

Homily for People and Parishes

Bishop Cam Venables – Sunday, 5th March 2023 – Lent 2

(The readings in bold are the ones to be used for Morning Prayer)

Readings: **Genesis 12:1-4a**

Psalm 121

Roman 4:1-5 (6-12) 13-17

John 3:1-17

When I was growing up in London there was usually a pantomime to go and see before Christmas. For those not familiar with pantomime it is a form of musical theatre with a rich mixture of comedy and melodrama. When villains come on stage, audiences boo and hiss, while the heroes play dumb and pretend they cannot see where the villain is hiding. Both villains and heroes interact with the audience, and there is usually much laughter.

If we interpreted the four Gospels through the lens of pantomime or melodrama then we'd find 'the Pharisees', 'the Saducees', and 'the Jews' certainly portrayed in villain-like roles. Villains who consistently oppose the hero figure of Jesus. Imagine how lively our Gospel readings would be in church worship if people booed each time the term 'Pharisee' and 'Saducee' was named, and cheered each time 'Jesus' was mentioned!

However, there is danger when we refuse to acknowledge complexity, and assume instead a binary world view of goodies and baddies. For example, it is sobering to remember that Western Churches for centuries described Jewish people as 'Christ killers' – while ignoring the obvious complexity of Jesus and the disciples being Jewish!

When we set aside the unhelpful caricature of 'villain' we can recognise that Pharisees and Saducees were groups within the Jewish community who took their faith very seriously. Pharisees focussed on teaching the Law found in Jewish Scripture, and on interpreting that Law. While Saducees were the people who rigorously organised daily worship at the temple in Jerusalem. In his words and actions Jesus repeatedly challenged the legalism of the Pharisees, and the self-interest that seemed to underpin elements of ritual worship in the temple. So, was it any wonder that both groups were not happy with him?

Bearing these things in mind we can better consider today's Gospel reading, for in this we are told that one night a Pharisee, called Nicodemus, went to see Jesus. It is easy to appreciate why he came at night because he would have been breaking ranks, and if he had been discovered he would have been judged harshly. I think Nicodemus must have been deeply moved by who Jesus was, or what Jesus had been saying, to have risked this meeting. Then Nicodemus began the conversation in a surprising way for he said, "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."

This was an extraordinary affirmation from someone recognised in the Jewish community as a Pharisee, a teacher of the Law, and it seems to indicate that a number of other Pharisees shared his thoughts. For, Nicodemus said, 'WE know you are a teacher who has come from God...', he did not say, 'I know you are a teacher who has come from God...' It's almost as though Nicodemus had been sent by a group of like-minded Pharisees to find out more.

A discussion unfolded in which Nicodemus wanted to better understand the phrase, 'Kingdom of God' and, Jesus suggested that to be in this Kingdom a person had to be 'born from above'. Nicodemus didn't understand, and so he asked how a person could be born physically a second time. Patiently, Jesus explained that a person becomes part of the Kingdom of God by water and Spirit.

It's not clear what Nicodemus thought in response because he is not mentioned again in John's Gospel until much later, when he came with Joseph of Arimathea to wrap the body of Jesus and place him in a tomb. At that point John describes Nicodemus as a 'secret disciple.' Clearly that conversation about the Kingdom of God, and the need for water and Spirit, had a lasting effect on Nicodemus.

In the book of Acts we often find water and Spirit mentioned in the lives of those who followed Jesus. Sometimes people were baptised with water and then received the Holy Spirit, while at other times people received the Holy Spirit, and were later baptised with water. In the Anglican Church we baptise children and adults with water, and in Confirmation a bishop lays a hand on the head of each candidate while praying, '*Strengthen, Lord, your servant with your Holy Spirit. Empower and sustain him, or her, for your service.*' It has been a great privilege to pray this prayer over many people since I became a bishop almost nine years ago.

Last Wednesday I had the great privilege of Ordaining a man called John Rolley in the Parish of Goondiwindi. In that service, as many clergy laid hands on John, I prayed, "*Send down the Holy Spirit upon your servant, John, whom we set apart by the laying on of our hands, for the office and work of a priest in your Church.*" It was a wonderful time of worship and commissioning, but the Holy Spirit was not only present in that moment. The Spirit was present in Word and Sacrament, in prayer and singing, and in the hospitality offered before and after the service. Surely the Spirit was also present with people as they drove home, and as they have gone on with their lives since then.

Inevitably, there are OCCASIONS when we have a sense of God's Spirit present in the midst of a conversation, a prayer, or an experience of some kind. But, there are also PLACES where we might have a particular sense of God's Spirit and they can be on mountains, by the beach, or under a particular tree. Celtic Christianity speaks of 'thin places' on earth where the sense of God, and God's Spirit, is more readily felt than in other places. I find

that there are some particular bars of instrumental music which when I hear them played, or play them myself, there is somehow an extraordinary sense of God.

I think we'd agree that the purpose of God's Spirit is not simply to make us feel good – whether God's Spirit is encountered in a solitary 'thin place', or in the midst of a crowd. I think it is given, granted, and gifted to help us live more faithful and godly lives; and to enable us, together with others, to bring healing, hope, and transformation. Healing, hope and transformation in local communities, in wider society, and in the world.

As we continue to travel this Lenten journey, may we each be a little like Nicodemus this week. Like him, may we seek to understand Jesus better, and be open to the Spirit of God in the midst of each day.

Amen