jesus is revered as a prophet, although not as the Son of God. My friends were very polite, but it was a reminder to me, as I contemplated this week's passage from John's Gospel, that his claims about himself in the gospels remain incomprehensible, if not scandalous. One of the great benefits of speaking deeply with those of other faiths is that one is forced to consider afresh why we believe what we do as Christians, and to be able to give an account of ourselves, despite the temptation to downplay the Church's claim from the beginning, that in him, and in relationship with him, God has saved the world, and made us children of God.

Christianity, and modern-day Judaism, are both descended from the Jewish faith as practised in the time of Christ, when the Temple still stood in Jerusalem, and sacrifices were offered there. A few decades after Jesus was executed outside the walls of that city, the Jewish people rose up in revolt against Rome, and when they were eventually defeated, the Temple was torn down, and Jews had to learn to practise their faith without priests and sacrifices, exiled from their promised land; and challenged from within by those who now followed Jesus, proclaiming that this rabbi from Galilee was the climax of Israel's history, the Word of God made flesh, who'd sent the Holy Spirit in a new covenant between God and humanity. This time of schism in the Jewish community is reflected in the Christian scriptures, not least John's Gospel, which often speaks of 'the Jews' as those who rejected Christ, but it's also there in the traditions and beliefs of what was becoming rabbinic Judaism, Judaism in exile, without a Temple.

The figure of Nicodemus may well have actually come to visit Jesus by night, as John's gospel describes, but what is also clear is that he symbolises a Jewish community challenged, energised, and in some cases, appalled, by what was being said about Jesus; for Christians 'The Christ', God's anointed one. Centuries later, when a man from Mecca in Arabia sought to share a final revelation from God, it sided with the Jewish critics of Christianity, and said that the gospels and letters of the Christian New Testament had corrupted the truth about Jesus, and the Koran had been dictated by an angel, to avoid any further misinterpretation. It's one of the main reasons why Muslims continue to read and pray in classical Arabic to this day – a scepticism about translation. As we navigate the changing religious landscape of our nation and city we need to know some of this basic history.

For those of us who respectfully disagree with Christianity's long-standing critics, the person and the message of Jesus have a power that is unique and compelling. The cross is not a stumbling block but a mystery that saves, revealing the true nature of God through a man who

suffered violence, and did not inflict it, once and for all. In St John's account of Nicodemus' visit, the Jewish teacher left, baffled, but still intrigued. This curiosity spoke to a desire to follow Jesus, which John says led to Nicodemus being one who scrambled to find a grave for the man he had fumbled to find in the dark – gloom upon gloom, about to be scattered by an explosion of light and hope, at Easter, when death itself is defeated – God embracing and saving humanity, opening up eternal communion with God.

Some say that Christianity is the original personality cult, and for many devout people who prize the transcendent unity of God, it's infantile and offensive, then and now. But those of us who follow Jesus as The Christ, put it differently – his story makes sense of who we are – he enables us to call God 'Our Father'. We find our true selves when we stand in that freedom, saved by his blood, animated by the Spirit, the greatest love story, reinforced, not contradicted, by the diverse stories of so many ordinary saints, who found life in him.

Fr Philip Anderson