

Reflection for Lent 2 Year A 2020

There is a story in the Jewish Midrash, that huge body of interpretations and commentary on the Torah - the first five books of the Bible. The young Abraham (or Abram as he is at this point) is an assistant to his father Terah, a dealer in idols. As Abram gradually becomes convinced that there is only one true God, he tries to convince his father's customers of the folly of idolatry. A customer comes to buy an idol and the boy asks his age. 'Fifty,' replies the man. 'Woe to him who would worship a one-day idol,' exclaims the boy. Exit customer, tail between the legs! Abram then smashes the idols and has to face his father's wrath. 'Who smashed the gods?' demands Terah. 'The chief god there,' says Abram. 'You know perfectly well that clay idols don't move,' says the father. 'Then why do you worship them?' rejoined the boy. Just imagine having a boy like that!

All three readings today involve the approach of acceptance of faith within life. In the brief passage from Genesis we have the extraordinary moment when Abram leaves the security of life in Haran, putting his trust in God and travelling to an unknown future, yet one, as we heard, through which not only would he dwell in a land, but become the progenitor of a mighty nation. In this short passage, we have displayed the start of a journey towards what will become the **fulcrum** of spiritual history revealed in one God - the creator of all. This journey into the future is a step into the unknown for Abram. He trusts in God.

In the New Testament reading, Paul knows the whole picture of faith, revealed in Jesus Christ. Think of the journey Paul has made, from his role as a zealous Pharisee who persecuted the emerging Christians, becoming someone whose life was turned upside down as the light of Christ flooded his life. The problem he deals with here is how Christians were to regard the Mosaic Law which governed every aspect of Jewish life. This tension is something which appears in the Acts of the Apostles and many of Paul's letters.

Paul takes us back beyond Moses to Abraham and the way in which (long before the Mosaic Law came into being) Abraham had travelled through the righteousness of faith. In first century Palestine, the Law was crushing the life out of faith. Paul redresses the balance in the light of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and the work of the Holy Spirit within people's lives.

Faith is a journey for life, and this is vividly illustrated for us in today's Gospel reading. Nicodemus only appears in John's Gospel. There is a real tension in the way John recounts this episode. Nicodemus comes at night - it is dark. This reminds us of the Prologue to the Gospel that – *'the light shining in the darkness - the true light which enlightens everyone was coming into the world.'* Nicodemus, a righteous man, a good Jew, sees Jesus as someone in whom God dwells. Yet his understanding is incomplete, and although he believes that Jesus is someone especially Spirit filled, he does not yet know him yet as, as *'the Word made flesh.'* Nicodemus almost butters Jesus up with this complimentary language, only for the Lord to brush it aside and challenge flattery with the radical requirements of full faith in him. *'Very truly (Amen, Amen,) I tell you, unless a person is born from above, they are not able to see the Kingdom of*

God.' There is ambiguity to this phrase in the Greek original of the Gospel, as we see from the startled reply Nicodemus gives. the phrase born from above - in other words- spirit filled- could also mean 'born again'. This is how Nicodemus takes it. *'How can a person enter again into their mother's womb?'*

It is quite clear from the reply that Jesus gives that he talks of being reborn 'from above,' in other words journeying in spirit-filled faith - again, we are back with the opening of the Gospel.....*'but to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.'* Jesus enriches this still further. It is through water and the Spirit that this journey is made. Although we could take this as an allusion to the sacrament of baptism - (and it may be that an allusion is intended), Jesus is more likely to be describing a 'water' that consists **of** the Spirit, before talking of blowing wind - again, the gift of faith through the gift of the Holy Spirit. No wonder poor Nicodemus is confused!

'How can this be?' says Nicodemus.

'You a teacher of Israel and you don't understand?' says Jesus.

And then Jesus leads not just Nicodemus, but **all** who hear or read these words on a wonderful journey towards an understanding of what faith in him really means now comes about. He talks of Moses, who has access to the heavenly world of God when he ascends the Holy Mountain. Through this access to heavenly power, Moses erects the brazen serpent to protect those who gazed on it from poisonous serpents.

However, in John's Gospel, Jesus drags heaven down to earth, and the brazen serpent is replaced by the intimate knowledge of God's love for humanity as the Son of Man is lifted up. What does this mean? I talked earlier of the fulcrum of faith. For us as Christians, the **cross** is the fulcrum of faith, the moment for humanity itself, when our view of creation is radically changed. The outpouring of God's self-giving love is revealed in the broken body of Jesus raised on the cross so that all who believe in him may not perish but have everlasting life. Nicodemus still has a journey to make to gain true understanding of Jesus. Later in the Gospel he reminds the Sanhedrin that a man must be heard before judged when they are discussing Jesus. His final mention in the Gospel is when he helps Joseph of Arimathea prepare the body of Jesus for burial, providing the embalming spices. What a journey he ultimately makes!

Like Nicodemus, we are able through the Spirit to journey knowing that, in every aspect of our lives - in times of adversity as well as of joy - heaven and earth are united in the face of Jesus Christ, because *'God so love the world that he gave his only son so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.'*

In other words, as Horatio Spofforth's powerful hymn puts it, we have this assurance:

When peace like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to know
It is well, it is well, with my soul.



Nicodemus visits Jesus by night – Henry Ossawa Tanner (1859-1937)

Genesis 12: 1-4a

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.’^[a]

⁴ So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him.

Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17

4 What then are we to say was gained by^[a] 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. 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.

John 3: 1-17

3 Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. ² He came to Jesus^[a] 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.'^[b] 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.'^[c] ⁷ Do not be astonished that I said to you, "You^[d] must be born from above."^[e] ⁸ The wind^[f] 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^[g] 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.^[h] 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.'^[i]

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.