

OPENING SENTENCE:

Jesus calls us to be His disciples, we take up the cross and follow him.

PRAYER of ADORATION:

We give you thanks God our Father, for mercy that reaches out, for patience that waits our return, for love that is always ready to welcome us and bring us home. You are faithful, and you are kind. Today we join together with each other, to declare your praise and to worship you, and you alone. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ, AMEN.

Sermon: Midnight Visit

Scripture: John 3:1-17

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things? Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. "For 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." Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD!

If any character from the Bible can be regarded as representative of twenty-first century church members, it might be Nicodemus. In many ways he is a sympathetic character. A successful and self-confident man, he plays a leadership role in his community. He is spiritually open and curious, yet also rational. He approaches Jesus directly and tries to figure out Jesus' actions and social networks. He is committed and curious enough that he makes an appointment to talk with Jesus face to face. However, Nicodemus is not ready to go public with his interest in Jesus, so he makes the appointment in the middle of the night, when he can keep his faith secret, separated from the rest of his life. His imagination is caught by Jesus, but he wants to compartmentalize whatever faith he has. Nicodemus is not ready to declare his faith in the light of day, not prepared to change his life.

Nicodemus must have been wealthy. When Jesus died, Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes for his body, weighing about a hundred pounds. (John 19:39). And only a wealthy man could have brought that. Nicodemus was a Pharisee. The Pharisees were the best people in the whole country. There were never more than 6,000 of them; they were a brotherhood. They entered the brotherhood by taking a pledge that they would spend all their lives observing every detail of the scribal law. Nicodemus was a ruler of the

Jews. He was a member of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin was a court of the Jews, and they held religious jurisdiction over every Jew in the world; and one of its duties was to examine and deal with anyone suspected of being a false prophet. It is amazing that Nicodemus should come to Jesus at all. Nicodemus belonged to a distinguished Jewish family, going back to 63 BC. If that is true, it is amazing that this Jewish aristocrat should come to this homeless prophet who had been a carpenter, that he might talk to him about his soul.

It was by night that Nicodemus came to Jesus. There were two reasons for that. It may have been a sign of caution.

Nicodemus quite frankly may not have wished to commit himself by coming to Jesus by day. With Nicodemus' background it was infinitely better to come at night than not at all. It is a miracle of grace that Nicodemus overcame his prejudices and his upbringing and his whole view of life enough to come to see Jesus.

Another reason is the rabbis declared that the best time to study the law was at night when it could be done undisturbed. Throughout the day, Jesus was surrounded by crowds of people all the time. It may well be that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night because he wanted an absolutely private and completely undisturbed time with Jesus. Nicodemus was a puzzled man, a man with many honors and yet with something lacking in his life. He came to Jesus for a talk so that somehow in the darkness of the night he might find the light. When Nicodemus came to Jesus, he said that no one could help being impressed with the signs and wonders that he did. Jesus' answer was that it was not the signs and the wonders that were really important; the important thing was such a change in a person's inner life that it could only be described as a new birth.

When Jesus said that it was necessary to be born anew, Nicodemus misunderstood him. To be born anew is to undergo such a radical change that it is like a new birth; it is to have something happen to the soul which can only be described as being born all over again; and the whole process is not a human achievement, but because it comes from the grace and power of God.

How can anyone, he said, enter again into his mother's womb and be born a second time when he is already an old man? But there is more to Nicodemus' answer than that. In his heart, there was a great unsatisfied longing. Nicodemus said, "You talk about being born anew; you talk about this radical, fundamental change which is so necessary. I know that it is necessary; but in my experience it is impossible. There is nothing I would like more; but you might as well tell me, a fully grown man, to enter into my mother's womb and be born again." It is not the desirability of this change that Nicodemus questioned; that he knew only too well; it is the possibility. Nicodemus is up against the eternal problem, the problem of someone who wants to be changed and who cannot change himself.

Now this was not an idea which was strange to the people of that time. Jews knew about rebirth. When a proselyte, a person from another faith, embraced Judaism, the rabbi's said, "is like a new-born child." So radical was the change that the sins he had committed before his reception were all done away with, for now he was a different person.

It is only when God's grace enters into us and takes possession of us and changes us that we can give to him the reverence and the devotion we ought to give. It is through Jesus Christ that we are reborn; it is when he enters into possession of our hearts and lives that the change comes.

