

The Man Who Came by Night

a sermon preached on the

2nd Sunday in Lent

17 February 2008

at

St Luke's in the City, Christchurch

by **The Reverend Francie Conolly**

Lection: John 3: 1- 17

In the name of God who shares the sacred with us
In the name of the son who shares humanity with us
In the name of the Spirit who unsettles and inspires us.

Just after Christmas after some years of positive urging from our daughter we joined Alice in Video land and since then we have revisited many old favourites , we have again seen some familiar Westerns, become part again of the drama of “High Noon” sung along with the beautiful singing and music of the Welsh people and the tragedy and rebirth of “How Green Was My Valley “ We have wandered the world with Rick Stein as he experienced new vistas , different countries their culture and cuisine , and with Michael Palin as he explored the countries and their very different geography , people and cultures and customs around the Pacific rim .Especially we have experienced some very unsettling and inspiring Australian movies, some fiction , some deep truths and renewed even reawakened understandings of human life and the breaking through of the sacred in the drama of everyday life and people, and especially the aboriginal. Experiences and renewed understandings that at times left me questioning, sometimes unsettled and certainly at times inspired ...

So when I was doing some reading and searching around today's Gospel when one biblical commentator gave this particular passage the title “The Man who came by Night”. It brought a certain ring and questioning , and I wondered what renewed understanding and experience would emerge .Yes I obviously knew this particular story of the visit of Nicodemus a well known , well educated ,well heeled Pharisee and teacher of the law who came by night to spend time with Jesus because after hearing the new understanding of the law Jesus had been sharing , had questions and wonderings he wished to share.

So why come by night ? why not question Jesus openly during the day ?, while he was teaching and moving among the people , for he Nicodemus was well used to public life , and talking and questioning with his peers. Nicodemus came by night for the very reasons mentioned , he was one of the foremost teachers of the Law and as a Pharisee , he not only taught the innermost understandings and truths of the Law ,the most sacred thing in the world for the Hebrew race , he also lived it to the very last detail and what might others think and surmise.

For many centuries the Law had been regarded as the perfect word of God and to add one word or to take it away was regarded as a deadly sin , the Law as it stood consisted of great wide and noble principles, everything considered necessary for the living of a good and upright life. However at this time about this time in Hebrew history the teachers had proclaimed that now the Law by itself was not enough and “there must now be a regulation to govern every possible moment for every possible man”, and so from the great principles of the Law a great number of rules to govern every conceivable situation in life came into being .

The Law was thus changed from one of great principles into a legalism of by-laws and regulations .For example to tie a knot on the Sabbath was now regarded as work but the type of knot needed to be defined those tied by camel drivers or sailors were illegal ,yet a woman was still able to tie a knot to do up her sandals or part of her clothes or around the top of the wine or oil skin , or if you could tie or untie a knot with one hand that too was legal . but you could not tie a knot to a bucket to lower it into the well for water ,yet you could tie it to a woman's girdle and lower that into the water. And so they continued Although these were religious laws , is there not an echo of that within the OSH and other endless laws we are being surrounded and asked to subscribe to in our daily living today ?

The Scribes worked out these regulations and the Pharisees dedicated their lives to keeping them. Because the name Pharisee means the Separated One ,these men literally separated themselves away from ordinary life in order to keep every detail as written down by the scribes. How far they had come from the ten

commandments handed down by Moses to love and honour God and to care for their neighbour ! No wonder with Jesus reinterpretation of that Law “To love others unconditionally as he loved “ to be good news for the poor , release for the captives , recovery of sight for the blind and liberty for those who are oppressed “ that a thinking person such as Nicodemus became drawn to this new way and significance of understanding and living..

Some biblical commentators give Nicodemus a bad press because he came by night to meet with Jesus but there are probably a couple of reasons why this happened. May be he was not yet ready to commit himself to Jesus teaching and was still searching and wished to do this privately , and don't we all at times when we may be exploring new dimensions of thought and experience. (Certainly, I know at times react that way.) We are told that the rabbis said the best time to study the Law was at night when life was more peaceful and the pressures of the every day not so great. So maybe this was a matter of habit and Nicodemus only wished to have a peaceful and undisturbed time of discussion and searching .

Whatever the reason Nicodemus came and asked “Rabbi we know you are teacher who has come from God , for no one can do the signs which you do unless God is with you”. Jesus reply came quick and fast. “This is the truth I tell you ...unless a man is reborn from above he cannot see the kingdom of God.” During the following dialogue when Nicodemus asks how any one can be physically born again ...Jesus tells him it is not physical rebirth that is necessary , that is not what he is talking of ,but it is only by allowing oneself to experience spiritual rebirth , to be unsettled and inspired through the power and movement of the Spirit that we become to understand and know what is of God , of the Spirit, what is the sacred , what is the holy . And simply once having experienced it and knowing it , to live out the love of God through the energy and movement of the Spirit just as Jesus has shown us .

The idea of rebirth is not just something crucial to John's Gospel for Matthew also has a similar understanding put more simply when he quotes Jesus saying to the disciples and the people, “Unless you turn and become like little children , you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” For how well Jesus must have understood the uncluttered , responsive and trusting minds and ways of small children. This could not have been too much of a surprise to Nicodemus for a person coming to the Jewish faith was not accepted by Judaism until through prayer ,sacrifice and baptism he had become regarded as “reborn”.

However we are told Nicodemus still seemed to misunderstand Jesus teaching of the spirit (the Ruach in Hebrew) as the wind that blows where it will ,that we may not understand how and why it blows ,but that we can see what it does ,and as we do during a nor or sou wester how it feels and can affect and unsettle us and the effect on the land and farming .Jesus final words to Nicodemus comes as a warning , yet also an invitation not just to him, but to each of us that if we cannot understand the simple truths of everyday life how can we ever hope to understand any deeper truths .

The prophet Micah, so many centuries before seems to have had this understanding when he said to the Hebrew people and which is still so pertinent to us today “This is what the Lord wants of you. To act justly ...to love tenderly and to walk humbly with your God .” Nothing else , no endless complicated rules and laws . Nicodemus came in the quiet of the evening to meet with Jesus seeking new understanding and from his reaction it was not quite what he expectedbut he was left with a new way , offer and opening to consider, live and share.

We are fortunate that these forty days of Lent provide us with a more simple reflective space and time for our worship, a time to be open ,to be unsettled , inspired and renewed by the Spirit to act justly , to love tenderly and walk humbly with all that is of God with all we meet in our every day life , in our personal relationships and in our care for our wider community and nation.

We are reminded that
As the people of the Spirit we have a human face,
We laugh, we weep, we move in faith and hope,
we lift our eyes, and stub our toes.
We love, we struggle, we fail, we stand,
and we stand on sacred ground as we affirm,
that nothing lies beyond the love of God
that we find in Jesus.
Amen.

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