John 3.1-17; Genesis 12:1-4a; Rom. 4.1-5, 13-17(T)
Second Sunday of Lent: 16th March 2014.
8:00 & 10:00 @ St. Andrew's, Totteridge

May the words of my mouth…

Nicodemus says, 'No one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God (3.2).' This life can seem a terribly cruel and arbitrary place sometimes, with little surface evidence of the love of God amongst the poor, the dispossessed, the refugee. Where is God's signs for them? How can we know that God loves them or us for that matter?

How do we know that he loved those for instance in Japan, who commemorate the third anniversary of the catastrophic tsunami, the subterranean upheaval that inflicted such terrible suffering on that nation and its people. There didn't seem to be a negotiable path amongst those on-rushing waves, or through those mountains of storm-tossed detritus left behind. How can we know God loves us? How can these things be? (v.9b).

It is a dark night in Jerusalem – there is a warm wind blowing gently over the Judaen mountains, picking up a little speed as it crosses the southern spur of the plateau upon which the city stands, nearly two-and-a-half thousand feet above sea-level. As the wind filters through the quiet of the sleeping city streets it reaches the place where Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish Supreme Court), has under cover of darkness sought out Jesus, the leader of a ragged band of disciples. Indirectly, Nicodemus will ask Jesus just this question – How can we know God loves us? How can these things be?

We hear how this Jesus, the enigmatic preacher, teacher and miracle worker, has been performing mysterious 'signs' that could only be interpreted as the work of divinity. For one such as Nicodemus to seek him out like this is highly unusual, for it is normally the Sanhedrin's task to publicly examine false prophets and to bring them to judgement; his visit alone and by night would have been at great risk to his reputation. It's difficult to speculate about Nicodemus' motivation in finding him, but John tells us that he engages Jesus with polite, respectful, theological debate.

As the gentle breeze brushes against the skin of the two men's arms and faces, Jesus is inspired to make the comparison between the unseen wind of the air and the unseen nature of the Spirit; both wind and spirit share the same word in Greek. The wind/spirit chooses its own invisible path and so, in the same way, does the grace of God, in deciding who, why, or how a person may come to faith or, in other words, experience a spiritual rebirth. For this is the crux of the gospel reading – what it means to experience a spiritual, baptismal, conversion of the heart, rather than just a physical, symbolic baptism of the head.

In the symbolism of baptism we find talk of death and resurrection, of washing the soul, of cleansing. As human beings in God's creation we may have become estranged from God, but not condemned. We need to find our way

home to the one who loved us enough to bring us into life. John uses the image of birth, where baptismal water is akin to the medium of amniotic fluid. 'No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit' (v.5).

The water is the external sign of baptism, the wind/Spirit its inner reality – it's not the washing or dipping in water that affects the reality of the baptised person, but an inner, spiritual alteration held to be the accompaniment of the rite. But these are the first fruits; there are heavenly things yet to come, brought by the one who has descended from heaven, Jesus himself.

In this darkness of a Jerusalem night, Nicodemus is told of how the darkness of humanity's spiritual night, our estrangement from God, will be brought to an end by the lifting up of the Son of Man, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. Not just at some time in the future, not just after death, but now, in this life, in the here and now. Salvation can't be foisted on anyone, but it will be made available to those who, for whatever mysterious reasons are listeners and doers of the truth.

How can these things be? How will this be achieved? How will human beings not just ultimately perish, even in terrible natural disasters, but know eternal life? The message of John 3:16, perhaps the most famous passage in the NT, is unequivocal. It will happen because of God's love for the world, for Nicodemus, for the people of Japan, for you and me. Christ is the pathfinder.

It was love that brought God among us, love that brought Jesus to earth, and it will be love that carries him from this meeting with Nicodemus through all the anguish, pain and suffering of crucifixion. Love; not power, nor vengeance, nor condemnation, will win the day. In all the passion of its undeniable truth, in the face of terrible adversity, God's love for the world will be shown victorious in the death defying triumph of the cross. Jesus came to tell us; and then to show us. In his rising to glorious resurrection, he acts as the eternal heavenly pathfinder for us all.

Spoken in the name of the Father, Son & Holy Spirit. Amen.

John 3.1-17 Nicodemus Visits Jesus

3
Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a
leader of the Jews. [2]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.' [3]Jesus answered him, 'Very
truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of
God without being born from above.'
[4]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?' [5]Jesus answered, 'Very truly, I tell you,
no one can enter the kingdom of God without
being born of water and Spirit. [6]What is born of
the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit
is spirit. [7]Do not be astonished that I said to you,
"You must be born from above." [8]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.' [9]Nicodemus said to him,
'How can these things be?' [10]Jesus answered
him, 'Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you
do not understand these things?

11 '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. [12]If I have told
you about earthly things and you do not believe
how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly
things? [13]No one has ascended into heaven
except the one who descended from heaven,
the Son of Man. [14]And just as Moses lifted up
the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son
of Man be lifted up, [15]that whoever believes in
him may have eternal life.

16 '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.

17 '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.

Genesis 12:1-4a The Call of Abram

12
Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your
country and your kindred and your father's
house to the land that I will show you. [2]I will
make of you a great nation, and I will bless you,
and make your name great, so that you will be
a blessing. [3]I will bless those who bless you,
and the one who curses you I will curse; and in
you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

4 So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and
Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five
years old when he departed from Haran.

Romans 4.1-5, 13-17 The Example of Abraham

4 What then are we to say was gained by
Abraham, our ancestor according to the flesh?
[2]For if Abraham was justified by works, he has
something to boast about, but not before God.
[3]For what does the scripture say? 'Abraham
believed God, and it was reckoned to him as
righteousness.' [4]Now to one who works, wages
are not reckoned as a gift but as something due.
[5]But to one who without works trusts him who
justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as
righteousness.

God's Promise Realized through Faith

13 For the promise that he would inherit the
world did not come to Abraham or to his
descendants through the law but through the
righteousness of faith. [14]If it is the adherents of
the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and
the promise is void. [15]For the law brings wrath;
but where there is no law, neither is there
violation.

16 For this reason it depends on faith, in order
that the promise may rest on grace and be
guaranteed to all his descendants, not only to
the adherents of the law but also to those who
share the faith of Abraham (for he is the father
of all of us, [17]as it is written, 'I have made you
the father of many nations')—in the presence of
the God in whom he believed, who gives life to
the dead and calls into existence the things that
do not exist.

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