

Lent 2, 5th March 2023

OT: Gen 12:1-4a

Epistle: Rom 4:1-5,13-17

Gospel: John 3:1-17

On this Second Sunday in Lent, we are given as our Gospel lection the passage in which there appears one of the best known verses in Scripture. I do not need to remind you of John 3:16: "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."

In today's Gospel we are given some of the surrounding details. This well-known passage from S John's Gospel is a rarity in the Gospels because it shows Jesus discussing in some detail all three persons of the Trinity. Jesus' words here should not be mistaken for a theological treatise on the one God in three persons, however. Instead, in this encounter Jesus challenges Nicodemus to move from theory to practice, from knowledge to faith, from curiosity to commitment.

Before we spend some time reflecting on those three movements we should consider some of the narrative details.

Our Gospel reading opens with the statement in verse 1, "Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews". It seems significant that at the outset we learn the name of Nicodemus. In the Gospel of S John significant people often go unnamed. Examples of this would be the woman at the well in chapter 4, the crippled man at the pool of Bethesda in chapter 5, and the man born blind in chapter 9. The stories of these people are important yet we are not given their names. Perhaps Nicodemus is named in the Gospel because he was a prominent man or, perhaps, because we find him reappearing later in chapters 7 and 19.

Nicodemus came to Jesus with impressive credentials. He was a Pharisee and a rabbi described as a leader of the Jews, which meant he was almost certainly a member of the Sanhedrin or Council which would be instrumental in the arrest and crucifixion of Jesus. We are told in chapter 7 that Nicodemus would try to obtain a fair hearing for Jesus. In chapter 19 we read that after the death of Jesus Nicodemus would bring a hundred pounds (that's around 50kg) of myrrh and aloes for the embalming of Jesus before his burial.

We might be a tad suspicious of the fact that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. It could be that he did so only to have a quiet, uninterrupted conversation with Jesus, who we know tended to attract crowds, but we must not forget that the Gospel of S John associates night and darkness with evil and separation from God. Nicodemus probably came at night so that he would not be seen. After all, as we have said, he was a man of significant reputation, and Jesus was a newcomer who could be described as an unknown quantity.

In the discussion which the Gospel passage describes Jesus as having with Nicodemus, there are the challenges Jesus gave Nicodemus: to move from theory to practice, from knowledge to faith, from curiosity to commitment.

Many of us spend quite some time looking at the theory of religion. We might find it fascinating to study all there is in religious theory to try to know about God. The challenge Jesus gave Nicodemus, and us, is to move that theory from the head to the heart. The theory we understand about God through Jesus should inform the practice of our lives.

The theory we understand about God becomes the foundation of our knowledge of God. The important thing for us to remember here is the difference between knowing about someone and actually knowing that person. At the moment we are aware that we have a new monarch, who will be crowned in early May. We may know as much information about King Charles as we can glean from books, magazines and the internet, but there cannot be many here in church who can say that they actually know the King. If he walked past us while on a walkabout, he would not call out, "Hi Jemimah!" Our knowing about Jesus needs to become a deep and personal relationship with Jesus.

In terms of religion our knowledge about God needs to move to a faith in God; that deep and abiding trust in the one who is all powerful and all knowing.

Once we have moved from theory to practise and from knowledge to faith we have one further step to take: we need to move from curiosity about God to commitment to God in Jesus Christ.

Lent is a time when we can decide that we do not want to be like Nicodemus, coming to Jesus by night so nobody can see us, but would rather commit our lives, and the way in which we live them, to God so that what we find out about God in Jesus we can live out day by day.

May Jesus bless you as you grow closer to him through this season of reflection and penance.