

It's one of the characteristics of John's gospel that several characters come to Jesus and have rather long dialogues and discussions. One of the most famous of those discussions is one that we have in today's reading where this Jewish teacher, Nicodemus, comes to see Jesus by night. Like other encounters that Jesus has in the gospel, there's a certain enigmatic quality to this meeting. It starts off as a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, but at some point, and it is not clear when in the reading this happens, but at some point, Nicodemus drifts out of the conversation and he's not part of it anymore. The text simply becomes Jesus commentating on his discussion with Nicodemus. When they are engaged in conversation, there's no real meeting of the minds. They talk past each other. They use the same words, but they don't understand what each other's meaning.

I learned something of this when I soon started going out with Laura, my lovely wife, realizing that English and American people can sometimes use the same words and mean different things. I learned one this week. Never say to an English person, "You're a sight for sore eyes," because if you do, it will mean exactly the opposite thing that you think it will mean. When you say it, you think you're saying, "Oh, you're so nice to see, you'll cheering me up." To an English person, it means, "You look dreadful today. What's happened to you?" So just a tip. It's a dangerous business talking with Americans. Soon after I met Laura, she bought a picture and she showed it ... I was with a friend. She came into my room in college and showed me this picture and she said, "Do you like this picture?" I remained silent, but my friend said, "Oh, I like the frame." "Yes, but what about the picture?" said Laura. He said, "Well, it's interesting," and at that point I had to intervene because I knew where this conversation was going. My friend clearly hated the picture, but he was too polite to say. The English way would not to be to say, "What a ghastly picture. Why on earth did you buy that?"

Two people speaking the same language, but not being able to pick up on what the other one was meaning or saying. There's something of that going on here with Jesus and Nicodemus. They understood the words each other was using, but Nicodemus just couldn't get on the same wavelength and understand

what Jesus was saying. They were talking past each other. There's so much I could say about this rich and deep conversation they have and the thoughts it gives rise to in Jesus' commentary. But instead, I'm just going to focus on one verse, perhaps the most famous verse in the Bible: John 3:16, "God so loved the world that He gave His only son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life."

When I looked at that phrase this week, that verse, I noticed that it contains two sets of pairs, four words that they go together to each. The first is to do with God, and the other is to do with us. So the first is this, "God so loved the world that He gave." The second is to do with us: "Whoever believes has eternal life." In short, loving and giving, believing and life. Those are the pairs of phrases that I want to examine.

Let me say something about the first pair: God loves and gives. God so loved the world that He gave. The first thing we can say about God, the clearest thing that comes across from the whole of the Bible, is that God is love. That's God in his essence. That's the easiest way to define how God is. God is love, and it's a giving kind of love. God is love and what we, as Christians, our distinctive understanding about God and his nature, is that we understand God to be made up as a set of relationship, a network of relationships between the Father, the Son and the Spirit. We worship a God who is not some individual, isolated being floating far off, but a God closely involved with His world; related as persons: Father, Son and Spirit. God is more of a family, of a community than some removed remote figure.

The word we use for that community, that network of relationships, the uniquely Christian word is Trinity. An understanding of God as three persons in one and one in three: Father, Son and Spirit. God is love, and it's not that God created the world because He had nothing to love. God was always within Himself in perfect communion of those relationships. The world was created to share in that love, to bring us and all the world into that community, those networks that we, too, might be embraced by the tentacles of divine love. It's important to remember the Trinity in this context as we remember that Jesus gave of Himself. It's not that God so loved the world

that He sent a very important person with a message or He sent somebody to sort it out. He gave of Himself in Jesus Christ.

What we're talking about in this verse isn't delegation. It's self-giving, a self-giving, a self-emptying kind of love. God's love is a giving kind of love. A note to the object of God's love: It's not His chosen people. The goody two shoes, His favorite ones. No, God loved the world. The word is cosmos, the Greek word used in this passage. God loved the cosmos. There's nothing outside God's love, the reach of His concern. There's an unimaginable depth and scale to God's love.

I came across these words inscribed on the wall of an asylum: "The love of God is greater far than tongue or pen can ever tell. It goes beyond the highest star and reaches to the lowest hell. The guilty pair bow down with care. God gave His Son to win. His erring child He reconciled and rescued from his sin. Could we, with ink, the ocean fill and were the skies of parchment made, were every stalk on earth a quill, and every man a scribe by trade. To write the love of God above would drain the ocean dry, nor could the scroll contain the whole, though stretched from sky to sky."

God's love is enormous, all encompassing, beyond our imagining, and yet it's on a scale, which includes us as individuals. Hear these words of Saint Paul from the Book of Romans: "For I am convinced," he writes, "that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." Note the use in that passage where Paul picks up on that theme of the breadth of God's love, that he also says it's a love that includes us. It has a personal dimension. The world, the cosmos, is included in God's love, but so are we, as part of that creation, as His people. We are the us included in God's divine love. God reaches out to each of us. He takes the initiative. He loves us, not because we are lovable, but because He is love.

