

Sermon to be preached at the Opening Service of the General Assembly  
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The Right Rev Pamela Tankersley  
Moderator of the General Assembly

## **Christ-centred, Community-facing: A Future with Hope**

Scripture Readings: *Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14 Jeremiah's letter to the Babylonian exiles*  
*John 3:1-8 Nicodemus meets Jesus*

The Gospel of John portrays Nicodemus as a model Pharisee of Jesus' time – but I have a sneaky suspicion that he would not be out of place at a Presbyterian Assembly! He was a male of course, and he would have likely been “elderly-yet-active,” head of the household, elder of the church, comfortably off and a pillar of society. What would have set him apart? A life that was religiously decent and ordered, grounded as it was in the history and traditions of his faith with its strong emphasis on personal purity and observance of the Torah (the Law), and the multitude of regulations and requirements that sprung from Pharisaic interpretation of the Torah.

Yet even in the first sentence of the passage we heard read today, we sense there is more to Nicodemus – a yearning for something deeper and more fulfilling, more true than his faith has so far offered him. He hears about this man, this radical teacher, Jesus, and arranges to meet him. He “came at night” the gospel writer tell us. Is there risk for him in coming to see Jesus? Risk to his reputation, his position as a leader of the Jews? We can only speculate. It adds to the tension of why he MUST see Jesus – and of course coming to see Jesus is always about moving from darkness into the light.

So he comes, stealthily, secretly, He addresses Jesus as Rabbi – teacher – his equal, someone for whom he has respect. And Nicodemus articulates that respect: “No one can do what you have done unless he is from God,” he says. They begin a dialogue that is typical of a teacher and student in the mode of Judaism – a back and forth dialogue where Nicodemus (and the listeners) are taken deeper and deeper into a new understanding of faith. We have this amazing conversation about the nature of spiritual change. Nicodemus is being asked to enter into a new life experience with a new identity: to be born again of the Spirit. Can this decent and orderly, prestigious and intellectually focused man do this? No, we are told that nobody can. To be born again is the work of the Spirit, not of the flesh, nor of the will, but only in dependence on God.

“You need to be born again, Nicodemus.” Jesus is asking too much, it’s not physically possible. “With the Spirit all things are possible. Unless you are born again, you cannot be a follower of mine. The wind blows where it chooses but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Now let me tell you another story, a story of my family. When I was a student at the Theological Hall, in Dunedin (the precursor to the School of Ministry) and came to sit my BD finals, my mother came down from Wanganui to stay for the three weeks, to look after me and the household (husband Roy and three school age kids). My father had died just the January before, so my Mother was on her own, a widow of nearly 10 months.

The evening after the final exam, Mum said to me, "What are we going to do tomorrow, Pamela?"

"I don't know. Got any ideas?"

"I would like to go to town."

"Something we need to buy?"

"Yes," said my 70 year old mother, "I want to get my ears pierced."

My father would have hated her having her ears pierced; it was for her a determined decision to be different, to change her identity. Off we went to town, and I paid for those first earrings. This June, my Mother celebrated her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, having spent her last 20 years with pierced ears.

What has this got to do with us today? This is a story about identity change and therefore of spiritual change. In the year before this incident my mother was, by her own definition and that of her community, Doug's wife – and mother to her six daughters. When he died, she became a widow and for that next year, that was her primary identity. Doug's widow. At the point when she had her ears pierced, I like to think she claimed another identity: Mickie Sherriff, a woman on her own, making her own way in the world.

I am sure you all know stories like this. Loss and grief are familiar patterns to us in the church and we know how they bring sharp changes in identity: We see our fellow travellers, family, ourselves change. And after a time we pick ourselves up, get our ears pierced and move on in new ways.

Now these stories of Nicodemus and my dear mother are about individuals. What if we start to see them as metaphors, maybe parables of our Presbyterian Church? And considered the identity of the church and how, with God's Spirit of grace, it might change and be changed.

Nicodemus, on the elderly side, decent, orderly, versed in the Law, grounded in the traditions and protocols of the past, sticking to the rules and desiring to be pure – encountering Jesus and discovering what it means to be born again.

Our Presbyterian Church, on the elderly side, valuing decency and order and good theology, grounded in history and tradition, in stories of past glory, struggling with its rules and identity, coming from the night of disillusion and conflict, to encounter Jesus again, Jesus who says, "If you will be my followers, you must be born again."

And a 70 year old woman, coming to terms with her grief and mourning, resolving it into a new identity. When I drew this parallel with a friend, she said, "what does a church look like with pierced ears?"

Maybe a look at our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures will help us understand more. (And for those who have used the Pre-Assembly studies, this will make sense.)

The people of the Babylonian exile had good reason to lament and to mourn. In time of the Jeremiah reading, we know they have lost everything: Jerusalem and its temple have been destroyed and the significant leaders and artisans have been deported to Babylon. We hear the lament of Psalm 137, "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?"

Before the exile, the future of God's chosen people seemed assured: the golden age of King David, and Solomon in all his wisdom and glory. The people rejoiced, "God is in his temple, and all is right with the world!" But now, all that has given meaning in the past is gone, along with the Temple. Where is God, if he is not in the Holy of Holies in Jerusalem? Who are we, what will become of us? Once we were God's people and now we are no people.

In answer to that lament, Jeremiah says, "Finish your grieving, end your lament, settle down, grow in numbers and prosper. Claim a new identity for yourselves." Through his prophet God speaks, "Seek the shalom of the city into which I have *sent* you, and pray for it. In it's shalom you will find your own. For I have plans for you, plans for your well being and not for your destruction.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, it seems to me that our beloved church is in the throes of huge change, impelled maybe by the changes in our Western society, changes that require us to grieve for that which seemed so good and stable. We are being propelled into a strange land, into unfamiliar territory. Propelled? Or is it *sent* as the exiles were sent? Sent by God, as surely as God has sent us before.

In the past few decades, we Presbyterians have experienced the hard yard; we've lamented our decline in numbers and public influence, contemporary society mostly ignores us unless the media can find something to sensationalize. We've experienced uncertainty, internal friction and factionalism, and we wonder who we are anymore. Though we calim to be church I mission, how much of our work will be about mission and how much about re-establishing our identity?

Perhaps we are having an identity crisis?

Or perhaps it is the night before the dawn, perhaps a lament for what has been lost, a prelude to the radical change of being born again? Perhaps the dis-ease of the Western church at the end of Christendom is the growing pains of transition and the emergence of what may be a new mission opportunity.

I believe Christ is with us in this struggle, lamenting with us, helping us to see that we cannot go back to the old Jerusalem, Our crucified and risen Lord keeps on transforming us. The Spirit keeps rebirthing us and setting our earrings jangling. We are reformed people - and continuously being reformed.

Friends, I believe God does have plans for us - plans for a future with hope. We cannot know where the wind of the Spirit will blow us. But shall we let go of the past and allow the Spirit to shape us? Move beyond our lament and seek the shalom of the place where we have been sent? Let's go out into our communities and engage with them, for Christ is already out there, loving and transforming all creation and calling us to join in his dance of love. Fellow Presbyterians - we are being sent again. Our mission is as clear as it has ever been: we are to be witnesses to Christ's love in the world, we are to be Christ-centered and community-facing.

To God be the glory in the church and in the world and to God's name be praise, now and forever!

Amen

