

Nicodemus By Night *Sunday 4, Lent yr B*

The words of Jesus to Nicodemus in the Gospel are deep and mysterious. I feel this basically honest, sincere Pharisee has found his way into the heart of Christ: but he fears what it will mean. This is involved in the mysterious words “he came to Jesus by night”. He was hesitant about committing to one whose words he finds dangerously alive. But this is no trivial meeting. There is a firm sense that they are alone, for one thing; and on the few occasions when Jesus is alone with one other person powerful things occur. Remember the way he takes people away by themselves to cure them, in the Synoptic Gospels: and how he meets Mary Magdalene alone at the tomb in the dawn of Easter.

Their conversation is about the religious search for truth and meaning; but it begins with Nicodemus’ curiosity about Jesus, who has deeply impressed him. Jesus tells him, in effect, about the pilgrimage *we* are engaged on in Lent, towards the renewal of our baptism: *You must be born from above...born of the Spirit*. He then tells Nicodemus that he must learn to trust Jesus if he wants to learn about heavenly things. Then he talks about the mysterious “lifting up” of the Son of Man; when he is lifted up, God will give eternal life to all who believe in him. This, he explains, is the reason for his coming to the world, the mission of his life:

God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son,
so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost, but may have eternal life.

For this moment of salvation to happen, it is necessary that the Son should be “lifted up”; and we understand that his lifting-up will make of him a challenge to the world, an irruption of the Eternal into the world; and when it happens, everyone on the earth will be aligned for or against the Son of Man; and that will be the moment when the world is judged.

The Synoptic Parallel - Matthew 25

That is the outlook of John’s Gospel. If we compare this language with that of St Matthew, we find that he creates a picture of the Son of Man coming in his glory escorted by *all* the angels - that is, a moment of epiphany, where the *whole* glory of God surrounds him. All the nations will be assembled before him, and he will separate people one from another, as a shepherd separates sheep from goats. Then he reveals the lines on which judgment will be passed. They are surprising: *the lives we have lived* already contain our verdict: *because we ourselves have judged Christ* in the poor. If we welcomed him, fed, clothed, visited, healed him, cut through the shame of his condition to stand with him, then we shall enter his kingdom as heirs. If not, we shall depart from him - not cursed by him, but “with your own curse upon you”. The principle difference between the Synoptics and John is that they place this meeting with the exalted Christ in the future, in an eschatological frame - where the world as we know it has been brought to an end. John seems to say that it will take place here and now: the end of the world as we have known it is now. To understand this we need to know that “the World” for John usually means the world that is against God, the world that does not and cannot know God. The world is the enemy Christ came to defeat: and it is our enemy too, so that Jesus can say:

In the world you will have trouble, but be of good cheer:
I have overcome the world.

The Son Of Man Must Be Raised Up

In our John extract, the judgment still takes place *within us* - by our believing or refusing to believe in the name of God's *only* Son (there will not be a second way of deciding) - but it is in response to the "raising up" of the Son. What does this raising-up entail?

Firstly, it entails the establishment of Jesus himself as the main object of decision for human history. We are never to think that our judgment - collective, as the human race, but also individual, as believers - is anything less than the one great life-and-death issue. Forget the confused questions about people who live in the jungle and never get hold of the catechism. The teaching of the Christian Church says that people's eternal destiny is determined by their decision about the Son of God. You don't have to have met him, or to know him, or to understand the Christian Gospel to make this decision; if that were so, we could never imagine God's justice prevailing in a world where millions have never been free to acknowledge him, or have never even heard of Christ.

Remember how in Matthew's judgment-story the people who have fed him and clothed him *didn't know what they were doing*¹; but they still pass his testing, and inherit his Kingdom as heirs. So with the Nicodemus story: the raising up of the Son has to be mysteriously present in all human history, wherever people have been presented with the issue of good and evil, light and darkness, and have made their free choice for death or for life. The Son of Man is raised up in every such crisis, and people declare themselves for him or against him in their free commitment or refusal of their lives.

Secondly, it must also entail the way in which human nature, as it has always been, runs true to type in the direct encounter between God and humanity: the Incarnation itself. Jesus is truly the Son of God, and Caiaphas and Judas and Peter and Pilate are just the random individuals who surround him as he comes to light in the first century. But in the story generated by his career amongst them, Jesus is raised up to the dock of *all* human history, and provokes the decision of the human race he encounters. They, in their turn, deliver the message of the fallen race to God: and they take part in the raising-up of the Son by what they decide: that he must be killed, and that his death must be exemplary. In this way the Cross is brought forth, and Jesus is raised up on it. In that posture he still reigns over human history, demanding a response from every member of the human family. By our response we take up our position in the judgment-scene, on his right hand or on his left.

Thirdly, the raising-up of the Son brings to an end the waiting, the suspension of judgment which paralysed our knowledge and our understanding. Now we know the truth that answers our deepest questions, to wit:

- We know *the truth about human nature* in the presence of God: that we are rebellious towards him, and violently so, that we are blinded from recognising him, and capable of murder in our refusal to respond to him. We wrought this response in the lives of his prophets; we wreak it again on the person of his Son. The Cross is thus the icon of our irreligion, our refusal to belong to God.
- We know *the truth about our policies and devices*: presented with the holiness of God we create a human disaster, and raise up in the heart of humanity an appalling carnage which is sanctioned by our religious leadership, our politicians, and our common voice. We ask, "How could this outrage be our response to the central initiative from the Creator to the earth he has made?" *But so it is.*
- We know *the truth about God*, in the matter of human history. The extreme cruelty of the Crucifixion tells us everything about the extreme fidelity of God towards his covenant with the earth. It does not depend *at all* on the response of human beings. It is the will of God that we should know his Son, the Beloved, on whom his favour

¹ any more than the engineers of his death in Luke: *Father, forgive them - they don't know what they are doing*

rests. To make that possible, God delivers his Son to us, and his Son delivers his life to the same end. We “explore this tenderness of his” to the terminal extent of piercing his pericardium with the point of a spear, so that blood and water appear. As our enquiry has already established, God does not waver before our cruelty. He remains the loving Father, and Jesus perseveres in being the obedient Son.

