

Lent II
Jn 3.1-17
February 17, 2008
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His name was Greek, and in that name was much revealed. Nicodemus ...conqueror of the people. Quite a name to live up to! To say that he was ambitious might begin to tell the story. St. John tells us that he was a “ruler of the Jews” which meant that he was a member of the Sanhedrin. Roughly equivalent to what we today would call a Supreme Court Justice.

So he was accustomed to power and privilege. When he walked into a room, people noticed. When he needed favors, people accommodated. When he sneezed, people were quick to say “God bless you.”

Such a life of privilege can be intoxicating... and not a little disorienting. We live in a country predicated on the notion that all men are created equal. Our little experiment in Democracy was to wipe out the rigid class system of the mother country. There is to be equal protection. Equal opportunity. Equal treatment. But even in a country with such guaranteed protection, power and wealth make a difference. The courts take notice. The prisons take notice. Death row takes notice. And even Archbishops and Marriage Tribunals take notice... if the supplicant has the right family name.

How much more must power and prestige have been important in a place and age when justice was rather capriciously applied! So Nicodemus must have learned caution. It would not be prudent to take chances.

But there was something compelling about this man, Jesus. Even if he went in secret.... even if he needed the cloak of darkness for protection, he nonetheless would go.

And what was it that compelled him? Evidently he had heard about the miracles. Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do the signs you do otherwise.

This was just good training. His catechism teacher had surely pointed out the commentary on the Book of Deuteronomy: If a prophet gives a sign or a miracle, he is to be listened to. Otherwise, he is not to be heeded.

But Jesus had always insisted that miracles were never ends in themselves. He had not come as a wonderworker, he had come into the world to redeem it. The miracles were but signs that would point to the coming Kingdom of God.

And so Jesus begins to explain the most basic steps required to enter this Kingdom. Nicodemus needed to be born again... born “from above” if he even wanted to catch a glimpse of God’s salvation. He needed to be born again of water and the Spirit.

And water was a reference Nicodemus understood. He knew about John the Baptist. He knew about the clamoring crowds of sinners seeking the washing away of wicked deeds. But how could he, a ruler of the Jews, a man who judged others, for heavens sake, stand in line with that crowd! The humiliation would be intense.

It was all impossible. It seemed incomprehensible. How can a man be born again when he is old!

And Jesus is astonished. How can a ruler of Israel, a certified teacher, essentially say that he has no comprehension of what a relationship with the living God might entail. If you cannot understand even the simplest things,

Nicodemus, how could you ever understand heavenly things?

At this point, we are almost at one of those heartbreaking, paralyzing moments of decision.

A moment such as Abraham faced when asked to leave all that was familiar in exchange for an unseen promise...

A moment such as the one the rich young ruler faced when the Lord asked him to give away his possession...

A moment such as the Blessed Mother faced when invited to endure shame and humiliation in order that the Word might become flesh...

A moment such as you and I faced on Ash Wednesday when the Lord asked us to forsake treasure that moth and rust could consume, and seek instead the Treasure of Heaven...

Jesus concludes his discussion with Nicodemus by telling him that no one can speak of heaven except the One who has come from heaven. And as Moses lifted the serpent in the wilderness, so will He be lifted up on the Cross, that the whole world might be drawn to his love.

And that is the end of the story.... Or so it would seem.

Nicodemus must have pondered the words of Jesus. He must have weighed them in his heart. He must have anguished over them. Anguished... because power and prestige were still his obstacles.

Just as they are our obstacles as well.

But there was a marvelous drama that was about to unfold... just as it will unfold before our very eyes this morning.

The heart of Nicodemus was transformed. He was in fact, born again.

When Jesus was being brought before the Sanhedrin, Nicodemus found his voice and the courage that had been lacking, speaking out for a fair trial.

And it was he who brought the most lavish and expensive spices to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea in order that the Body of Jesus might be anointed.

What on earth could convince a powerful man that there might be something else worth risking it all for?

Watch closely, and we can see what Nicodemus saw. For the mass, like a beautiful Bach Fugue, is a contrapuntal drama. In the Creed, we bow our knees at the Incarnation, just as the Word came down to dwell among us.

At the elevation, the Sacred Host is raised for our adoration, and we see Jesus high lifted up on the cross.

This is what Nicodemus saw. This is what transformed his heart. This is what makes all the vain things which charm us most vanish like dust and ash... Our arrogance is vanquished... by the humility of God...

Though he was in the form of God, he counted not equality with God a thing to be exploited. But he emptied himself... taking the form of a servant. And he was obedient, even unto death on the cross. Therefore, God has highly exalted Him, and given him the name that is above every name. That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, and every tongue confess...

Rabbi, we know that you are teacher come from God for no one can do the thing you do unless God is with him.

Truly, truly I say to you unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.

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