

## DOUBLE MEANINGS NOT TO BE MISSED

Genesis 12. 1-4a  
Romans 4: 1 – 5, 13 – 17  
John 3: 1 – 17

I speak to you in the name of † the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

Our text in John's Gospel relates a very interesting evening meeting, a conversation that occurred between our Lord and Nicodemus. 'Why did Nicodemus come to Jesus at night?' you may ask.<sup>1</sup> Possibly because he knew that Christ was often surrounded by crowds of people during the day; or possibly because he wanted to have a good bit of time to talk with him; and certainly, because Nicodemus was not just anyone: he was a religious VIP, and perhaps he feared that his peers would not approve of this meeting.

For you see, as our text tells us, Nicodemus was a Pharisee. As we all know, the Pharisees were deeply devoted to the Jewish religion, but they also had very particular views about things. They were a legalistic and exclusivist group who strictly, and often hypocritically, kept the Law of Moses and the unwritten tradition of the elders. They considered themselves to be set apart.

But Nicodemus was not only a Pharisee; he was also a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council. The Sanhedrin was the Supreme Court of ancient Israel and exercised jurisdiction over Jews throughout the world. This Supreme Court was composed of 71 members, all of them very powerful, rich and influential. Only the King and the High Priest of Israel had more power than they did. We can therefore understand that other members of the Sanhedrin might have been

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<sup>1</sup> The Word is life and light (Jn 1. 4), and the light was coming into the world (Jn 1. 9). The light shines in darkness and the darkness does not overcome it (Jn 1. 5). The movement of Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, toward Jesus, coming from the darkness of the night into the light, is a significant movement toward believing and receiving the one sent to make God known (Jn 1. 11-14).

shocked to learn that their peer Nicodemus had come to our Lord to seek his teaching and counsel.

Why was Nicodemus drawn to Jesus? Quite simply, because he had taken note of the signs that Christ had performed. As Nicodemus says in verse 2, ‘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.’ Nicodemus was not only curious about our Lord; he had questions for him.

As you’ll have noticed, Jesus doesn’t even give Nicodemus the time to ask his first question. Christ knew that some of ‘the Jews’ had already rejected his words, as John’s Gospel tells us one chapter earlier (2. 18-20); and he knows that Nicodemus, whilst he doesn’t reject Jesus’s words, comes to him with limited, but positive understanding. So in his response to Nicodemus’s opening comment, our Lord attempts to build upon his partial comprehension. Without any clarification, he says to Nicodemus, ‘I tell you, no-one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above’ (3. 3).

Jesus knew that his statement would surprise Nicodemus. First of all, in speaking of being born in the kingdom of God, Christ used a word in Aramaic, which when translated into Greek had several meanings. The Greek word ‘anōthen’ (ἀνωθεν), which means ‘from above’, can also mean ‘again’, or ‘anew’. Our Lord plays on the use of this word with a double meaning to tell Nicodemus that in order for person to ‘see’ the kingdom of God, he or she must be both born ‘from above’ and born ‘anew’.

Jews like Nicodemus were familiar with the notion of God as king, but Jesus’s demand that one be born anew, or born from above, to ‘see’ the kingdom of God challenges Nicodemus to expand his notion of what that kingdom might be.

Here's Nicodemus; he's approached Christ as a rabbi, and he finds himself confronted with an affirmation about a radical kingdom that is beyond his understanding.<sup>2</sup>

Nicodemus thus falls back upon the tried and true, and asks another question that shows that he's not grasped the two possible meanings of the word our Lord uses. He says, 'How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter *a second time*<sup>3</sup> into the mother's womb and be born?' In saying 'a second time', Nicodemus is continuing to use words that speak of time on a horizontal plane; and yet Jesus wants him to understand that being 'born anew' is not only an event that happens horizontally in time; it's also an event that happens when God intervenes vertically in our time and space. One can only 'see the kingdom of God' after having an experience that combines both the horizontal and the vertical. Christ's words to Nicodemus ask for a new birth that combines both the horizontal experience of time and the vertical experience of the in-breaking of God 'from above'.

Nicodemus's 'misunderstanding' allows our Lord to explain further and give another example in verse 5. He uses the same words that he uses in verse 3 of our passage, but changes them slightly: 'I tell you, no-one can enter the kingdom of God without being born *of water and Spirit*'. Here again, Jesus introduces the same two dimensions into his statement about what it means to be born anew and to enter the kingdom of God: there is, says Christ, a *human* experience 'of water' that

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<sup>2</sup> As a devout and well-taught Jew, Nicodemus anticipated the arrival of the kingdom at the end of history. The uniqueness of Jesus's message and mission was the fact that with the arrival of the Messiah, the kingdom (eternal life) was inaugurated but not consummated. Thus there ensues an unexpected 'period between', when the kingdom has been established (eternal life is truly received), and yet the full realisation of the kingdom (the full possession of eternal life) has still to take place.

