

Considering Nicodemus, light and darkness

Pitt Street Uniting Church, Sunday 5 March 2023

A Reflection by Rev Dr Josephine Inkpin

Lent 2A (and end of Sydney WorldPride)

Contemporary Reading: from *Quiverful* by Jim Cotter; Psalm 121; John 3: 1-7

This worship service can be viewed on You Tube at <https://pittstreetuniting.org.au/spirit/reflections/>

Today's Gospel reading is a very rich passage, full of extraordinary metaphors, story and meaning. It includes, for example, that powerful central affirmation of Christian Faith that God so loved the world that they sent their Beloved One that all who believe may have eternal life. Note well the heart of this good news: that God loves the world so much that all who believe – not just the doctrinally righteous, or the ethically conservative, but all may have eternal life. For the God we celebrate today is the God of unlimited, inexhaustible, love. As our Gospel text says, Christ comes among us not for condemnation, but for love and salvation. Let us therefore affirm again that you, we, all of us, are loved. The Gospel, our Good News, invites us to claim this, and live it. All of which brings us, in this passage, to the person of Nicodemus, and to light, and darkness...

How do you feel about Nicodemus? Is Nicodemus just a negative foil for Jesus in our Gospel story? Nicodemus certainly receives a very mixed press in Christian reflection down the centuries. Indeed, in some quarters, the question is sometimes asked: '*was Nicodemus saved?*' That is partly tied up with what, in the text, we understand to be the meaning of the words '*to be born again*' or '*born from above*'. It also, however, reflects deep ambiguities about Nicodemus. Is he, for example, hiding from the light and the truth when he comes to Jesus in the night? Indeed, to use a modern phrase, should he instead be '*coming out*' in the light of day and sharing his truth fully in the world? Or is there more to this story, and our lives, queer and straight, than simplistic binaries about how we are to live?

It is very tempting to fall into categories of good and bad, and equate them straightforwardly with light and darkness as opposites. Aided by surface reading of the fourth Gospel's language and symbolism, today's story can be interpreted in that way. Indeed, it has to be said that John's Gospel arose in a context in which tensions had arisen between the followers of Jesus and other inheritors of Judaeon religion. A process of redefinition was going on, out of which the Judaeon religion in which Jesus was raised gave birth to both key forms of what we now call Christianity and Judaism. As with many other religious conflicts in the Gospels, we therefore do well to be careful both to recognise context and also not to read into the text our own presuppositions about the 'true' nature of either Christianity or Judaism.

Much hangs on what is meant by Jesus' words '*unless you are born again* (or born from above)?' What does that mean? Does it mean, for example, that unless we conform with particular forms of 'conversion' or 'coming out', we are not truly valid in the more narrowly tribal versions of Christian, queer, or progressive community? Are we then 'inauthentic', or even lying to ourselves or others?

In Reformed thought, Nicodemus has certainly had a bad name. John Calvin, not least, was particularly scathing at times in his reflections.ⁱ For, in the midst of both the culture, and actual, wars of his time, Calvin saw Nicodemus as representative of those who avoided standing clearly in what he considered the light of the Gospel, thereby escaping its costs and consequences. Hence the term '*Nicodemite*' came into being: denoting a secret, timid, or dissembling adherent of a particular Faith. We can understand the passion behind this disparaging understanding of Nicodemus. For when others are literally losing their families, livelihoods, and actual lives for their open owning of faith, it is sometimes hard to value those who seem to be hiding within the very forms and structures which are inflicting the violence and oppression.

Perhaps Calvin was also unimpressed by the way Nicodemus had been taken up as a saint in Catholic and Orthodox Christian traditions. For Calvin sought a radical transformation of the inherited faith and world of his day; and a key message he read out of today's text was the call to Nicodemus to be radically transformed by grace: aka 'born again'. Not for nothing was Calvin's motto '*post tenebras lux*': out of darkness light.

It was therefore not enough to skulk in the darkness of night, as he saw Nicodemus doing. In a different context, a similar emphasis can be found among other great Reformed leaders. For example, in his famous address '*Where to now?*'ⁱⁱ, Martin Luther King invoked this story as a metaphor for a profound call to massive transformation for his own society. King reflected on what was needed to be saved:

Jesus didn't get bogged down on the kind of isolated approach of what you shouldn't do... instead of just getting bogged down on one thing, Jesus looked at him and said, "Nicodemus, you must be born again." In other words, "Your whole structure must be changed."

Hearing some of our more radical First Nations speakers recently, I can also hear echoes of that. It is not enough, they rightly say, to try to make small changes, including the Voice to Parliament proposal, within a system of darkness. Instead, they urge us, life as a whole on these lands on which we live must be, so to speak, 'born again': "*Your whole structure must be changed.*"

So is that the message of today's Gospel for us? Are we being called into fuller transformation, and to greater light, stepping away from the darkness? What do you think? What is God calling you, us, into? How are we, like Nicodemus, being called into greater life?

In contrast to such Reformed thinking, Nicodemus has however been seen more positively, and is venerated as a saint by both the Catholic and Orthodox traditions, often alongside Joseph of Arimathea. For, with Joseph, Nicodemus is said to have arranged the burial of Jesus - note well, openly, and with some extravagance, at a time when the supposed model male disciples had all run away.

