

**Sermon (CW Year A) preached by Sister Margaret Anne at 10am Sung Eucharist
at St Mary's Barnes on Second Sunday of Lent 8 March 2020**

Some of the most interesting and fascinating parts of the Gospels are those accounts of Jesus engaging with an individual on matters of faith, and nowhere is this more so than in John's gospel. Today for this Second Sunday in Lent we have John's account of Jesus meeting with Nicodemus. Nicodemus we are told was a Pharisee, a Jewish leader of Jesus' day. He was also a member of the Sanhedrin, the council or assembly of Jewish leaders appointed to sit in every city of ancient Israel. At the time the Sanhedrin would have consisted of about seventy members who represented three groups: the chief priests, the elders and the scribes, some of whom would have been Pharisees. So, Nicodemus was clearly an important representative of the Jewish faith, a member of the religious establishment.

Like Lazarus, Nicodemus does not appear in the synoptic gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, but only in John. In this his first appearance early in John's gospel, he comes to Jesus "by night". Altogether he appears in John's gospel three times. The second time he is mentioned comes in chapter seven, when opposition towards Jesus from the religious leaders is mounting and they try to use the temple police, unsuccessfully, to arrest him. At this point Nicodemus speaks up for due process and asks the rhetorical question:

"Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?"

Nicodemus' third and final appearance in John's gospel is at the end of chapter nineteen. It is the afternoon of Good Friday. Jesus has died on the cross, and Joseph of Arimathea, who had been a secret disciple of Jesus, asks permission of Pilate to take away Jesus' body for burial. Nicodemus also comes, with a huge quantity of spices, and he and Joseph of Arimathea together prepare Jesus' body for burial and place Jesus' body in a nearby garden tomb.

What do we make of Nicodemus' first appearance in John's gospel, that we have for our gospel reading today (John 3.1-17)? Often in John's gospel an encounter between Jesus and an individual focuses on a theological idea, using a particular image or theme. The pattern of the dialogue often begins with Jesus making an ambiguous statement, which the individual misunderstands. Then Jesus clarifies and expands his original statement, and the individual is somehow transformed by the encounter. In the example of Nicodemus, it is not until later in the gospel, in his second and especially third appearances in the gospel, that the reader can trace Nicodemus' process of transformation.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night. If we were to ask various church congregations, what is it that they remember about the story of Nicodemus in John's gospel, it would probably be this simple fact, that Nicodemus comes to meet with Jesus by night. The phrase "by night" speaks volumes. It implies, without needing to be spelt out explicitly in the text, that Nicodemus, a leading Jew, did not want his religious colleagues to be aware of his interest in Jesus, and so he goes at a time when he will not be seen. Just before this episode John gives the account of Jesus' cleansing of the Temple. On that occasion Jesus would have very much upset the religious leaders by publicly overturning the tables of the money changers who were selling cattle, sheep and doves, for the Temple's animal sacrifices. Jesus vividly demonstrated his anger at the Temple being turned into as he put it a "marketplace". It was the most important time in the religious year, the Passover festival, and Jesus was boldly confronting the religious authorities by his words and actions. So, for a religious leader to identify with him would have been dangerous. But something about the way Jesus exerted his

authority had captured Nicodemus' imagination. Nicodemus wanted to talk with Jesus, and the safest way to do that was to approach him by night, when others would not observe him. Nicodemus opens the conversation with what could be interpreted as flattery. He acknowledges Jesus' teaching authority, even that he has come from God. Jesus' response gets straight to the point:

"Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above" (which can also be translated as "... born anew").

Nicodemus responds by taking Jesus literally, and gets distracted with matters of childbirth. But Jesus is not going to be distracted. One must, Jesus states, be born of water and the Spirit. There may be a reference to baptism here. But what is key is that Jesus makes a clear contrast between flesh and Spirit, between worldly values and the spiritual values of God and the kingdom of God. Jesus' whole conversation is a challenge to Nicodemus. Without being explicitly rude or too openly condemnatory of Nicodemus, Jesus manages nevertheless to unsettle him. Jesus makes Nicodemus reassess his own teaching. And the climax of the encounter is Jesus' veiled reference to the cross: "so must the Son of Man be lifted up". For the Son of Man must be lifted up on the cross. There follows what is arguably the most famous verse in the whole of the scriptures: "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".

Stainer famously put this verse to music in his work *The Crucifixion*. Indeed, this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus has inspired the arts: music, art, sculpture and poetry. A *pieta* by Michelangelo shows Nicodemus helping to take down Jesus' body from the cross. The seventeenth century Metaphysical poet Henry Vaughan wrote a moving poem entitled *The Night*. In the first verse Vaughan writes:
"Wise Nicodemus saw such light
As made him know his God by night".

The poem celebrates the night's relationship with God. Night is Christ's "prayer time". The last verse contains some well-known words:

"There is in God, some say,
A deep, but dazzling darkness"

and the poem ends with Vaughan longing for a spiritual night of union with his God. A century earlier than Vaughan the sixteenth century Spanish mystic and Doctor of the Church St John of the Cross wrote in his works *The Ascent of Mount Carmel* and *The Dark Night of the Soul* of such a spiritual night, in which the soul is purified, illumined and ultimately united with God. This *Via Negativa* is a hard road, in which we are stripped of all our earthly attachments until we finally rely on God alone as the one in whom we can put our faith and know that we are loved.

Nicodemus has been venerated as a saint in some Eastern Orthodox Churches and in the Roman Catholic Church. The story of Nicodemus in John's gospel is an important one. In his three gospel appearances we are shown how an individual soul can journey from a place of hesitation, even fear, through searching questionings, to an eventual state of openness and even boldness, when the soul no longer fears what others may think or say or do, but simply rests in the knowledge and love of God. For Nicodemus, the key moment in his transformational journey was Jesus' death on the cross: that death and ensuing resurrection that changed everything, even creation itself. Nicodemus' story is a challenge to us. Can we be so inspired by his transformational journey that we can see our own evasions, our own unwillingness to stand in the light? May Nicodemus' story encourage us in our own daily discipleship to grow in faith, to deepen our knowledge of Christ and above all to serve God and one another in ways that witness to truth and love.

