



Study two

Conversations in the shadows



Heinrich Hofmann - *Christ and the young rich ruler* 1889



Can you think of a time when you wanted to believe or understand something deeply, but found yourself unsure or hesitant?

What helped you move forward?

Nicodemus at Night

(Read John 3:1–21)

Nicodemus is introduced as a member of the upper class, conservative in his beliefs but very interested in Jesus' teaching. He's a respected teacher, and as a Pharisee a member of a strict religious sect, unlike the Sadducees who were less rigid in their beliefs.

Nicodemus would have been aware of any prevailing doctrinal trends of the day, and it would have been the miracles he had witnessed, and rumours heard, that prompted this interest in Jesus. There seems to be a genuine desire for conversation rather than confrontation, as his greeting was polite and not hostile.

Jesus assumes Nicodemus has a good knowledge of Scripture, and in their

conversation talks of being 'born again' or 'born from above,' of wind and Spirit, of life that only God can give. Nicodemus wants explanation, and Jesus offers much more, transformation.

This is a tender moment - a meeting of curiosity and confusion. It reminds us that faith often begins in the shadows where certainty wavers. Lent invites us, like Nicodemus, to bring our questions openly before God. New birth isn't about having everything sorted; it's about opening ourselves to the Spirit working in us.



What do you imagine drew Nicodemus to Jesus, despite the danger of criticism from other Pharisees?

What might 'being born from above' mean for you personally?

How can doubt or uncertainty become a doorway to deeper faith?

The Rich Young Ruler

(Read Mark 10:17–31)

Here is someone else excited at the prospect of talking to Jesus, and who sees him, at the very least, as a wise teacher.

This young man believes he has ticked all the correct religious boxes in his life, and yet senses that something is missing. Jesus responds in love, sensing the need but also the challenge his question raises.

Jesus looks him in the eye and simply asks him to let go of those things that define him most and then follow him. This is in a culture where to be wealthy was believed to be evidence of God's blessing.

Jesus doesn't condemn his wealth or attitude to life but simply names the barrier and allows him to choose.

There is no indication that Jesus' response is binding on all believers, but what Jesus does ask is that we need to lose our close attachment to material things, or risk losing focus along our journey of faith.

Lent gives us space to be aware of what we cling to - possessions, habits, status, control - and to hear again that loving call, 'Come, follow me.'



What does this story reveal about the nature of discipleship?

When Jesus talks of the 'rich' in verse 23, how would you understand the word in its context?

Why do we so often cling to things, and find it difficult to let go and move on?

'Lent is a time for discipline, for confession, for honesty—not because God is mean or fault-finding or finger-pointing but because he wants us to know the joy of being cleaned out, ready for all the good things he now has in store.'

(N T Wright)

'Lent stimulates us to let the Word of God penetrate our life and in this way to know the fundamental truth: who we are, where we come from, where we must go, what path we must take in life...'

(Pope Benedict XVI)

The Father and a Troubled Son

(Read Mark 9:14–29)

As Jesus and three disciples come down from the Mount of Transfiguration, there is a lively conversation taking place between the other disciples, a crowd, and the teachers of the law, who were busy monitoring Jesus' preaching and miracles. Jesus arrives at the perfect moment, and the crowd make room for him in their lively discussion about a boy possessed by an evil spirit.

This father is worn out after years of caring for his child. When Jesus tells him that all things are possible for the one who believes, his humble

response is a model for all when despair becomes overwhelming; 'I do believe; help overcome my unbelief!' Jesus meets him at that place of despair and honesty.

This is good news for anyone who struggles to trust completely. The man's mixture of hope and doubt is enough for Jesus to act. In our own shadows, we can pray the same words and know we are heard.



What do the father's words, 'I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief' say about his situation?

How does Jesus respond to fragile or partial faith?

What might this passage teach us about prayer when faith feels weak?

Summing up

Nicodemus, the rich man, and the desperate father all come to Jesus from the shadows - cautious, conflicted, and uncertain. Yet each encounter reveals a God who meets seekers where they are. Faith grows not through having every answer but through bringing our questions and longings honestly to Christ. Lent is a season for such honesty - to come, to listen, and to let his love draw us from our shadow into the light.

Think about later

At some point this week, pray the father's prayer in your own words.

Ask Jesus to bring light to one area of confusion or hesitation, and be open to how his Spirit might surprise you.

A closing prayer

Lord Jesus,
you welcome those who come in fear and confusion,
you love those who cling too tightly to their treasures,
you hear those who cry, 'Help my unbelief.'
Meet us in our seeking, and draw us
into the light of your transforming grace.

Amen.

