

# By Night

a sermon preached at the  
**Watchnight Mass**

31 December 2010

at the

**Rose Historic Chapel**

by **Fr David Moore**

parish priest, St Luke's in the City Christchurch

Deuteronomy 30:11-20, John 3:1-12

"A Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Judeans... came to Jesus by night..."<sup>1</sup>

Here, at the turning of the secular calendar year, as we mark time in the middle of the night, we are offered a model for our spiritual predicament – caught as we are in the throes of tremendous evolutionary upheaval. Nicodemus is a model for the honest seeker after truth in the midst of such a circumstance. He is a Pharisee. This means that he stands within the faith tradition. He is a believer, an adherent of the faith, which he takes very seriously.

But he comes to Jesus 'by night'. While some have interpreted this in terms of Nicodemus' ignorance, his state of spiritual darkness, in fact this is the necessary path. The Christian problem of over-emphasising the light is surely at the root of a great deal of evil – presuming to be sole possessors of the light, repressing our own darkness, we Christians have appalling blood on our hands. All the spiritual masters have taught, by contrast, that truth must be sought in the darkness – in the desert, in the Abyss, in the Cloud of Unknowing, in the dark night of the soul, in the darkness of earth,<sup>2</sup> in the total darkness of crucifixion.

Nicodemus acknowledges that in Jesus he has discerned a 'teacher from God'.<sup>3</sup> He recognises that Jesus stands firmly in the tradition with which he is intimately familiar as Pharisee. This is a courageous stance, since others of his fraternity, as John later tells the reader, frightened by Jesus, refuse to accept what is obvious to Nicodemus.<sup>4</sup> The spiritual search requires such courage. Even risky devotion such as we find in the third and last mention of Nicodemus by the evangelist – in the end the loving provider of expensive myrrh and aloes for the burial of Jesus' body.<sup>5</sup>

But the surprising contribution of the Nicodemus symbol to the Christian believer is his willingness to expose himself to that which he cannot grasp - what is coming to birth in human consciousness. Not only does Nicodemus recognise Jesus' credentials as a faithful Jewish teacher – he opens himself to the light who is coming into the world, the light which penetrates the darkness. Paradoxically, too much light renders vision in the darkness impossible. Nicodemus' night-time visit to Jesus points to the necessary way for spiritual enlightenment and for salvation. In the darkness Jesus is able to reveal to Nicodemus the deeper light: "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit."<sup>6</sup>

This is the great illumination in the darkness, to which Nicodemus willingly exposes himself. Here is the great uniting symbol which has eluded the Pharisaic mind thus far – being over-dependent upon Spirit. The paradox here is that the search for spiritual truth fails in its trajectory when it over-emphasises Spirit, rationality. This is the state of affairs which besets all pharisaic manifestations – not only the Jewish party known by that name, but just as much Christians over-

---

<sup>1</sup> John 3:1-2a  
<sup>2</sup> John 12:24  
<sup>3</sup> John 3:2b  
<sup>4</sup> John 7:50-52  
<sup>5</sup> John 19:39  
<sup>6</sup> John 3:5

emphasising the rational aspects of doctrine and scripture. Such an excess of spirit needs to be plunged into water – perhaps precisely what the Baptiser had intuited.

The descent into water is an immersion in the instinctual, in the great and unfathomable Abyss, in the non-rational, in a deep and dazzling darkness which is primal. Being born the first time is an awakening to potency of the flesh. Flesh is good, Genesis assures us,<sup>7</sup> nevertheless what is born of flesh remains merely that.<sup>8</sup> And flesh under the influence of an excess of Spirit is still merely flesh, but now inflated, dangerous potentially lethal – as religious history amply illustrates. Whereas 'being born again' is an immersion of the excess of Spirit which results from that necessary awakening into the dark chaos of instinct and matter. Perhaps it was this intuition which guided the church in shaping its great Easter Vigil rite – the newly-lit Paschal Candle plunged three times into the freshly-filled waters of the font; a rite undertaken in the darkness of night heralding the first day of the new creation.

Thus Nicodemus models for us the quest for the deeper significance of the initiation foreshadowed by the Baptiser. He is an image of the spiritual path – remaining firmly within the faith tradition, while submitting to the wisdom of watery darkness which seems to challenge and threaten his tradition. Willingness to submit to this deeper initiation is the path, Jesus assures him, to the unification of water and Spirit which is entry into the Kingdom of God.

"How can these things be?"<sup>9</sup> Nicodemus' question is an honest one – it is, of course, our question also. Nicodemus' two later appearances in John's gospel amply demonstrate his willingness to live with this honest question until such time as the great uniting symbol revealed itself. In this way, also, Nicodemus models for us a way through our own night which we experience in the passage of the years.

[david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz](mailto:david@stlukesinthecity.org.nz)

---

<sup>7</sup> Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31  
<sup>8</sup> John 3:6  
<sup>9</sup> John 3:9