When that happens, we are born of the water and the Spirit. There are two thoughts there. Water is the symbol of cleansing. When Jesus takes possession of our lives, when we love him with all our heart, the sins of the past are forgiven and forgotten. The Spirit is the symbol of power. When Jesus takes possession of our lives, it is not that the past is forgotten and forgiven; but into life there enters a new power which enables us to be what by ourselves we could never be and to do what by ourselves we could never do.

Water and Spirit stand for the cleansing and the strengthening power of Christ, which wipes out the past and gives victory in the future. John lays down a great law, "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is Spirit". Human beings by themselves are flesh, and their power is limited to

what the flesh can do. By themselves, they cannot be other than defeated and frustrated; that we know only too well; it is the universal fact of human experience. But the very essence of the Spirit is power and life which are beyond human power and human life; and when the Spirit takes possession of us, the defeated life of human nature becomes the victorious life of God. To be born again is to be changed in such a way that it can be described only as rebirth and re-creation. The change comes when we love Jesus and allow him into our hearts. Then we are forgiven for the past and armed by the Spirit for the future; then we can truly accept the will of God. There is also the misunderstanding of those who are unwilling to understand; there is a failure to see which comes from the refusal to see. Some people can deliberately shut their minds to truth which they do not wish to accept. Nicodemus was like that.

The teachings about a new birth from God should not have been strange to him. Nicodemus was an expert in Scripture, and again and again the prophets had spoken of that very experience of which Jesus was speaking. If people do not wish to be reborn, they will deliberately misunderstand what rebirth means. If people do not wish to be changed, they will deliberately shut their eyes and their minds and their hearts to the power which can change them. What is the matter with so many of us is the fact that, when Jesus Christ comes with his offer to change us and re-create us, we more or less say: "No thank you: I am quite satisfied with myself as I am, and I don't want to be changed." In effect he said: "This rebirth about which you talk about may be possible; but I don't understand how it works." So Jesus said to Nicodemus: "You can hear and see and feel the wind; but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going to. You may not understand how or why the wind blows; but you can see what it does. You may not understand where a gale came from or where it is going to, but you can see the trail of flattened fields and uprooted trees that it leaves behind it.

There are many things about the wind you may not understand; but its effect is plain for all to see." "The Spirit is exactly the same. You may not know how the Spirit works; but you can see the effect of the Spirit in human lives."

There are any number of things in this world which we use every day without knowing how they work. Few of us know how electricity or radio or television works; but we do not deny that they exist because of that. Many of us drive a car with only the haziest notion of what goes on inside an engine; but our lack of understanding does not prevent us using and enjoying the benefits which a car offers. We may not understand how the Spirit works; but the effect of the Spirit on the lives of men and women is there for all to see. The unanswerable argument for Christianity is the Christian life. No one can disregard a faith which is able to make bad people good.

Jesus said to Nicodemus; "I have tried to make things simple for you; I have used simple human pictures taken from everyday life; and you have not understood.

How can you ever expect to understand the deep things if even the simple things are beyond you?" There is a warning here for every one of us. It is easy to sit in discussion groups, to sit and to read books; it is easy to discuss the intellectual truth of Christianity; but the essential thing is to experience the power of Christianity. And it is fatally easy to start at the wrong end and to think Christianity as something to be discussed, not as something to be experienced. It is certainly important to have an intellectual grasp of every aspect of Christian truth; but it is still more important to have a vital experience of the power of Jesus Christ. When we undergo treatment from a doctor, when we have surgery, when we are given some medicine to take, we do not need to know the anatomy of the human body, the scientific effect of the anesthetic, the way in which the drugs work on our bodies, in order to get cured. Ninety-nine out of one hundred accept the cure without being able to say how it was brought about. There is a sense in which Christianity is like that. At its heart there is a mystery, but it is not the mystery of intellectual appreciation; it is the mystery of redemption.

For Jesus, the cross was the way to glory; had he refused it, had he evaded it, had he taken steps to escape it, as he might easily have done, there would have been no glory for him. It is the same for us. We can, if we like, choose the easy way; we can, if we like, refuse the cross that every Christian is called to bare; but if we do, we lose the glory. It is an unalterable law of life that there is no cross, there is no crown.

PRAYER:

Almighty God, whose Son was revealed in majesty before he suffered death upon the cross: Give us faith to perceive his glory, that we may be strengthened to bare our cross, and be changed into his likeness, from glory to glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. AMEN.

BENEDICTION:

How can we be sure that Jesus knew what he was talking about? What guarantee is there that his wonderful, good news is true? We believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that in him is the mind of God, that he knew God so well, was so close to God, was so one with God, that he could tell us the absolute truth about him. GO IN PEACE!