So let me move on to the second pair of words that we find in John 3:16. How do we respond to God's love and generosity? We're called to believe and have

life. One follows the other. There is this response, this call to believe, looks different in every person. We're all unique. We all respond to God's love in different ways. Just look at the readings that we've had today. In the Old Testament reading, God says to Abram or Abraham as he was to become, "Go from your country, all your friends and family, everything you've ever known and go to the land I will show you." Abraham doesn't question the request. He doesn't ask for time to think about it. We're told he simply went as the Lord had told him.

This straightforward, uncomplicated, immediate response is very different to Nicodemus, who we hear about in our gospel reading from John. Nicodemus was more measured, more circumspect. He didn't jump in with an emotional response. He wanted time to think. He'd no doubt heard Jesus is preaching and teaching, and he came to seek Him out at night when there was no one around. He wanted time on his own with Jesus. There is no patron saint of Episcopalians. I think if there was, Nicodemus would be the man. He's our kind of guy.

So, let's look a bit closer at this man, Nicodemus. Nicodemus was a rationalist. Look how he replies to Jesus. When Jesus says, "You must be born again." He says, "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" Why does he say that? Is it because he's stupid? No, because we know he's a well-respected teacher. Is it because he wanted to make Jesus look stupid, which actually many of his colleagues did? That's clear in the gospels, but there's no one else around. There's no one to show off to. This is a genuine inquiry; *mano a mano*. I think he answers like this because poor Nicodemus just doesn't get it. He doesn't get what Jesus is saying.

Nicodemus comes across in this passage as a pragmatist. This is where his Episcopalianism comes out so clearly. He's a cautious literalist. He's preoccupied with what he knows to be possible. The word can appear nine times in this passage. Nicodemus can't get past what he knows can be done, what can happen and what can't happen. He's limited by his own understanding and experience. Jesus is talking about heavenly things. Nicodemus is not on that wavelength. He recognizes the words, but he doesn't know what they mean. I think when

Nicodemus asked Jesus, "How can a man be born when he is old?" there's a wistfulness in his voice. That's what we can't get from the text. We miss the tone of voice in which these words are said, but it strikes me there is, when Nicodemus says this, a wistfulness. He wished he could understand what Jesus was saying. He wished he could get on his wavelength, but he can't.

How could a man be born when he is old? He recognizes that it's necessary; that it's desirable; that it's important. But in my experience, Nicodemus is saying, "I can't see how this can happen." It's not the desirability of being reborn that Nicodemus is questioning. It's simply the possibility. It's the mechanics of the matter that troubled him. Let's assume that at the end of the conversation, Nicodemus thanked Jesus for his time. As he shuffled on back home through the darkened streets of pre-dawn Jerusalem, what, I wonder, was going on in his mind? Did he get it when Jesus was referring to himself, when he talked about the Son of God? Did he understand that when Jesus was talking about his crucifixion, that that would be a way of saving the world? Did he really get it, that metaphor of being born again? Well, did that metaphor, that image, sound as silly to him as he walked away is when he first heard it? We don't really know.

What we do know is that if [Nicodemus] went home, a saved man, experiencing that new life that Jesus can bring and he might have done because he does reappear again at the burial of Jesus, making sure he gets a decent tunic. So if he experienced that gift of new life, it wasn't because he managed to figure it out himself. It wasn't that Jesus said, "Well, you're such a great teacher. Here it is." If Jesus managed to make anything clear, it was the idea that salvation doesn't come as a reward or a prize given as a response to any accomplishments that we may have. That if it comes, the gift of new life, seeing the kingdom of God is always a miracle with a divine origin. It's a God given gift. St. Paul's word for this miracle is grace. We see it in the epistle that we have read. "For this reason, it all depends on faith in order that the promise may rest on grace..."

If on his way home, the penny dropped for Nicodemus and he got it, if he came to experience

God's new life, he hadn't earned it. It wasn't because he was smart and Israel's religious teacher, it was because he'd been born again of the Holy Spirit. Lent is a time to reflect on our own spiritual life, to think about our own new life in Christ, our own response to his promise of new birth. Are we more of a Nicodemus or an Abraham? It isn't that one is wrong, and one is right, but it does help to know where we are on that spectrum. Where are we on the spiritual journey? Where is the spirit stirring in us?

Lent is the time to think about those questions. Actually, in this context of morning prayer, when we end our service, we want to listen to one of Bach's cantatas in the way that they were meant to be listened to in this liturgical framework at the end of the service in response to the sermon where Bach himself has wrestled with the passage that we've just heard, and written a piece to follow the sermon on that text. Let's use this Lenten opportunity to reflect on those big questions that come out of this passage. The piece we hear has several movements in it, and as we listen to it, maybe the movements of the music may help us to discern the movement of God in our life.

So, let's be quiet. Be still. Open ourselves up to the Spirit of God, who still comes to His people, who are still reborn and receive that promise and gift of new life. That is, let God, by His Spirit, minister to us through this music and take time to be quiet and to reflect on where we are on our spiritual journey. We've seen how Nicodemus reacted to that encounter with Jesus. What is our experience? What is our response?