

In the name of God, who through the Word and in the Spirit creates, redeems, and sanctifies. Amen.

Last Sunday evening, as I normally do, I read the next Sunday's lectionary passages. Last Sunday, I had some other things on my mind as I read what we just heard this morning; last Sunday, I was thinking about the memorial service for George Floyd that took place on Tuesday; and I was looking forward to the conversation we would have on the book *Caste* by Isabel Wilkerson on Wednesday; with these things in my mind, I found myself reimagining today's Gospel in a way I hadn't considered before.

We often think of Nicodemus coming by night to see Jesus as a secretive act, a meeting that Nicodemus doesn't want the other Pharisees to know about. We often see the interaction between Nicodemus and Jesus as an argument between an expert in the law and a rabbi who are on different sides of a concept. Instead, this week I saw an exchange between one man whose very spirit has been disturbed by Jesus' presence; and the Son of God who is making that man question his understanding of himself and of God. Jesus and his work and his teaching are keeping Nicodemus up at night. Who Jesus is and what Jesus is doing is troubling Nicodemus,

leaving him in such spiritual discomfort that he can't even sleep.

Nicodemus is pulled out of bed and driven to see Jesus in order to try to settle or soothe the discomfort he is feeling.

In Nicodemus' words I hear something else besides a desire for understanding; I hear in Nicodemus' words a deep, deep longing. "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." I can clearly see that you come from God, Nicodemus is saying. I can hear Nicodemus struggling with what that means; what does it mean if this Jesus, who talks to Samaritan women, and heals on the Sabbath, and eats with outcasts and sinners - what does it mean that *he* is the one who comes from God? If Nicodemus is a good Pharisee, he is dedicated to making sure that Jewish law is followed properly; Nicodemus wants to be sure that everyone is getting it right, that he is getting it right. A good Pharisee would study the law, and argue about its meaning, and structure his behaviour in hopes that he wouldn't do anything that violated those sacred teachings passed down to him. And here was Jesus, whose very presence broke down all those structures which had shaped Nicodemus' life. Nicodemus' soul responds

to Jesus in recognition that Jesus can come from no other than God; and it wakes Nicodemus up.

Jesus' response to Nicodemus, I think, can be seen as Jesus affirming what Nicodemus' soul has recognised. We often read it as another commandment, or a criticism, another task Nicodemus must accomplish when Jesus says, "Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'" Instead, I think Jesus can be heard saying: Nicodemus, if you have recognised that I come from God, then you have seen the kingdom of God, and you have been born from above.

I can almost hear Nicodemus thinking, I've been a good Pharisee; it has shaped my whole life, it has defined who I am; I have grown old in that identity, and have built my whole way of seeing the world on it. I have grown worn and tired in that identity. How can I be any different? How can the shape of my life be changed after all this time, and all my efforts to keep it small and hemmed in by the law in fear of God's condemnation?

And Jesus gives him words of great hope: "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.”

These words affirm that what has been keeping Nicodemus up at night is in fact the Spirit of God renewing his life. Jesus seems to say, Why are you surprised that I said, Wow, this man knows me! This man has to have been born from above! God’s Spirit can touch you, Nicodemus, and every one of us, without us even asking or being aware that it’s happening. God has awakened in you a new life, Nicodemus.

And Nicodemus’ response to this good news is one of hopeful doubt: “How can these things be?” Can this really be true? Can it really be that my life has begun anew, as if I had been born in my old age?

Jesus’ response gently, and I think with humour, points out that a lifetime of focusing on the rules and upholding a fearful structure as Nicodemus the Pharisee did, left Nicodemus the child of God unprepared for the touch of the Spirit. “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?” Jesus asks.

Nicodemus has built his life and his practice around the fear of being condemned by the law; Jesus has come to him with the message that God

does not seek to condemn Nicodemus, but to heal him; “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.”

The story of Nicodemus’ awakening was not the only one I read this week. In Isabel Wilkerson’s book *Caste*, she shares the story of a man from India, a man born at the very top of its society, a man taught from infancy that he was better than, more worthy, and more righteous than everyone else. But as he grows older, he begins to suspect that those who he was taught were far below him actually might share in his humanity. He sees the inequities that a society shaped this way gives rise to; he meets some of these people that he was taught were unworthy and he finds intelligence, and potential, and capabilities and beauty more than equal to his own. He, like Nicodemus, realises that the entire framework on which his life was built was something dead and spiritless. This man from India compared it to being given a crown just by chance of who your ancestors were. “It is a fake crown that we wear,” he said. “My message would be to take off the fake crown. It will cost you more to keep it than to let it go. It is not real... You will be happier and freer without it. You will see all of humanity. You will find your true self.’ And so he had discovered. ‘There was a stench

coming from my body. I have located the corpse inside my mind. I have given it a decent burial. And now my journey can begin.”

This man, like Nicodemus, found his spirit troubled; he began to see the humanity of the people around him and so discovered his own humanity; he began to see a different way of being, a way that embraced the least of these and the outcast; and his spirit was awakened. He was born from above to begin life anew.

On this Sunday, Trinity Sunday, we contemplate the dance of the Spirit between the divine and human faces of God. She moves through and in and between the two in God and in humanity made in the image of God. The Spirit moves through and in and between us, uniting the beauty of humanity in the fullness of our creation with the divine image in which we were made; she unites us, if we surrender to her, in a sacred union with one another as children of God, beloved and created to love. Like Nicodemus and the man in Wilkerson’s book, we will not know peace until we allow that divine mystery to have full expression in our lives. We will not have peace until we lay to rest those lifeless structures which gripped us in our past, left us servants of fear, and blinded us to the beauty within

ourselves and of those around us. May the Holy Spirit continue to disturb us; may we continue to look to Jesus to teach us and reveal to us what our souls already know; and may we in humility live as children of a God who loves us beyond our own understanding. And as we are born anew, may we, day by day, minute by minute, in turn renew the world. Amen.