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Knowing God (John 3. 1-17)

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'Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews' (John 3.1). This is Nicodemus' first appearance in the gospel of John and there will be two more. In a few chapters' time, he'll be heard arguing that Jesus should be given a hearing by the Jewish Council which is inclined to condemn him out of hand (John 7. 50-51); and after Jesus is crucified, Nicodemus will join with Joseph of Arimathea in preparing his body for burial, contributing staggering quantities of valuable spices – myrrh and aloe – 100 pounds worth. Yet Nicodemus appears in none of the other gospel narratives and he's not reliably identified with any known historical figure. Did he ever actually live? Or is he a kind of allegorical figure – one who symbolises the journey from doubt to faith, from hesitation to commitment, from furtive inquiry to daring solidarity?

I once had an idea for what I wanted to call 'The Nicodemus Centre' as part of Benedictus, which I imagined as a space or set of programs explicitly designed for spiritual seekers! I've always identified with the hints we're given of Nicodemus's spiritual journey, and I meet many others who seem like him. Those who come to my office quietly and privately, wanting to inquire about God and the meaning of Jesus, sharing their yearning and their doubting, and the fact this isn't a quest they can readily share with their families, friends or colleagues. Like Nicodemus, these people sense there might be something true, something of God in what Jesus says and does, but they struggle to reconcile this inkling with everything else they know and have trusted in.

In the case of Nicodemus, steeped in the Torah, he was rightly wary of idolatry and false prophecy, of anyone (like Jesus) claiming to speak and act for God without proper authorisation. In our case, steeped in post-Enlightenment thinking, many of us struggle to reconcile the so-called truths of faith with our scientific worldview, our

evolving cosmos and our secular culture. I think there's integrity in these struggles. We don't want to be misled, to yield to false consolation or promise; at the same time, something draws us which we cannot simply ignore. A former colleague told me he'd once described himself as 'an atheist troubled by doubt'. So how do we discern between truth and illusion in the domain of spirit? How is it possible to come to know God truly, if God is true? What might the dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus suggest about the way?

To begin, there's the question of *how* we may come to know truthfully. Nicodemus approaches Jesus signifying his readiness to listen and learn. 'Rabbi', he calls him; 'Teacher'. He indicates he's already seen something that he's inclined to trust: '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'. For Jesus, the fact that Nicodemus has recognised this much is itself a sign that he's on the way, that God is already at work in him: 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above'.

Nicodemus, however, seems more confused than encouraged by this remark. What does being 'born from above' mean? 'How can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?' Scholars suggest Nicodemus is unlikely to be as obtuse as this makes him sound. His words look like a move in rabbinical argument. He deliberately presses the literal meaning to the point of absurdity (of course no one can enter their mother's womb a second time), in order to invite Jesus to draw out his metaphor. Which Jesus then does, by distinguishing what is born of flesh from what is born of spirit. 'Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit'.

This is an allusion to baptism and thus to conversion. What Jesus seems to be saying is that coming to know God, entering into relationship with God, these aren't things we can reason our way into, or make happen under our own steam. Jesus makes the same point in Matthew's gospel. When his disciple Peter suddenly recognises him and declares him to be 'the Messiah, the Son of the living God', Jesus

responds: 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven' (Matthew 16. 16-17). In other words, only as our way of seeing and knowing is touched **by** God, will we be capable of seeing and knowing God. 'What is born of the flesh is flesh; what is born of the Spirit is spirit'.

This might sound frustratingly, even perniciously, circular reasoning. But what it points to is the necessity of a shift in register. God is not like another object in the universe; in fact, God is not an object in the universe at all, and this means that our usual ways of sensing, conceiving and imagining are insufficient for apprehending God. Thus, awareness of or attunement to God's reality calls for an awakening of other capacities of the knowing self – and this awakening is itself a gift. 'The wind blows where it chooses ...'.

