

# Second Sunday in Lent

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## Introduction

You are listening to a friend who has had a terrible experience. They tell how they have been treated unjustly, by someone they had trusted. In hearing their story, you can see why they are hurt, distressed and angry. You feel like having a word with that person whom you think has caused the trouble to put them right. Instead you talk with the person who hurt your friend, and suddenly you find out there is a whole lot more to the incident than you first realized. Hearing both sides of a story can cause you to change your opinion radically. Do you remember a time when you experienced something like this?

There is something like this going on as Nicodemus meets Jesus. He was a Pharisee, a leader among his people, and often Jesus was in conflict with Nicodemus' fellow Pharisees. Yet there was something about Jesus that intrigued Nicodemus. He comes diffidently, secretly, at night, to get an answer to a question that wouldn't go away

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## Text

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night and said to him, "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." Jesus answered him, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus said to him, "How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" Jesus answered, "Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.' 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." Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" Jesus answered him, "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"

"Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

“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.

“Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

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## Comment

John’s gospel tells us that Nicodemus, a Pharisee, was also a leader of the Jews, a term which John uses — problematically — to denote those who were opposed to Jesus and his teaching. Nicodemus also came by night – light and darkness are key defining themes of this Gospel. Here ‘night’ denotes opposition to God’s reign. In the first eleven chapters of St John’s Gospel Jesus meets people in public in the day. Nicodemus comes secretly, at night.

Nicodemus doesn’t come with a question but a statement. “No one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God”.

Jesus picks up Nicodemus’ words ‘the presence of God’. Nicodemus recognizes the very essence of God in the signs which Jesus is performing. Nicodemus is intrigued as to what this might mean.

Jesus says ‘no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above’. Jesus reply is simply making a statement, and passes no judgment on Nicodemus. However Nicodemus’ incredulity that a grown person could ‘born again’ reveals just how much Nicodemus remains in the dark. The Greek word ‘another’ can mean ‘born again’ or ‘born from above’ or both.

Jesus is drawing the distinction between Nicodemus’ objective assessment of the ‘signs’ within Jesus ministry as denoting the presence of God, and the intriguing invitation to not only observe but to step into the stream of God’s activity in the world.

Here ‘seeing the reign of God’ requires more than right thinking, but is a consequence of a life whose actions are directed and empowered by the Spirit. Nicodemus believed that the presence of God was revealed in Jesus’ ministry, but as Jesus said later ‘no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Spirit.’ The water of baptism is the mark of joining a community. The gift of the Spirit is participating in the ‘the presence of God’ active in the world.

The new life, life of the Spirit, is talked about in this passage as ‘action’. Jesus uses the metaphor of wind – ‘you don’t know where (the wind) comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.’ You discern wind because of its effects, says Jesus, so it is with those who are born from above, they are like Jesus heralds of the reign of God.

Nicodemus is clearly lost at this point. Jesus uses a rabbinical method of arguing from the lesser (earthly things) to the greater (heavenly things) and points Nicodemus back to the Torah. When the Israelites were offered salvation from the plaque of vipers by looking at the bronze serpent Moses lifted up on a “pole” (Numbers 21.9). We can imagine this pole having a vertical cross bar at the top

with a serpent entwined around it. In using this story, Jesus again is forming a 'sign' (the word for 'pole' – *stamneion* – can also mean 'sign'), so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

"Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." Jesus' response to Nicodemus' secretive, nighttime meeting is a demand that Nicodemus should not just admire Jesus' ministry, or even to state that the signs that Jesus performed demonstrated the presence of God, but that Nicodemus should be baptized, be part of the Jesus community living life in the guidance and strength of the Spirit.

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## Response

We are not sure why Nicodemus came to Jesus 'by night'. In what contexts do you find it difficult to be yourself, to stand up for what you believe in? Why is that? Is it right sometimes to be less than open?

There are two other references to Nicodemus in John's Gospel. Nicodemus gives a somewhat halfhearted defence of Jesus who was in conflict with the religious authorities (7.50–52). The second is when Nicodemus helps Joseph of Arimathea with the burial of Jesus (19.38–42) by providing an super-abundance of spices for the embalming of the body. Was this, at last, Nicodemus moving from darkness to light? In any case, the challenge for Nicodemus and for us, is not only to 'believe', but as part of the Christian community to be signs of the reign of God in 'the nighttime' world. How is your Christian Community being 'light' in the 'night'?

John's usage of 'the Jews' throughout the fourth gospel is problematic, and has, over the course of centuries been used to justify anti semitism. How has your practice Christianity been done at the expense of other faith communities?

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## Prayer

Jesus Christ,

by your words and deeds you revealed God's love for the world,

Fill with your Spirit, the members of your body, the Church,

in our time and in our world

so that we may be Good News for those in need,

not only by our words of concern,

but in actions that reflect your love for us.

We ask this for the glory of Jesus Christ.

AMEN

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Season: Ordinary time

Themes: Reconciliation