- Now we know *the matter of our judgment*. There is no other Son than this: we can't choose a different place and time for the moment of judgment. This is the moment about which we will be judged: where we stand at this moment is going to determine the whole truth about us in eternity.

Let's not try to deceive ourselves about the Passion: it would have happened if Jesus had waited twenty centuries to be born; its “necessity” is not down to anything hidden in divine secrets, nor is its firmness decided by anything special about the Jews. Jesus rolls the human agenda to the brink of divinity, calling on us to be loving, truthful human beings and to risk the loss of everything by surrendering ourselves in love. We could *never* have afforded him, and still paid our taxes and sustained our institutions. It is *we* who stand outside Pilate's house and call for him to be crucified.

Where Is Judgment For John's Gospel?

So let us try to point up the terms of this moment of crisis, the judgment of mankind, and our own personal judgment. What is it like to *believe in* the one so raised up, and what is it like to *refuse to believe*? Matthew made it a very simple morality-question: did we feed the hungry, clothe the naked? What does John say?

On these grounds is sentence pronounced: that though the Light has come into the world, men have shown they prefer darkness to the light, because their deeds were evil. Indeed, anybody who does wrong hates the light and avoids it, for fear his actions should be exposed; but whoever lives by the truth comes out into the light, so that it may plainly be seen that what he does, is done in God.

You can see that John has a much grander perspective, pitched between earth and heaven. It seems that we cling to our worldly, godless perspective, ignoring the fact that the whole human landscape is dominated by the massive truth of the Cross. *The light has come into the world*. This is the raising-up of the Son of Man. Our humanity has a choice to make: but what a choice! He is raised up - crucified - because his love is too great for the boundaries set by the human world.

- We can shake our heads in regret for his idealism, and nod our heads as the authorities pass their sentence, and we can choose how we stand to watch him die: mocking him, from the safety of our human careers and pension-plans, all still safely in position on Holy Saturday.
- Or we can feel silent, undecided, confused, going home like the people in Luke, beating our breasts sadly, to our dishonoured houses. Another prophet gone west in Jerusalem; Passover tonight and tomorrow, and back to work in the morning. It'll all be the same in a hundred years.
- We can go home with the shattered disciples, who “cannot go with him now”, and who have lost every shred of the understanding they thought they had a week ago....with Peter, who came so badly to grief on Thursday night. Where's Judas? Now we are eleven. What possessed us to get involved in this business? We're at the end of the line. Perhaps we'd better head home and face the music. Wonder if the boat's still there.
- Or there is the martyr's option: to “come with him now”, to join him in his raised-up position before the rest of mankind.

“Believing in the one who is raised up”, we can now see, is a very different business from “believing in Jesus of Nazareth”. We read the Gospel easily from end to end because it is the Church’s book, and it does its best to present it all as one consistent story. But the Crucifixion puts an end to one story: the teacher a Pharisee like Nicodemus might have felt easy with dies on Calvary. That’s why Paul couldn’t listen to it either. We Christians find it incredible: why can’t they see? Why don’t they cotton on, fall in, and follow him? We forget that the Cross must have settled the matter for most people, made everything that much clearer; he’s done what we thought he might, and come to a very sticky end; and *you too were with Jesus of Nazareth....why, you are a Galilean!*

We’ve become used to the idea that our Founder was crucified. Now, of course, it’s all different. Crucifixion doesn’t apply; we live in a world that is converted by his values, and which no longer crucifies people; not like those nasty Jews who had such narrow minds and such ghastly cruel customs. Still, it’s worth remembering, just so that we spare a shudder for the horrible past, and know how to avoid becoming religious maniacs ourselves.

You can see that the *last* thing that’s due to happen in this understanding is that you might find the way to go with him, to carry the cross, and to be crucified yourself. Yet that is what he asks of you: in the Synoptic Gospels

He said to everyone: If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me: for whosoever would save his life shall lose it; but whosoever shall lose his life for my sake, he will save it.

and in John:

If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also; if any man serve me, the Father will honour him. He that loves his life, loses it; he that hates his life in this world shall keep it for eternal life.

It’s a rare occurrence of parallel wording across all four Gospels. But in the context of “the one lifted up” it has its own Johannine resonance.

The First Reading

In the dispassionate words of 2 Chronicles, the description of the great disaster, the destruction of the Temple and the Babylonian Exile, covers one of the most creative and seminal periods of Jewish history. They lost everything, and then the Lord brought them back to begin again their life as a covenanted People of God. There is an obvious link between the return of the remnant to the Holy Land, to rebuild the Temple, and the beginning of Christian life after the Resurrection. Lent may be before Easter, but the Christian life for us is something we are already living, and the Lenten search for holiness is equipped with the full battery of the risen Christ’s power. *Whoever there is among you of his people, may his God be with him! Let him go up!*