Jesus's statement in verse 3 of the terms of entry into the kingdom represented a further and even more shocking surprise as far as Nicodemus was concerned. As a devout, orthodox Jew he presumed that his place in the coming kingdom was assured, by virtue of his race and circumcision. As a Pharisee and a leading religious professional, there could be few Jews, if any, in the entire city whose credentials were more impressive as far acceptance with God was concerned.

<sup>3</sup> The actual word used for 'a second time' by Nicodemus is 'deuteros' (δεύτερος).

happens horizontally and in time; but there is also a *spiritual* experience ‘of the Spirit’, that happens when God intervenes vertically in our time and space.

We will remember that the very first chapter of John’s Gospel tells us that a gift of God, or a gift ‘from above’, is necessary for all of us to be born anew. To quote John 1. 12, ‘But to all who received him, who believed in his name, *he* gave power to become children of God.’ Belief in our Lord is not solely the result of our human response; it is through the action and ministry of God’s Holy Spirit that he comes and breaks into our lives from above, so that we may ‘enter’ and ‘see’ his kingdom.

Yet there is also a historical, time-based part to our being born anew. As a mark of our being born anew, we receive the Sacrament of baptism, a baptism of water and repentance, similar to the one performed by John the Baptist in Jesus’s time.

Christ therefore helps us (and hopefully Nicodemus) to understand that seeing and entering the kingdom of God are consequences of two things: the gift of the Holy Spirit and the Sacrament of baptism.<sup>4</sup>

In a further attempt to guide Nicodemus out of his misunderstanding, our Lord resorts to a brief parable about the Spirit. In the Bible as you know, one of the Greek words used to describe the Holy Spirit is ‘pneuma’ (πνεῦμα), which can also mean ‘the wind’, or a ‘movement of the wind’. Making a play on this word, Jesus starts with a reflection on the everyday experience of the wind. He says that the wind is a mystery; that one can experience it; that it is a part of life. But one can never claim to have discovered and explained where it comes from and where it is

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<sup>4</sup> Another interesting interpretation to verse 5 is provided in Ezek 36. 25-37, which is a clear Old Testament reference to a birth associated with water and Spirit. The passage speaks of the new order of the messianic age in which there will be a new experience of cleansing. It states, ‘I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; ... I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and my laws.’ Jesus is informing Nicodemus that this new day of cleansing and power is now at hand; the long-awaited messianic age is now present.

going. On the basis of this observable truth about the wind, Christ affirms that the same is true of those who are born of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit, like the wind, is entirely beyond our control and the comprehension; we can never determine its origin and destiny. The Holy Spirit is sovereign and works as he pleases in the renewal of the human heart.

Poor Nicodemus! After all of our Lord's teaching and explanations, he still doesn't get it. In verse 9, his response to Jesus is one of stunned perplexity: 'How can these things be?'<sup>5</sup>

You might find it odd, but the third chapter of John's gospel does not reveal anything further of Nicodemus's reactions to the amazing truths that Christ has just shared with him. We leave our passage in John perhaps a bit sorrowfully, realising that at this point in the story at least, Nicodemus is a man of partial faith.<sup>6</sup> He does not reject our Lord's words; but his difficulties come from his inability to reach beyond what he can measure, control and understand. He cannot grasp that the only way to full acceptance of Jesus is to recognise that he offers a gift 'from above'.

As we bring our thoughts to a close, we can ask ourselves, 'Even though I am a Christian, is my faith response to God sometimes like that of Nicodemus?' In what situations, and in what areas of my life, is God asking me to have more faith and to trust in him? If we are honest with ourselves, I am sure that you and I both can think of circumstances in which we could be criticised for having 'partial' faith.

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<sup>5</sup> Nicodemus should have been able to grasp some of the meaning of Jesus' teaching. The idea of a 'life in the Spirit' that transcends the human spirit and understanding was not new in Israel. It was part of its religious tradition (cf. Ex 15. 8; Isa 40. 7, 44. 3, 59. 21, Ezek 11. 19-20, 36. 26-27; Joel 29. 29; Job 34. 14; Ps 18.15, 51. 10).

<sup>6</sup> Two other references are made to Nicodemus in John: 7. 50-52 and 19. 38-42, where we learn that Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea, another Pharisee, took Jesus's body, prepared it for burial and placed it in the tomb. This was undertaken at great risk to themselves.

My goal in this message is not to point a finger at anyone, but rather to encourage us. In those areas where we long to have more faith in God – for example, concerning our futures, our jobs, our finances, our parents, our children, or our relationships with other people – today, we can make a resolution to say ‘no’ to the doubts that have shaken our faith foundations. We can make our minds up to trust God to be the God of his Word and of his promises. And we can ask God to sovereignly blow his ‘pneuma’, his wind in us, so that our lives, our walk with him, and indeed our *expectations* of him will astonishingly change. I wonder, if God were to ask us today, ‘what’s your wind factor?’, what would our response be? Let us embrace the wind of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.