



Revd Ro's Reflection on Second Sunday of Lent

Year A

Romans 4.1-5,13-17

John 3.1-17

Generally in the gospels the Pharisees and their ilk have very bad press but not so much so in this account of the visit of Nicodemus. We are told, ^{3.1} 'Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews.' He was well educated and a leading member of the Jewish community. He was a teacher, he knew the scriptures and he knew the law; he felt, like most of those in his position, he'd got it right with God. He was doing everything he had been taught in Judaism and he was instructing others to follow in the way of God. And yet... Nicodemus senses there is something missing or at least he knows that Jesus has something important to say. He recognises, like many others, that Jesus has 'authority' and that authority of course comes from God.

This account is in chapter 3 at the beginning of St. John's gospel and yet it already has an ominous ring. ² 'He came to Jesus by night.' Why come by night, why not just walk up to Jesus when he was teaching and put all the questions he wanted to him in the broad light of day. There are several reasons, firstly Nicodemus has his position to consider, and he is an important person in the ruling community and a member of a sect that does not approve of Jesus to say the least of it. Herod has it in for Jesus as much as he has for John the Baptist, who of course was executed on his orders. Even now, right at the start Jesus is not safe to be with if you want to keep in with the powers that be. So Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, and of course in St. John's gospel there is always symbolism attached to dark and light, night and day. But at least Nicodemus comes to Jesus. He knows that Jesus is a man of God; moreover he believes Jesus acts in the power of God so he greets him with these words,

² 'Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.'

I like Nicodemus. This is not just empty lip service or obsequiousness, he means it or why come under cover of darkness. I wonder what Jesus thought of him, he certainly sees enough potential in Nicodemus to spend time with him.

³ 'Jesus answered him, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.' ⁴Nicodemus said to him, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' ⁵Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. ⁶What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.'

Nicodemus takes what Jesus says at the surface level, quite literally and so it makes no sense to him, but it should and of course it does to us. But we should also be careful. There has been a lot of emphasis put on being 'born again' or having what for want of a better word might be called a 'Damascus Road' experience. That is fine, wonderful if it happens but it doesn't happen to all of us and is not a prerequisite. You do not have to have this kind of experience to be a Christian, by no means. Just think of those words, 'water and spirit.' That takes us right back to the baptism of Jesus, He goes down into the waters of the Jordan at his baptism by John. As he rises the Holy Spirit descends on him like a dove and a voice from heaven proclaims, 'This is my Son, the beloved in whom I am well pleased. There we have it, water and the spirit. We are Christians, we are baptised into the church of Jesus Christ and become followers of his way by baptism. It is the first biblical sacrament and Jesus ordered his followers thus at his ascension,

¹⁸ And Jesus came and said to them, 'All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.' (Matthew 28)

This is twofold, firstly make all people Christians by baptism and secondly, remember I am with you always. How is Jesus with us always? In his Holy Spirit.

Baptism is vital and always has been. Whenever I take a baptism service I explain that this isn't simply a naming ceremony, the candidate already has their name! What we are doing is making a new Christian. Just as with Jesus at the Jordan the waters of baptism will be poured over the candidate to cleanse and renew. The waters have been consecrated and just as with Jesus at the Jordan the Holy Spirit is present and will be within the new Christian. That is the point, and the church would have understood this and put emphasis on it. New Christians were Spirit filled beings, born again into new life with Christ. Looking at it like this the meaning is crystal clear. Nicodemus hasn't got it right with God, he has done his best, he is a good man but he must understand that here before him is God's anointed one, the promised Messiah for whom he and the Jews have been waiting. This is the dawn of a new way, and if he wants to be saved then he must turn to Jesus as his Lord and saviour, indeed his God, because Jesus is part of the Godhead.

⁷ 'Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You must be born from above." ⁸The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.' ⁹Nicodemus said to him, 'How can these things be?' Jesus uses the illustration of the wind; wind here is of course the Holy Spirit, just as at creation the wind of the Holy Spirit moves over the waters. Basically Jesus is saying, the Holy Spirit must fill you and I am the one who will fill you with the Spirit. it is only through me that you can come to the Father. It is a seismic shift in attitude and faith that is needed and Nicodemus still isn't with it as his 'How can these things be?' shows. Jesus' answer is impatient.

