

Trinity Sunday, May 31, 2015

By: Ms. Patricia Kover

Nicodemus - Who was he?

A ruler of the Jews – a member of the Sanhedrin or supreme council. He appears three times in the Gospel of John: here, again at the end of chapter 7, where he reminds his colleagues, the other members of the council, that the law does not judge people without trial, and finally in chapter 19, when he comes, bearing spices, to help Joseph of Arimathea prepare the body for burial. In that verse, John reminds us that he “had at first come to Jesus by night.”

This is an important man; a man of power and influence, a man with a certain position that he does not want to risk.

He comes at night and he comes alone: what motivates him?

He comes at night during the Passover festival. Jesus is already in Jerusalem. He has overturned the tables of the money changers and driven out the people selling doves, and cattle and sheep. People “believed in his name because they saw the signs he was doing.” The Messiah! The atmosphere would be supercharged: expectation, excitement, unrest, uncertainty. People wondering what would happen; people watching the council, the council watching the people, watching the Romans, the Romans watching the Jews. In such a situation, the smallest incident can trigger a violent uprising, a revolution even. In such circumstances, more even than usual knowledge is power.

So maybe Nicodemus’s mission is to find out what Jesus has in mind. The picture is of a cautious man – he chooses his words carefully, limiting himself to what is generally agreed. “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs which you do apart from the presence of God,” or as the Authorised Version phrases it, “except God be with him.”

But he comes at night, which suggests that perhaps his mission is personal rather than political; not an agent sent by the council on a fact finding mission but rather a seeker drawn, in defiance of the risk of ridicule or risk, by curiosity or impelled by a need to understand the “Jesus phenomenon.”

Who is Nicodemus in the 21st Century?

I suspect he is like many of us. In his own world, he has a position secure and assured. He is, like the centurion in Matthew 8, a man under authority, who says to one man, “Go,” and he goes, and to another, “Come,” and he comes, and to his slave, “Do this,” and his slave does it. We may not have that kind of authority, or slaves to command, but we do have a position secure and assured, respect in and from a world in which religion is a minor theme, not something that is intimately and inextricably woven into the fabric of our real lives. But almost in spite of himself, he is “drawn” to Christ. It is a feeling many would recognise. In *Surprised by Joy*, C. S. Lewis describes his own yielding:

“You must picture me alone in that room in Magdalen, night after night, feeling, whenever my mind lifted even for a second from my work, the steady, unrelenting approach of Him whom I so earnestly desired not to meet. That which I greatly feared had at last come upon me. In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England.”

And like so many of us, Nicodemus discovers when he is called into the presence that more than mere comfortable observance is going to be required of him.

We begin by observance. We come to church. We pray. The familiar words, the ritual, they are comforting. “Oh God, our help in ages past...Our shelter from the stormy blast and our eternal home.”

God, as incarnate, embodied in our church family and community, is shelter, refuge, home. But there is more to it than this. The encounter with Christ, for Nicodemus as for us, is discomfoting. God knows our needs before we ask and our ignorance in asking. And here, Christ answers the question before Nicodemus asks it: how can one see the Kingdom of God? How do we know God? – but the answer is not straightforward and certainly neither comfortable nor comforting.

What Christ tells Nicodemus – and us – is that being faith goes beyond “knowing [intellectually] that you are a teacher come from God,” expressing belief in a set of tenets, however fundamental. It entails being born anew, being born from above. It means accepting not just the possibility of change, but of yielding, allowing ourselves to be changed, “being born of water and the spirit” – “Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again. The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the sound thereof, but canst not tell whence it cometh or whither it goeth/Do not be astonished that I said to you, “You must be born from above. The 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.”

It’s a very uncomfortable place to be, albeit we live in a culture which offers endless opportunities for being born anew, especially during what seem to be bi-monthly PBS fundraising drives. I’m in sympathy with the meek of the earth. I write cheques. I vote NDP. I’m in favour of humanity – just don’t ask me actually to touch an actual homeless person. This came home to me with force as I read the invitation to IMBY-ism in this week’s bulletin. I’d like the sick, the hungry, those in prison to be sanitized before I actually have to have contact with them, thank you very much. Jesus, do you know how uncomfortable it is to feel that you are actually supposed to do things differently, if you actually knew what it was you were supposed to do differently. Which you don’t.

Last Sunday, Whitsunday, we heard the promise, “I will send you a Comforter.” The modern, transferred meaning of comfort is to make things easier, the pat on the back, the arm around the shoulder. We forget the etymology of the word – cum forte, with strength. No one said it would be easy: the promise was that we would be given strength.

Today is Trinity Sunday. The collect for the day petitions, “We beseech thee that this holy faith may ever more be our defence against all adversities.” In the end, yes, we come Sunday by Sunday to be comforted, to be strengthened to go out into the world and fulfil the mission to which we have been called. This week, may we be comforted in whatsoever we are called upon to do.