

Fourth Sunday in Lent Year B 2021

John 3:14-20

Fr Peter Groves

*And this the is judgement, that the light has come into
the world. (John 3.19)*

Through that pure Virgin-shrine,
That sacred veil drawn o'er thy glorious noon
That men might look and live as glow-worms shine,
And face the moon:
Wise Nicodemus saw such light
As made him know his God by night.

Most blest believer he!
Who in that land of darkness and blind eyes
Thy long expected healing wings could see,
When thou didst rise,
And what can never more be done,
Did at mid-night speak with the Sun!

The words of our gospel reading are taken from Jesus' encounter with Nicodemus, a man described as being both a Pharisee and a leader among the Jews. It is an encounter which takes place in the dark. Nicodemus, presumably, is wary of being seen with Jesus. He seeks Jesus out during the night, but he goes away enlightened. Such contrasts and inversions lend themselves to poetry, and few poets are as theologically acute as Henry Vaughan.

This is the first of several appearances of Nicodemus in the gospel narrative. He is an enquirer, unsure what he will hear and discover. Nicodemus is supposed to be a teacher of Israel, but the evangelist leaves us in no doubt who it is who is teaching new things to Israel, with the nation here represented by one of its own religious authorities.

It is night. Nicodemus has found Jesus in the darkness: as Vaughan's poem *The Night* makes clear, there is heavy irony in this. The very first chapter of the gospel told us that the light is shining in darkness

and the darkness is unable to overcome it. In chapter eight Jesus will declare himself to be the light of the world. But here and now, it is the cover of darkness which has enabled Nicodemus to take his risk, and to ask his questions, and, in so doing, to reveal his ignorance.

In John's gospel, light and judgement belong together. This is judgement, that light has come into the world and people loved light more than darkness. All who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their evil may not be exposed. In part, Nicodemus's conversation with Jesus' is an illustration of this idea. In asking questions of the one who is truth himself, Nicodemus is revealed to be sorely lacking as a teacher of Israel. But he has taken the risk of visiting Jesus, and he is prepared to expose his learning to correction by serving as pupil to this Galilean carpenter who is telling him the truth about God. The light of Jesus exposes Nicodemus's own darkness.

The night is the necessary background to the lesson Jesus is teaching Nicodemus: appearances are not necessarily reliable, what you think you know, you don't really know: there is literal blindness in the world, to be sure, but there is spiritual blindness as well. Jesus tells Nicodemus that all who wish to see the kingdom of God must be born from above of water and the spirit. The phrase "from above" is important, because the Greek word "anothen" can just as well mean "again", and in fact this reading gives us the well known phrase "born again Christian". But the evangelist is teasing us just as Jesus is teasing Nicodemus: Jesus asserts that one must be born from above but Nicodemus, in his ignorance, interprets this with an absurd literalism – how can one be born a second time? What seems obvious, is not, what we see is not everything: Jesus tells Nicodemus that the wind blows where it wills: wind and spirit are unseen but powerful, and again wind and spirit are the same word in Greek.

Nicodemus is in darkness, seeking enlightenment. It is not enough to look with the eyes of the world, because in Jesus that world has been flooded with light to such a degree that nothing appears the same. The God-given light of Christ has revealed the Father's love to the world, but has also taught the world something about itself – that the world has been blind all along. It thought it could perceive and understand, but light has now revealed that what it thought it could see was not there at all – the world's insight was shrouded in darkness.

Even that is not quite enough, however, because the act of seeing in John's gospel is more than an act of simply learning something new. It is an act in which one is presented with a new life, a new life to be practised and lived through Christ which is its centre. As the serpent was lifted up in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. When the people of Israel brought upon themselves the torment of snakes, the Lord commanded Moses to make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, so that all who were bitten might look

on it and live. Coming face to face with the means of death was itself the means of salvation. Nicodemus misunderstanding about being born again makes it clear that he knows nothing of the true life and death of which Jesus speaks. In order to be brought into this new sphere, he must come face to face with death – true death, the death of God himself – by looking upon the Son of Man when he is lifted up from the earth.

Night will return in John's gospel. When Judas is set upon betraying Jesus, he goes out into the night. A few hours later that same night we are taken to a garden, and see a band of soldiers come upon Jesus as if he were a brigand. In these night-time events, night itself is descending upon the whole world. John doesn't bother to tell us about the darkness which covered the land at Jesus' execution – his point is too well made to need such details. At that crucifixion, Nicodemus, the night-time disciple, is faced with eternal night, the triumph of death, as he helps to bury the body of Jesus and, in so doing, stares the darkness of death squarely in the face.

Christ's light flooding the world is the world's judgement, because by it true vision, true understanding, is given to those who would learn, those who would be disciples. Darkness and night-time are only known as such when there is light with which to contrast them. Our own darkness is so much safer, so much more secure, than the light which shows us to be what and who we truly are. But it true that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it. Passiontide is almost upon us. We will shortly be called to stare death and darkness squarely in the face, to watch in that dark garden and walk up that dark hill, hoping and knowing that another garden awaits us, and the dazzling light of life.