¹⁰ 'Jesus answered him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?' Everything in the scriptures points to the Messiah, the saviour of Israel, Nicodemus as a teacher of Israel should have been able to recognise Jesus for whom he is, but he is still blinkered.

¹¹ 'Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. ¹² If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?'

Jesus has made things as clear as he can by using images and metaphors which are earthed and should have helped with understanding but it is no good. It appears that Nicodemus hasn't followed him at all, much less would he if Jesus spoke of heavenly things.

What Jesus says next is rooted within Jewish scripture, Numbers 21.5-8

¹⁴ 'And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.'

When the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness having been rescued by God from slavery in Egypt, instead of following Moses their God given leader, they were always moaning and questioning him. This grumbling comes to a head and God punishes them by allowing poisonous snakes to invade the camp. Many are killed. God gives Moses instructions to make a bronze serpent and put it on a pole and hold it up before the people. Those who turned and looked at the serpent would be saved from the evil of the snakes. The meaning is clear, turn from evil and obey me, your God, turn to look at Moses my instrument and do as you're told, obey my will and you will be saved, you will be healed from the poison of evil. Here the bronze serpent represents healing that is why it's still used in the medical profession.

Jesus makes clear who he is and what he has come to earth for. Jesus when he is lifted up on the cross will draw all to him and all who believe in him, all who turn to him, will be healed of their sins and receive eternal life. Jesus, part of the Godhead, takes all evil on himself on the cross, conquers it once and for all and sets us free, 'by his wounds we are healed.'

Our passage ends with this wonderful promise, notice the emphasis is on love. It says God loves the world,

¹⁶ '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.'

¹⁷ 'Indeed God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.'

The world is God's creation, and it will be perfected in the new re-created order; Jesus is the one through whom this perfection has begun. Remember that the promise given to Abraham was that he would become the 'father of many nations' not just the Jews. The good news of Jesus Christ is for all humanity and all who turn to him receive God's grace.

This is not the last we hear of Nicodemus, he is not mentioned in the synoptic gospels only in John's and he is mentioned by John on three occasions. Firstly this visit to Jesus 'by night', secondly in chapter 7 Jesus is preaching in the Temple during the festival of booths. The Jewish leaders want him arrested but Nicodemus says ⁵¹'Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?' he is obviously a just man and, as we will see in the gospel passage, very interested in Jesus' teachings. Finally he appears in chapter 19 after the crucifixion.

³⁸ 'After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. ³⁹Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. ⁴⁰They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom

of the Jews. ⁴¹ Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. ⁴² And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.'

So there is Nicodemus ministering in the only way he can now, preparing Jesus' body for burial. We all remember Joseph but how many of us remember that Nicodemus was there at the tomb? Did he feel his failure, did he feel bereft now? Or maybe he has literally seen the light, maybe he has become one of the first followers of Jesus and, as he heard of the wonder of the resurrection, all Jesus' words came back to him and the meaning became crystal clear. Maybe Nicodemus is baptised and becomes Spirit filled. It would be good to think he became one of the first followers who turned to Jesus, who heard him and believed. From the first Jewish followers who were the yeast, the mustard seed, the word of God and the Christian faith has grown and spread throughout the world. We are the heirs of God and his children; his promise is for us and all humanity. May we live out the Christian faith we profess for Jesus asks no less.

The reading from Romans is not easy, as with last week's, just hearing it read once would tend to leave us confused. But if you think about it these readings are isolated, taken out of context. Here we have a passage removed from the rest of Paul's carefully reasoned argument. We don't know what went before or what follows and that is not designed to make understanding easy, added to that part of his argument is omitted because the middle verses are missed out. If there is one thing I have learned by writing these reflections it is that the readings chosen for the day are usually linked. Well the link with the account of Nicodemus and our reading from Romans I think is this,

¹⁶ '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.'

¹⁷ 'Indeed God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him.'

That is the point, God sent his son into the world to save the world; to bring salvation to all people not simply the Jews. We remember that Paul called himself an 'Apostle to the Gentiles' here his audience is the Roman Christians. Now, keeping all this in mind the reading with Paul's carefully constructed argument will be more easily understood. This quotation is from chapter 3,

²¹ 'But now, irrespective of law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, ²³ since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; ²⁴ they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith.'

