

Nicodemus

Second Sunday in Lent

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Over this season of Lent, our Gospel readings are drawn from the Gospel according to John. John's Gospel is not a biography of Jesus but presents in a framework like a legal argument, the case for the reader to believe that Jesus is who he says he is.

The prologue, which we hear each Christmas, is like the opening statement in the case, and the evangelist then calls a number of witnesses and details a number of miracles to prove his case - that Jesus was divine.

In our Gospel this morning, Nicodemus takes the stand and is presented as a credible witness. Nicodemus was a Pharisee and no doubt one of great learning. He was a member of the Sanhedrin, the governing council of the Jews. He was anticipating the Messiah, and rather than let his prejudices get in the way, when he heard about Jesus and the things he had done, he was keen to investigate and find out more. That he did so at night suggests that Jesus' activities had already begun to stir up trouble amongst the rulers.

Nicodemus appears twice more in John's story.

In chapter 7, he stands against those who are trying to arrest Jesus and is accused of being a secret follower and again when he and Joseph of Arimathea take charge of his body from the Cross and place it in the garden tomb.

But in today's story, he is beginning his faith journey. He knows that there is something special about Jesus, and he dares to find out what it is. Each of us must also make this journey. In that we, through baptism, are joined into the family of God, we must take this next step of taking on the statement of faith for ourselves - that Jesus is more than just a human, but God in human flesh.

Nicodemus shows us the way in this Journey. In this fourth Gospel, John often portrays a dynamic exchange between his characters and Jesus in his presentation of Jesus' teaching. This is in sharp contrast to the technique of Matthew, where Jesus stands or sits and delivers the message. In John, the encounters with Jesus are a dialogue in which the witness not only hears what is to be taught but has the opportunity to correct their misconceptions.

Nicodemus was seeking answers, but he needed a better framework. Jesus challenged him - If you want to see the kingdom, you must be born from above. 'Born from above?' Says Nicodemus, 'How can anyone have a second birth?' With two thousand years of history, it is easy for us to understand, but for Nicodemus, this was something new. He knew what birth was, so he used his experience to try and understand, but he got it wrong. You see, his thoughts are set in the framework of this world.

It is a warning to each of us that we are not to try and understand heavenly things in terms of earthly imagery. Jesus was not talking about the physical birth but rather the process of the foetus becoming the child. Birth is a transition that is not reversible or controlled by the individual experiencing it. In the birth process, we are passengers, and so it is with the heavenly birth, this birth from above.

In the same way, that the foetus has the potential to become a child, so does each individual have the potential to become a child of the kingdom, but it is only via this birth process. Each of us must not only be born into the human family but, by the influence of the Spirit, we must also be born into the family of the Kingdom. The waters of physical birth can be likened to the Spirit in action, preserving, nurturing and preparing us to enter the world of the kingdom.

But above all, it is from above. The second birth is not in our power... It is in the hands of God and, in particular, in the hands of the Holy Spirit, who will bring us to faith. In Christianity, unlike the other religions of the world, we can only be the passive recipient. There is nothing that we can do to be born again. Nothing, except to allow God into the process.

And this is the meaning of the end of the passage.... "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."

We can get caught up in a number of parts - God's love, God's giving, and God's promise. But the critical part, the key is in the So that -, so that everyone who believes in him. It is all that is required. Only to believe...in Him.

How does this inform us as God's people? How will we work in the world to draw others like Nicodemus to Jesus?

First, we must look at ourselves. How are we expressing our faith? It is easy for us to get caught up in programmes, fellowship, and mutual caring, but it is the underlying premise that we believe in him. Is it evident to the outsider, the inquirer, that we believe in him? Not only corporately but individually as well?

Second, we must allow God to work. Perhaps it took three years before Nicodemus' faith grew strong enough for him to stand up and be counted, but the Spirit was at work. We must allow God time to work in the lives of others. Give them time to grow, mature, and take their place in the kingdom. It is not our place to judge others or to attempt to measure their faith, but rather to walk beside them and encourage their faith.

John Bell spoke of how we have a tendency to see God in a narrow way. Somehow, we try to grasp him by defining him in terms of a limited theology. But God is bigger than any theology, and just as we feel that we know all there is to know about him, he will surprise us by defining himself differently. The adventure of faith is that our God will not be limited in earthly terms. Like Nicodemus, we must be prepared to see him through new eyes.

Finally, we are called to allow the Spirit of God to act in our lives as individuals and corporately. God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, is the active agent. Let us be open to the possibility of him working in and among us.

AMEN