Like Gamaliel, it is likely that, in being a member of the Judaeen Council, as an 'insider', Nicodemus also helped Jesus and Jesus' early followers in other ways. Certainly, when it comes to politics and religion, light does not all shine in one way. Radicals do not possess, or bear, all truth and light. In Nicodemus' case, the larger traditions of the universal Church have always reminded us of Jesus' teaching - that it is by our actions, and not by our mere professions of faith, that we are saved: by what we actually contribute to and through the light, not by how bright we turn up the dial or burn our torches.

The reality is, as the biblical scholar Craig Koester has put it: "*Theological complexity is integral to the characterisation of Nicodemus.*"ⁱⁱⁱ Indeed, if we put aside our human tendencies to false binaries and dualism, we may see that the Nicodemus narrative is ambiguous by design. For, in Russ Gasdia's words:

The author of the Gospel of John has included a character whose importance is self-evident, but has left the nature of that importance open for interpretation. Nicodemus enters the story of John's Gospel at critical junctures, serving to both forward the narrative and bring about important theological discussions in the text itself. Yet at the same time, Nicodemus occupies a space of liminality in John's otherwise unequivocal Gospel. As one who is neither fully disciple nor fully Pharisee, the normal indicators of John fail to aid the reader in making a ready judgment of Nicodemus.^{iv}

Let me therefore conclude by offering two more ways of looking at Nicodemus in human understanding. The first of these arises from the experience of marginalised people, the second from the realms of metaphysical poetry.

If Martin Luther King continues to challenge us to embrace "*holistic transformation of faith and world*" as the meaning of being '*born again*', he would also want us to recognise the journey of African-Americans as being like that of Nicodemus himself. Indeed, it is historically significant that, after the American Civil War, Nicodemus was regarded as a model of rebirth by black people as they sought to cast off their old identity as slaves. Not for nothing was a notable abolitionist song also called '*Wake Nicodemus*', after which the all black settlement of Nicodemus in Kansas was named.

Indeed, Nicodemus' experience of coming to Jesus at night powerfully reflects the experience of such journeys of salvation for marginalised people. In the case of African-Americans, slave owners often forbade them reading the Bible, fearful that they might question scriptural interpretations.

As Rosemary Rodman has thus put it: "*Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the same way African-Americans came to the Bible: at night and in secret, understandably afraid of the consequences.*" Queer people, and others historically marginalised, can also identify with Nicodemus in this. When we as human beings are denied love and truth in the light, then we must find it in the night, in the shadows, whenever and wherever we can.

This brings me, finally, to a great poem, entitled *The Night*, by the 17th century Welsh metaphysical poet Henry Vaughan.^v Its context is also one of oppression, when what we now call the Anglican Church was legally suppressed by Presbyterians - and by Congregationalists too - in Cromwell's reign. For, let us remember, despite our Uniting Church traditions speaking so strongly of liberty, they also contain shadows too. When we seek to exterminate darkness, we usually betray our own light. Vaughan's poem *The Night* thus partly reflects the experience of Anglicans and others when they are denied their forms of prayer and life and the deep wells of community and identity. Coming to Christ in the night thus takes on a profound significance.

Yet there is much more. As Vaughan speaks in his poem of the night encounter, he touches on the mystical experiences of God reflected in darkness. He not only identifies in his own context with Nicodemus' liminality, but he also turns upside down the associations of night and darkness with fear and ignorance, despair and evildoing. Night, he says, is relief from the mere ordinariness, busy-ness, and clutter of the day, and a reminder of Christ's presence in prayer. As he put it:

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*Dear night! this world's defeat;
The stop to busie fools; care's check and curb;
The day of spirits; my soul's calm retreat
Which none disturb!
Christ's progress, and His prayer time;
The hours to which high Heaven doth chime;*

In this, Vaughan affirms, in night and darkness we also learn and grow in God. For:

*There is in God, some say,
A deep but dazzling darkness; as men here
Say it is late and dusky, because they
See not all clear.
O for that night! where I in Him
Might live invisible and dim!*

Let us remember, the poem also says, that that amazing message about God's Love for all which Jesus shared was given in this private conversation in the night; not from a mountain top, at high noon, or even with a searchlight.

Therefore, even as we seek to own our own divine light, and to bear and share that light in the struggles of our time, may we also treasure the night and darkness, and our own ambiguities - and like Nicodemus, seek to meet God there.

In the name of Jesus, the Light of the world, given by God that all may live into the fullness of Love. Amen.

ⁱ beginning in 1544 with his *Excuse à messieurs les Nicodemites*

ⁱⁱ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/where-do-we-go-here>

ⁱⁱⁱ https://digitalcommons.luthersem.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1018&context=faculty_articles

^{iv}

https://www.academia.edu/33131915/He_Came_to_Jesus_at_Night_John_Calvins_Polemical_and_Theological_Engagement_with_the_Biblical_Character_Nicodemus

^v <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50441/the-night-56d22d9009233>