

**Lent IV 2006**

At midnight speak with the Sun

**John 3:14-20**

**“And this is judgement, that light has come into the world.”**

Though that pure Virgin-shrine,  
That sacred veil drawn o'er thy glorious noon  
That men might look and live as glow-worms shine,  
    And face the moon:  
Wise Nicodemus saw such light  
As made him know his God by night.

    Most blest believer he!  
Who in that land of darkness and blind eyes  
Thy long expected healing wings could see,  
    When thou didst rise,  
And what can never more be done,  
Did at mid-night speak with the Sun!

Henry Vaughan's ingenious poem develops an essential detail of this morning's gospel reading, that the words we heard are spoken in conversation with Nicodemus, a man described as a leader of the Jews, who seeks Jesus out during the night.

There are some obvious, and thus less interesting things to say about this night-time quest. The most immediate reason is, presumably, that Nicodemus is fearful of being thought of as one of Jesus' followers. He appears at several important points in the gospel narrative, but at this point, his first appearance, he is unsure what he will hear and discover. And the conversation could hardly be more startling – unless a man is born of water and the spirit he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus is understandably bemused – what is this being “born again”; surely no-one can be born once he's old. The more matter of fact Nicodemus's objections, the more radically Jesus' teaching contrasts with them. Nicodemus is supposed to be a teacher of Israel, but by this exchange the evangelist leaves us in no doubt who it is who is teaching new things to Israel, with the nation here represented by one of its own religious authorities.

It is night. Nicodemus has found Jesus in the darkness: as the quotation from Vaughan made clear, there is heavy irony in this. The very first chapter of the gospel told us that the light is shining in darkness and the darkness is unable to overcome it. In chapter eight Jesus will declare himself to be the light of the world. But here and now, it is the cover of darkness which has enabled Nicodemus to take his risk, and to ask his questions, and, in so doing, to reveal his ignorance.

In John's gospel, light and judgement belong together. This is judgement, that light has come into the world and people loved light more than darkness. All who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their evil may not be exposed. In part, Nicodemus's conversation with Jesus' is an illustration of this idea. In asking questions of the one who is truth himself, Nicodemus is revealed to be sorely lacking as a teacher of Israel. Nevertheless, his motives are not just admirable but genuinely brave. He is prepared to expose himself to public ruin by risking being seen visiting Jesus, and he is prepared to expose his learning to correction by serving as pupil to this Galilean carpenter who is telling him the truth about God. The light of Jesus exposes Nicodemus's own darkness.

The night in which our story is set serves to bolster what Jesus is trying to teach Nicodemus: appearances are not necessarily reliable, what you think you know, you don't really know, there is literal blindness in the world, to be sure, but there is spiritual blindness as well. All who wish to see the kingdom of God must be born from above of water and the spirit. The phrase "from above" is important, because the Greek word "anothen" can just as well mean "again", and in fact this reading gives us the well known phrase "born again Christian". But the evangelist is teasing us just as Jesus is teasing

Nicodemus: Jesus asserts that one must be born from above but Nicodemus, in his ignorance, interprets this with an absurd literalism – how can one be born a second time? What seems obvious, is not, what we see is not everything: wind and spirit are unseen but powerful, and again wind and spirit are the same word in Greek.

Nicodemus is in darkness, seeking enlightenment. It is not enough to look with the eyes of the world, because in Jesus that world has been flooded with light to such a degree that nothing appears the same. The God-given light of Christ has revealed the Father's love to the world, but has also taught the world something about itself – that the world has been blind all along. It thought it could perceive and understand, but light has now revealed that what it thought it could see was not there at all – the world's insight was shrouded in darkness.

That is not quite enough, however, because the act of seeing in John's gospel is more than an act of simply learning something new. It is an act in which one is presented with a new life, a new life to be practised and lived through Christ which is its centre. As the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. When the people of Israel brought upon themselves the torment of snakes, the Lord commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent and

set it on a pole, so that all who were bitten might look on it and live. Coming face to face with the means of death was itself the means of salvation. Nicodemus misunderstanding about being born again makes it clear that he knows nothing of the true life and death of which Jesus speaks. In order to be brought into this new sphere, he must come face to face with death – true death, the death of God himself – by looking upon the Son of Man when he is lifted up from the earth.

Night will return in John's gospel. In that vivid garden scene, in which we are told that a band of soldiers comes upon Jesus as if he were a brigand, night will descend upon the whole world. John doesn't bother to tell us about the darkness which covered the land at the crucifixion – his point is too well made to need such details. At the crucifixion, Nicodemus, the night-time disciple, the one who gropes in darkness towards the light which will dazzle him, is faced with eternal night, the triumph of death, as he helps to bury the body of Jesus and, in so doing, stares the darkness of death squarely in the face.

Christ's light flooding the world is the world's judgement, because by it true vision, true understanding, is given to those who would learn, who would be disciples. Darkness and night-time are only

known as such when there is light with which to contrast them. Our own darkness is so much safer, so much more secure, than the light which shows us to be what and who we truly are. But if Nicodemus can brave the darkness not knowing what it is he will find, then we can have no excuses. When the time comes to stare death and darkness squarely in the face, in Holy Week, we know we must do so, must watch in that dark garden and walk up that dark hill, hoping and knowing that another garden awaits us, and the dazzling light of life.