

Bishop's Reflection – 4th Sunday of Lent

Nicodemus comes to Jesus under the cloak of darkness. What is he looking for? Why is he willing to risk his reputation as a teacher of the Law? He is looking for truth. He is looking for clarity. He is drawn to the light. We, also, come to Jesus today. For many of us our faith is often kept separate from the rest of our lives. We, too, come under the cover of darkness. But, even then, what are we looking for? Why do we run the risk of being discovered? Hopefully, we, too, are looking for truth and for greater clarity. We, too, are drawn by the light.

Jesus speaks to Nicodemus about the cross. He tells Nicodemus, “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.” Jesus also speaks to him about “being born again”, a reference to Baptism, being joined to Christ and his Passion, Death and Resurrection. It is obvious, from the conversation that Nicodemus doesn't fully understand. He is still mystified by what it all means. This may also be true for us.

The early Christian community, to whom John wrote his Gospel, knew the meaning of the cross. They met under the cover of darkness to protect themselves from the penalties associated with unlawful rites and rituals. Even then, they took risks, proclaimed the message in the streets, shared it with family and friends and caused it to spread like wildfire. Their collective suffering did not stand in the way of the urgency of the message, but added to it. Maybe we have become too distant from the cross, both in time and by the privilege we enjoy. Maybe we can identify more with Nicodemus' fears in losing his place of privilege, than we can with those whose privileges had been stripped away (and those whose privileges continue to be stripped away today).

When Jesus speaks to Nicodemus about the cross, and the need to be reborn through Baptism, he speaks about the gratuitous gift of God; a gift so great, it has the power to heal and to save. In a line from scripture that is often flashed at baseball games and other sports venues, Jesus tells Nicodemus that, “God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.” Jesus didn't come to punish, but as gift; he didn't come to show us God's displeasure, but his love.

In a world that so often feels condemned by the Christian message and the Church's teaching, this basic message needs to be proclaimed and understood. In and through Christ, God is offering a gift, a gift of His gratuitous love. A love that heals. A love that is stronger than sin and death. A love whose light pierces the darkness of human sin, fear and shame. A love that demands our response.

For many, God's love is met by rejection or indifference. A love from which some will hide, preferring darkness to light, false news to good news, lies to truth, pride and arrogance to transparency and accountability, while others walk away or remain indifferent, unmoved by the gift, their heart set on other things, if anything at all. But those who love the light come to the light; those who are seekers of the truth come to the truth; those who desire healing draw near to the healer. This is not by our doing, as St. Paul tells us, but by the grace of God effective in us. Let us call on His grace, so that we may better appreciate and respond to his gift, and let us share that same love with those who need it most.