

Today is the fourth Sunday in lent and as we walk together with Jesus to the cross, we hear in today's readings the old life contrasted with the new.

The story in Numbers of the bronze serpent set on a pole, so that those bitten by the poisonous serpents would look at the serpent of bronze and live, is understood in the Wisdom Writings, to speak about Israel turning towards the teachings of the Torah and God as saviour.

Turning to look at the provision of God in the serpent pole, saved the ancient people from the effects of the poisonous venom of the serpent.

In the same way, Jesus tells Nicodemus, Jesus must be lifted up on the cross so that whoever turns to him and believes in him may have eternal life.

Today's gospel reading is the last stage of that wonderful encounter captured in John's gospel, between Nicodemus and Jesus.

It's a familiar gospel story.

Just to refresh our memories - Nicodemus was a teacher of the law – a prominent Jew in other words – and he had a yearning to know more about this man Jesus because Jesus bought something new and exciting to the table of life.

Nicodemus goes to see Jesus in the dark of night, so that he might find out more about God's new way in Jesus.

Contemporary theologian Walter Brueggemann sees the details of their encounter in this way. He writes:

*Jesus knows that Nicodemus comes to him out of much more than idle curiosity.*

*And so like a good therapist, Jesus hones in on Nicodemus, disregards his high position in the religious order of the day, and reaches toward Nicodemus' gnawing sense of deficiency.*

*Jesus says to him: You've got to start over! You've got to be reborn.*

*You've got to be born again. You've got to be born from above.*

*You've got to become as vulnerable and innocent and dependent as a little child....*

*You've got to let go of all the things that make you self-sufficient and that alienate you from the wonder of the gift of God.*

*Start over in vulnerability, in innocence, and in dependence, for the way you are living now keeps you cut off — from all the gifts of life for which you so much yearn.”<sup>1</sup>*

To all this, Nicodemus' response is, “How can this be?”

This is a very relevant text for lent for lent is especially the season when we ponder the finer details of our relationship with God - and I believe during this time, many of us identify with

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Devotions for Lent; A Way Other Than Our Own*, Compiled by Richard Floyd. WJK, Kentucky, 2017, p 34-35.

Nicodemus in our bewilderment and in our urging and even in our denial, as we journey closer towards the Cross.

Speaking personally - I know that I have.

There was the time in my life years ago - I had just returned to church after a long absence – and it was Good Friday. There I sat in the pews, and I could not bring myself to look at the cross on the wall of the sanctuary.

And that was hard because I was sitting up the front of the church and the cross was there right before me.

I looked everywhere but at the cross. Up to the ceiling - down to the floor -sideways at what people were wearing - and I even shut my eyes for some of the service.

After what seemed like eternity, and was probably about 5mins in reality- there came the time that I could no longer avoid looking.

My eyes opened and fell on the cross on the sanctuary wall, and the tears started to flow, gushing out in fact, and they continued to flow on and off for next 3 weeks.

What happened to me on that Good Friday - was simply a lifting of the veil from my eyes. My tears were for my resistance to see and accept that the suffering of Jesus on the cross was for me personally. It had been much easier for me to deny –to stay in the dark - for the light, the truth before me, was far too painful to accept.

Yet on this day and in the days ahead, I was tenderly accompanied through the darkness and the pain - into the light and into the freedom of acceptance that Jesus suffering was for me, in the love of God.

When we look at the cross we may see different things, yet in its fullness, what is there before us is Jesus unimaginable suffering, his unimaginable resurrection and resurrection appearances, his glorious ascension and the coming of his Holy Spirit who brings us into our freedom to become whole.

What is there in the cross of Christ is unimaginable personal salvation. How can this be?

Well the Apostle Paul has the answer in the epistle – it is all through God's Grace – it is not our own doing: it is a gift of God. *For, as John tells us, God loves us so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but have eternal life.*

Looking at the cross of Christ reveals to us many things, but mostly the amazing love of God for each one of us – it is this that holds us all together in communion and ultimately transforms us. For when our love for Christ is in our hearts in response to God's love for us, people see things in a new way, themselves and one another and God and God's world.

The Lord be with you.