

In our Gospel reading we heard about Nicodemus coming to speak to Jesus at night. Nicodemus was a learned Pharisee, a member of the Sanhedrin - the council of religious leaders who knew the Jewish law, and spent their time explaining it to others and making sure that it was upheld among the people. Of course this was a people living under the secular authority and laws of Rome, and so it was their religion that gave them an identity and cohesiveness under occupation.

Nicodemus had heard a lot about Jesus, and indeed it is clear that he had listened to Jesus' preaching and teaching and had been impressed by him. He speaks with great respect, saying that it is clear that Jesus is a teacher who has come from God. He comes by night, probably because he knows that the other leaders of the Sanhedrin would disapprove of him being there, but it becomes clear that he is still "in the dark" in other ways too. It is as though Jesus is speaking in a different language from Nicodemus - the language of wind and water and Spirit and being 'born again'.

He says: *"the wind blows where it wills and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going to. So is everyone born of the Spirit."*

And what is it that stops Nicodemus understanding? Strangely, it is his learning and his detailed knowledge of religion that is getting in the way of his seeing the truth standing right in front of him. Like so many, he has always relied on religious rules and laws to keep control of his own and other's belief. If we say the right words and perform the right actions, if we know the religious laws back to front and keep them, then God will be pleased and will look after us.

And yet, throughout the Jewish scriptures - our Old Testament - the prophets have called not for knowledge, but for a change of mind and heart, and perhaps Nicodemus is just beginning to realise that it is that kind of change that Jesus is encouraging. To be born of water and the spirit is about experience, not knowledge. It is about faith, not certainty.

Karen Armstrong maintains that the Christian Church is marked out from other faiths in the amount of talking and deliberating and arguing it does, and has always done, about its doctrine. And the subject most spoken and written and argued about is the Holy Trinity. In the 4th Century the church formulated a doctrine of Trinity which said that God had a single essence, which would always remain incomprehensible to us. But in Scripture, God had made himself known to us in three manifestations - Father, Word, and Spirit - divine energies that adapted the ineffable mystery of God to our limited intelligence. Perhaps they hoped that would settle the matter! That like Moses on the mountain top, enveloped in cloud, unable to see, but knowing himself to be in the presence of God, so we might accept our limited understanding, and yet know by experience the reality of God's presence with us.

But this was not to be... over the centuries, scholars, theologians, saints, preachers have endeavoured to understand and explain how God can be One and yet Three - and some have been persecuted, even killed as heretics for their pains.

We always want to know - to understand. Francis Bacon said that knowledge is power, and certainly it does give control over others and over the environments in which we live. And all this takes us back to the Garden of Eden - Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat of the tree of Knowledge, and the serpent told them that it was because God was afraid that if they did, they would become like gods, knowing everything. The serpent thought that God feared losing control - but maybe God feared what humanity might do if we were in control!

It was the Early Christian Mystics who suggested that to be united to God we must "break through" the sensible world and pass beyond the human condition to move beyond knowing to unknowing, from knowledge to love. They understood love as the core of reality and spoke of a deep relationship between love and knowledge. "Love is the highest form of knowing," Saint Augustine wrote. And Gregory the Great said, "Love itself is a form of knowing", meaning that the love by which we reach God implies a form of knowing above ordinary reason.

In the fourteenth-century an unknown author wrote a spiritual guide called *The Cloud of Unknowing*. In it he suggests that we should seek God not through knowledge and intellect but through intense contemplation, motivated by love - that the only way to know God is to abandon consideration of God's particular activities and attributes and be courageous enough to surrender one's mind and ego to the realm of "unknowing", at which point one may begin to glimpse the nature of God. "*God is forever beyond the reach of the intellectual faculty; but by means of the loving faculty, God can be fully grasped by each individual being.*" *The Cloud of Unknowing* is still in print, and indeed it was an important resource for Thomas Keating and others who forty years ago devised the practice of "Centering Prayer" which is used across many traditions to this day.

We cannot understand intellectually the nature of God - the concept of Trinity - because our intellect tells us it is impossible for God to be One and yet Three, but we can and do experience God in this way and we should be content and grateful to leave it at that. We cannot contain God in our minds, but only come to know him in our hearts. Of course, to accept this makes our faith feel insecure and vulnerable - it implies that intuition and trust are more important than reason, and takes our concept of God out of our control. But like Nicodemus, it can bring us into the light.

Nicodemus is mentioned twice more in John's gospel: after his night time discussion with Jesus he went back to his place at the Sanhedrin, but something had changed. When Jesus overturned the tables in the Temple, the council sent the Temple Guard to arrest him, but they returned without him, having been swayed both by Jesus' words "Never has anyone spoken like this", and swayed too by the reaction of the crowd who defended Jesus against arrest. The religious leaders were furious, saying "this crowd, which does not know the law, they are accursed". And Nicodemus, who had maybe begun to understand that knowing is not everything, speaks up and says:

"our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing does it?"

He wants the others to hear what Jesus has to say - to begin to understand as he has that it is the experience of love, not the gaining of knowledge that brings us closer to God. The rest of the council mock him and ignore him, and perhaps that is the end of his career in the Sanhedrin.

The final time we hear of Nicodemus is when he is one of two disciples who, after the crucifixion, carry Jesus' body to the garden, sanctify it with vast quantities of myrrh and aloes, wrap it in strips of linen and then lay it gently in the tomb.

Kahlil Gibran wrote this, as if spoken by Nicodemus himself:

*“Do you not remember me, Nicodemus, who believed in naught but the laws and decrees and was in continual subjection to observances?
And behold me now, a man who walks with life, and laughs with the sun from the first moment it smiles upon the mountain until it yields itself to bed behind the hills.
The barriers of flesh and bone fell down when the Poet of Galilee spoke to me; and I was held by a spirit and was lifted to the heights, and in mid air my wings gathered the song of passion.
And when I dismounted from the wind and in the Sanhedrin my pinions were shorn, even then my ribs, my featherless wings, kept and guarded the song. And all the poverties of the lowlands cannot rob me of my treasure.”*

Nicodemus had found God in the Cloud of Unknowing.

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