

Cryptic words

Read: [Genesis 12:1-4](#) [John 3:1-12, 16-17](#)

I have a confession to make. I am one of those slightly odd people who enjoy the challenge of a good cryptic crossword. There may be others here with a similar passion ...! To the uninitiated, cryptic crossword puzzles play games with words – there are riddles, anagrams, words with multiple meanings, words that sound the same but mean different things.

The compiler of such crosswords traditionally signs them with their initials. For readers of *The Age* newspaper, the initials that strike fear and confusion into the heart of every crossword solver are DA – which may well stand for ‘Don’t Attempt’. In the case of the Friday cryptic crossword they actually stand for David Astle.

In our Bible readings today there are several puzzling words and phrases that show up ... that even with 2000 years of Christian history we still debate their meaning... terms like **kingdom of God, born anew, born of the Spirit, eternal life, blessing, grace, faith, justification**. These words form part of two cryptic and ambiguous conversations. But what do the words really mean?

For Abraham the conversation is the beginning of a new relationship with a mysterious god who speaks strange words to him and sets his life going in a totally new direction. Struggles, mistakes and confusion lie ahead but for now the two key words are ‘**blessing**’ and ‘**go**’.

For Nicodemus the conversation is also the beginning of a long journey of discovery, trying to work out who this Jesus is – and trying to make sense of his puzzling teaching, especially the call to be born anew or born from above. For Nicodemus this journey will continue right up to the trial and death of Jesus and beyond.

Two intriguing conversations

In the case of Abraham the conversation appears rather one-sided. God does the talking and Abraham does the listening. It’s all quite puzzling as Abraham is called to leave behind his past, his culture and his home ... all for the sake of some remarkable but enigmatic promises of blessing.

I can only imagine the awkward conversation when Abraham gets home and tells Sarah the good news.

You agreed to do **what** exactly?

You want to leave here and go **who knows where**?

You actually want to **trust** this strange voice speaking in your head?

Don't you realise how **old** we are?

Where this journey with God will lead is unknown and uncertain.

There will be many hardships on the way.

Many questions and doubts will arise in Abraham's mind.

... yet Abraham trusts God and persists, which is why Paul – and many Jewish people – called Abraham the '**father of faith**'. For Jewish people and for Christians, our lineage of faith comes through Abraham, his son Isaac and then Jacob and his sons. In Islam, Abraham also features prominently as a friend of Allah and an example of faith, which comes through the line of Ishmael.

Turning to the encounter between Nicodemus and Jesus, we hear a different sort of conversation, but again one filled with puzzling cryptic clues. While Abraham may appear somewhat reckless, Nicodemus is a study in **caution**. He knows – or at least thinks he knows – much more about the mysterious God than Abraham did. Yet I suspect he left the encounter more confused than enlightened.

The conversation begins well. Nicodemus acknowledges that there is something both compelling and authentic about Jesus, whose words and deeds both point to God as their source. As always, Jesus seems to sense what needs to be said. He cuts through the politeness and encourages Nicodemus to expand his thinking and engage his imagination ... if you really want to understand me, Nicodemus, and what I'm doing, you need to be **born from above**.

Nicodemus doesn't get it. He's thinking **concretely** – how can anyone be born a second time? Jesus – it seems – is speaking **figuratively** – playing a little word game. You need to be born from above – by God's Spirit. This is God's work – and is as mysterious and untamable as the wind. You can't box God in or predict who will experience this touch of God's Spirit from above or how.

Nicodemus doesn't get it yet – but much later at Jesus' trial and then after his burial he will. Jesus is talking about God's **love** and God's **grace** – and it doesn't make

much logical sense to Nicodemus. God's love is poured out indiscriminately and extravagantly – freely available to everyone. It cuts across all our prejudices and ways of judging people. The divine pattern is like the wind, which blows where it will.

Our journey of faith

As we contemplate our **own** journey of faith, we may have doubts and questions about the road ahead – just as there were for Abraham and Nicodemus. Our way will sometimes seem uncertain or confusing. But Jesus' offer of **life** is held out to us – today and every day. In the same way, we're also invited to be a blessing to others – today and every day.

But I wonder how many **Abrahams** we might have here today ... older people who are willing to step out in courageous ways and begin new things ... people who don't think age or what has happened in the past are the deciding things when it comes to faith. So I think of Sue and Alan who are stepping up to take over the Tuesday community meals when Jane from Uniting retires at the end of this month. It's a big task to take on and they'll need some extra help ... but they're willing to give it a go. I'm working with one of the residents here at Gifford Village planning a celebration for his twin brother who passed away in tragic circumstances just recently. I don't know where this will lead, but I'm prepared to follow God's lead and see what happens.

Perhaps we also have some people here today who are more like **Nicodemus**. You're naturally more cautious and don't want to stick your neck out too far. But you're intrigued with Jesus and want to learn more. You don't mind having your faith stretched and you like to keep pondering new and even challenging ideas. You might like to come along to the joint study group that we run every fortnight with folks from Croydon. But be warned, just as God's Spirit continued to work in Nicodemus's life well beyond the initial puzzling conversation with Jesus, so God's Spirit will continue to challenge each of us to follow where the Spirit leads us.

Where our journey will eventually take us – as individuals and as a community – is not yet clear – but in faith we are continuing to walk and work together.

May we have the courage of Abraham

the curiosity of Nicodemus

and the creativity of God's Spirit to guide and sustain us. Amen.