

From Darkness to Light

John 3:14-21; Numb 21:4-9; Eph 2:1-10

The favourite Gospel of many is John's Gospel. I have heard people say that, for them, it has a more spiritual feel to it. In the way that it is written, I would agree. Written some thirty or so years after the Synoptic gospels of Mark, Luke and Matthew, John writes in those extra years of experience into his account, of the impact of Jesus Christ on the lives of those who came to believe, especially in his Johannine community.

He often uses earthly descriptions to explore spiritual truth and experience. For example, the word "world". When that word is most commonly used, it means, of course, planet Earth. But in John's Gospel, it has a spiritual meaning. The term "world" refers to anyone who refuses to accept Jesus into their lives ... those who refuse to believe in Jesus. So that the world that John describes is a dark spiritual world, to use another metaphor. The Gospel of John therefore tells the story of how Jesus Christ brings about the conversion of people from the world into the Kingdom of God from darkness to light from non-acceptance and non-belief in Jesus to open acceptance and belief.

So that the quote from today's Gospel, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" - which has appeared on religious placards all over the place - is not as cosy in context as it seems to be, separated from the Gospel, and the Johannine community. The negative character of the "world" is evident throughout the Gospel.

In John's Gospel, the picture as painted shows that the "world" is against Jesus. For example:

To his disciples, he says, "I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices." (John 16:20).

In prayer to God his Father, Jesus says, "I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world." (John 17:14).

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And from those quotations, we can see that the world not only hates Jesus, but also those who believe and follow him. The world is not exclusively neutral, nor is it patiently awaiting good news. As of those days and those of today, there are many who are actively hostile to Jesus, to Christianity, to its message. If we didn't already know it, then perhaps now, we do.

Against this background, we have our Gospel reading for today. It is part of a discussion that Jesus had with Nicodemus. He was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body and religious authority among the Judeans of the house of Israel.

At the beginning of chapter 3, we are told that Nicodemus was attracted to Jesus through what he had possibly seen and certainly heard. But he had a reputation as a Pharisee and religious leader, and his personal honour to keep up, so he came to Jesus in the dark significantly. In the Mediterranean world, privacy virtually did not exist and we can sympathise with Nicodemus in protecting his reputation and honour this way. Once ruined or lost, a reputation or honour cannot be regained.

In the discussion as reported by John, Nicodemus apparently fails to understand Jesus' use of a Greek word, which has two meanings. "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again." The problem is that English word "again"; because the Greek word for "again" can also mean "from above". So that the sentence would read "No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born from above". Nicodemus typifies many who came to Jesus but had difficulty understanding him at first. They had little spiritual understanding so that "from above" was completely meaningless to them. Which left them with the word "again" and finding difficulty with "being born again", quite understandably.

To his credit, though, Nicodemus seems to have thought about and continued his interest in Jesus after this encounter. Later in the Gospel (John 7:37-52), Jesus' statements in the Temple prompt a divided

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response in his audience. Some believe, others want to have him arrested.

The chief priests and Pharisees are angry and taunt and insult the Temple police for not arresting Jesus. At this point, Nicodemus exposes himself to shame by defending Jesus' right to a hearing. Shame is not long in coming: "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee." Derisive words from his fellow Pharisees. Nicodemus, the night visitor, has now gone a considerable step further than that, to daytime defender of Jesus.

The last appearance of Nicodemus in John's Gospel makes his spiritual journey appear to be near completion. When Jesus dies, Nicodemus comes forward publicly with myrrh and aloes to anoint Jesus' body. Along with Joseph of Arimathea, he see to the burial of Jesus' corpse (John 19:38-42).

This final appearance of Nicodemus illustrates the text in John 3:14-15: "Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life." And in John 12:32: "But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself."

For me, it turns out that the story of Nicodemus is one of the great conversion stories of all time; and particularly relevant because it is a gospel story. He travels from darkness to light from the "world" to the "kingdom of God".

Let us recognise the mothering quality of Jesus in nurturing Nicodemus towards the kingdom of God; of that journey from darkness to light.

After the example of Nicodemus, let us cast aside our senses of reputation and honour, throwing away our masks of ambitious identity and lift Jesus up and follow him.

This season of Lent is surely an opportune time to redirect our paths to Jesus, and to follow him on his path.

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Amen.