

Lent 2: Sunday 8 March 2020
Christ Church South Yarra
Sermon by Craig D'Alton

How can anyone be born after having grown old?

In each of the four extraordinary stories that provide our readings from John's Gospel over the next four weeks we are challenged, time and again, to ask deep questions about the nature of faith, of belief, of doubt. And in the first of these stories – that of Nicodemus – we are invited into a religious world in which even the elements of time and space are on a different plane from that we commonly comprehend.

Nicodemus, who comes to Jesus by night, immediately reflects to Jesus his understanding of who Jesus is – a series of things we, who have read chapters one and two already – have also been told. Jesus is a teacher, someone who comes from God, someone who does signs.

The signs are crucial for Nicodemus – they are the reason he has come to Jesus. He has heard about the signs, and he wants to know what they mean.

Jesus' response does not in the least relate to anything Nicodemus has said. Instead, in the NRSV translation we use at Christ Church, he says "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Some of you may know a version of this verse that instead says, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born again." Both are correct. The Greek word *anōthen* has both meanings. Australian Jesuit Francis Moloney writes that "One [meaning] lies on a temporal-horizontal axis ("again") and the other on a spacial-vertical axis (from above). Jesus' first words to Nicodemus on his initial approach can only be understood if the word *anōthen* is given both meanings." Nicodemus' reply: "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" addresses only one of Jesus' two meanings, the temporal horizontal one. Nicodemus understands – but only in part.

As the story continues to unfold, Nicodemus continues to struggle with what Jesus is telling him. Jesus' frustration comes through: "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

From this point on, Jesus moves his address from the singular into the plural. All that follows, including the extraordinary proclamation of verse 16 that “God so loved the world” addresses not Nicodemus, but we readers. Nicodemus melts away from the narrative, and we begin to understand that he was, in effect, a literary device for introducing a deep truth – a truth that those who seek to understand Jesus will, all too often, fail to see clearly. We come to the light seeking after truth, but often we bring so much baggage with us that we fail to see what is offered, which is eternal life.

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So.

How strong was Nicodemus’ faith?

Nicodemus melts away in the face of the overwhelming nature of Jesus’ discourse, yet he appears again twice in John’s Gospel. First, in chapter 7, when he reminds his fellow pharisees that under the law Jesus deserves a hearing, and finally, coming – this time in the light of day – to bring ointments to assist in Jesus’ burial in chapter 19.

Nicodemus, John is clear, is a person of a deep traditional faith – he is a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews. Yet he is also a person of marginal faith. He only half-understands about Jesus, and he does not at first become one of his followers. Yet he remains curious. He doesn’t become one of those who follow Jesus, and yet as a sceptic he advocates for him with his fellow leaders. And finally, when all the disciples have deserted the crucified and dead Jesus, in John’s narrative it is Nicodemus, along with Joseph of Arimathea, who rescues Jesus body from the cross. Nicodemus provides “a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds”, for what Pope Benedict XVI calls “a royal burial”. The one who first came by night – in the dark – has now come at the darkest hour but in the light, bringing the most intimate of gifts.

How strong was Nicodemus’ faith?

It depends on when you ask the question.

How strong is your faith?

Perhaps it depends on when you ask the question.

Where do you sit, right now?

Do you operate with such certainty in a traditional faith framework that any dissent on the part of others is almost beyond comprehension, and so you must exclude them, even have them crucified?

Or is there room in your traditional faith framework for a new idea – for a ray of light that might challenge some of your established beliefs. And if there is, how much of that ray of light can you comprehend? Perhaps only one small element? Have you the appetite to find out more?

Or is your faith an embarrassment to you, a guilty secret that you find it hard to reveal in public? Do you skurry from one dark doorway to the next, lest the light reveal what you believe, such that others might clearly see it?

Alternately, do you live a life of such evangelical scepticism that any overt demonstrations of faith by someone else make you wince? Do you feel the need to attack persons of faith, because even though their faith is bunkum, it is somehow a threat to you?

Alternately, is your faith driven by a healthy scepticism, such that you have come to understand that the more you know, the less you understand, and the less you understand the less you believe, and the less you believe, the more God become utterly necessary to make sense of it all?

Welcome, I think, to the complicated world of Nicodemus.

Nicodemus has faith – a traditional faith as a leader of the Jews – but one that allows a healthy dose of curiosity. The sort of curiosity that leads him to Jesus by night.

Nicodemus is a skeptic – he understands that Jesus is something new, something important, and that his teaching deserve his attention, but when Jesus reveals the mysteries to him, he questions, he dismisses, and eventually he simply disappears from view.

And yet Nicodemus does not entirely walk away, and in the darkest hour, the light reveals a truth to him and he emerges from the dark doorways. He

comes to Jesus when everyone else has walked away, bringing the richest gifts he has.

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How strong was Nicodemus' faith?

How strong is your faith?

Does these questions even matter?

Is it not more a question of us approaching Jesus with an open heart and an open mind, unafraid both to ask our questions, no matter how naïve they might be, and to listen to the answers, no matter how simple or how complex they might be? And then to put aside evil deeds, and instead to do whatever we can do, in the light of God.

Faith is not a static thing. We move in and out of love with faith. And yet we can all be born after having grown old, even if our faith has dulled, even if our faith has died, because God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.