This is the central point; Jesus Christ came into this world that all who truly turn to him might have everlasting life. There is no superiority in being Jewish or indeed being of any other race, all are loved equally by God.

4.1 'What then are we to say was gained by Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. ³ For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.' ⁴ Now to one who works, wages are not reckoned as a gift but as something due. ⁵ But to one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness.'

This looks dense and difficult but actually I think Paul is taking us back to Abraham because he was the founding father of the Jewish race. God made a covenant with Abraham but a covenant is a two

way thing, promises are made on both sides and they must be kept on both sides. The link is faith and love. The point is Abraham did not do anything specific to be chosen by God, it wasn't that he earned it but when God chose him and asks Abraham to turn to him he does so in faith and trust. (So many people God chooses are the least likely, Paul himself being a prime example. In the middle of his persecutions God in Jesus pulls him up sharply, once he has turned to Christ he is his man forever.)

⁹ 'Is this blessedness, then, pronounced only on the circumcised, or also on the uncircumcised? We say, 'Faith was reckoned to Abraham as righteousness.'¹⁰ How then was it reckoned to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised.'

This has been omitted from our reading but it is an important part of the argument. The badge of the Jewish faith was circumcision; many Jewish converts wanted new Gentile Christians to conform to Jewish law and be circumcised. But Paul does not agree and here is his argument, when God made the covenant with Abraham he was not circumcised that came later as a badge of the agreement. It is much like couples exchange rings at a wedding ceremony as a symbol of their love and faithfulness, their marriage is itself a covenant. If those rings were lost they would still be married! So circumcision is not the point anymore. Now here is the central question, are people saved through the law or through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ?

¹³ 'For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith.'

The truth is this Jesus was the fulfilment of the law, the law itself is not central anymore; the law does not bring salvation. Jesus our King and God is the saviour of the world. Therefore faith in Jesus is the key to salvation. This is Paul's point and he continues to illustrate that.

If we carry on with the theme of Abraham his relationship with God had nothing to do with the law, there was no law until Moses, no it depended entirely on his faithful obedience to God.

¹⁴ 'If it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void.

¹⁵ For the law brings wrath; but where there is no law, neither is there violation.'

God gave the law to the Israelites through Moses as their guide in life but it is not an end in itself. The law will not save anyone, it simply shows you the right and wrong way to behave, to break the law means punishment. No, the new way, the way of Jesus Christ supersedes the law. So much of the scriptures points to the coming of God's anointed, the Messiah. That of course is what Jesus is trying to make Nicodemus see.

¹⁶ 'For this reason it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to the adherents of the law but also to those who share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father of all of us, ¹⁷as it is written, 'I have made you the father of many nations')—in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist.

That is the point; Abraham is the father not simply of the Jewish nation but many nations.

Christianity is worldwide because Jesus calls us all. Remember Paul has said this clearly, there is neither slave or free, Jew or Gentile, male or female. All are one to God, equally loved by him. Faith in Jesus Christ is the central thing. Turn from sin and turn to Christ, it is faith in Jesus Christ and God's saving grace that is all important. No one is superior to anyone else. All Christians can say 'We have Abraham as our father' that was of course the Jewish saying which they believed meant they were God's chosen people. That was true, Jesus was sent first to the house of Israel, but then to the entire world. All Christians have their roots in the Jewish religion; they are our scriptures too, but no

one is superior. Jesus Christ died and rose again, he won salvation for us; on the cross he took on himself the sins of the whole world and vanquished them by love. All who turn to Jesus as God and King are members of the family of God and receive the promises of God given through his grace. Nothing we can do can earn that, it is freely given. The last covenant was the promise of God in Jesus Christ, like all covenants it is two way. We need to live in Christ's way and obey his teaching. Now in this season of Lent we look to the cross and Jesus' passion. We see our God who came in love for humanity and died a vile death in love for us. God in Jesus was up there on the cross, but he triumphed over evil and rose in glory on Easter morning. As our side of the covenant as St. Paul says in Philippians 2 we must try to live in Christ's way,

^{2.1} 'If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, ²make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. ⁴Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. ⁵Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.'

'At the name of Jesus ev'ry knee should bow, ev'ry tongue confess him king of glory now.'

Caroline Maria Noel

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