Please note, it's not that this quickened way of knowing invalidates or contradicts knowledge of the world gained through science and discursive reason. All it means is that science and discursive reason, by themselves, will not bring us to knowledge of God, for this touches into another dimension. The tradition speaks of the 'heart's knowing' and of the 'spiritual senses' both of which are fruits of our seeking, our waiting, our prayer and ultimately of grace. As Jesus goes on to say in John's gospel, this is what he has come to make available. This is the Spirit he will breathe into his disciples after his death.

And this brings us to the second section of the dialogue with Nicodemus, in which Jesus begins to speak not only of the Spirit but of himself as an access to knowing God. He says that he knows God: 'we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony'. He says he is the one who mediates between realms, the Son of Man ascending to and descending from heaven. And then he points Nicodemus to the necessity of the crucifixion, drawing a parallel between the 'lifting up' of the Son of Man and Moses 'lifting up the serpent in the wilderness'. The allusion is obscure, but it relates to a story in the Hebrew Scriptures in which God delivers the people of Israel from a plague of serpents which has erupted as a consequence of their faithless grumbling on their way through the

desert, as they journey from captivity in Egypt to the promised land. In this plague, the Israelites are being bitten and dying. Moses cries out to God on their behalf, and God tells him to make a poisonous serpent in bronze and set it on a pole, so that 'everyone who is bitten shall look at it and live' (Num. 21.4-9).

Significantly the cure God offers is essentially contemplative. God does not simply disappear the serpents or render them toothless. Rather, God tells the people to gaze steadily upon that which they fear, that which is bringing them suffering and death, until gradually the serpents' poison loses its power over them. Likewise Jesus, lifted up on the cross, does not remove the causes of suffering and fear from the world, but nullifies their ultimate power over life. In the crucifixion, we gaze upon the worst that can befall – humiliation, injustice, terror, death. Yet as we contemplate Jesus' suffering these things, we are liberated from their thrall. We realise they need not ultimately determine our life. Why not? Because as we gaze on him, we see through him to the One who sent him, to the God who 'so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes [or trusts] in him may not perish but may have eternal life'. As Jesus undertakes his journey through death and pain, we are shown there's a reality more encompassing than all we fear and are diminished by. We are shown the steadfast mercy and unconditional solidarity of God.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night, seeking the truth of God. He receives a teaching on a way of knowing God which is simultaneously a revelation of God's Trinitarian life. How do you come to know God? By receiving the Spirit, listening to Jesus, trusting God. How do you come to know God? From the inside out, as your life energies are connected to a larger Life, as the limits of your intelligence are expanded, as your heart is opened in compassion and yearning.

The problem, for Nicodemus, as I think for many who are seeking, or feeling themselves in some sense outside it all, is how to achieve lift off. How do I move from scepticism to faith? How do I believe with integrity? What if I don't feel this supposed wind of the Spirit? What if my critical intelligence and my fear of trusting

wrongly keep me at a distance, inquiring but unable really to open or yield myself?
Does this exclude me forever?

Well, Nicodemus talked with Jesus and went away again. He doesn't immediately become a disciple or change his life, and Jesus doesn't ask him to. Yet he remains willing to learn and critically engaged, not only with what Jesus says but in relation to his pre-existing understanding and belonging. When his fellow Pharisees criticise Nicodemus for his apparent sympathy for Jesus, he says: 'Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it? (John 7. 41). And at some point, though when it happens is invisible in the text, it seems that Nicodemus does find himself – integrity intact – in a different place, responding freely, offering daringly what is his to give. After which, we never hear of him again.

Trinity Sunday is the culmination of the whole journey of Lent and Easter. Liturgically, spiritually it's been a season of intense focus. We've contemplated Jesus' death and resurrection; we've celebrated the gift of God's Spirit at Pentecost and today we've touched on what all this means for how we come to know and image God. Next week, we embark on what used to be called 'Ordinary Time' – the slow discovery of how this story, these events connect with and enable our daily lives. And what I'd like to say is this: wherever we find ourselves at this point in our journeys, let us trust our way. Whatever we think we know or don't know, believe or don't believe, let us remain like Nicodemus willing to learn and critically engaged so that, however the journey of faith unfolds for us, we too may be true to our calling and generous in offering what is ours to share.