

Sermon for 12.3.17

Throughout the gospel narratives we are privy to different stories of Jesus' personal interaction with people.

Each encounter reveals something about the nature of Christ, enabling the reader to more deeply understand His love and compassion for humanity.

Each encounter also reveals something of the nature of the person he is with.

These stories of encounter in the gospels, between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, Nicodemus, Zacchaeus, the woman at the well, the adulterous woman, Saul, Pontius Pilate, the dying thief and Satan in the wilderness, speak to us on many different levels.

Today we focus on the encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus.

The narrative tells us that Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a leader of the Jews. And he came to Jesus by night.

Perhaps he came by night because he feared retribution by his fellow Pharisees, or for fear of losing status among his peers.

Or perhaps he was suffering from that common human emotion that we can feel in the darkness of the evening, when our day time support systems, fade into the night – the ones that keep us afloat and on top of things.

The night time may well have been Nicodemus' most vulnerable time when alone with his thoughts, he questioned religious beliefs that were well ingrained, yet were in opposition to what he had seen with his own eyes and heard about Jesus.

Whatever the reason he chose the night time, Nicodemus came to Jesus because he wanted to hear more from the one who had touched him and disturbed what he thought he knew about the God of Israel.

Nicodemus was different from the hostile authorities who explicitly rejected Jesus.

His words "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" witness to this.

Even though he wasn't ready to proclaim his seeking ways in the light of day, he did make the move towards Jesus and in their encounter, we hear something of his response to what Jesus proclaimed.

In response to Jesus words about entering the kingdom by being born from above, there is shock, "how can this be."

There is also lack of understanding expressed through disbelief "How can anyone be born after having grown old, can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?"

When Jesus told him that hereditary spiritual standing - which he had - was not enough to get one into the kingdom of God – when Jesus told him that it was the Spirit who was the agent of the well spring into new birth, Nicodemus repeated, "How can these things be."

Nicodemus is mentioned only one more time in the gospel of John and that is at the burial of Jesus before the resurrection.

Some theologians believe that this encounter between Jesus and Nicodemus is intended to depict a development towards faith.

They believe that it speaks about an experience of someone who has been called into faith and who is crossing over the threshold from where their well ingrained thought processes have held them fast, and into the new way of life through faith in Jesus Christ.

Rowan Williams speaks about this journey in chapter 2, in, *Being Disciples*¹, our Lenten study book.

Here Williams taps in to the insight of 14th century mystic St John of the Cross.

Williams describes how St. John combines the interaction of the mind in terms of understanding, memory and will, with faith, hope and love.

According to St John, on the Christian faith journey, faith is what happens to our understanding; hope is what happens to our remembering and love is what happens to our wanting.

St John believed that in this process of Christian growing up, from understanding into faith, from memory into hope, and from will into love, one of the most difficult things we experience, is the sense we will have, that we have lost our bearings on the way.

Williams explains that we can lose all sense of continuity - What we thought we understood, we discover that we never did; what we thought we remembered is covered with confusion and what we thought we wanted turns out to be empty.

The journey into faith calls everything we know as reality into question. And we hear something of this in the Nicodemus and Jesus encounter.

What Jesus is proclaiming to Nicodemus is that being born from above means being recreated in the Spirit, in faith and hope and love –becoming who God has called us to be.

Williams suggests that, the saving factor of this journey, is in the truth that even though we may at times let go of our faith - and there may be all sorts of reasons why this would happen; it could be illness, a sense of loss, or the journeys just too hard, or we simply don't want to let go of the old ways –whatever the reason we may let go of it, the truth remains that we are *not let go of* by God.

For once the call to faith is answered by us, it is sustained by God's faithfulness, not ours, and God's faithfulness is eternally steadfast and dependable.

And it is in this most dependable relationship that we are somehow set free to face all that we are called to, by the conviction that we are *not let go of* by God.

¹ Williams, Rowan. *Being Disciples: Essentials of the Christian Life*. Michigan: William B Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016.

For many of us, the faith journey can be long and challenging.

For others it can be *Abraham like*, that is, ever ready to obey, as we have heard today in the first reading from Genesis.

Yet, however it is for us - whatever challenges we face on the journey during this Lenten season, especially when we ask God in our quiet moments, "How can this be", remember we are a faith community - we are not alone, and remember especially that we are *not let go of* by the one who has called us.

The Lord be with you.