

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

Our gospel reading today from John 3 verses 1 to 17 could be the subject of a whole series of homilies. It's so rich in its language and extensive in what it says about God – the gospel writer John at his best.

To set the scene – in John's gospel, Jesus had just performed his first miracle with the wine, at a wedding at Cana of Galilee – one that his mother had been present at. Then Jesus travels from Capernaum where he had been with his family, to Jerusalem, as it's at the time of the Passover festival. Jesus then evicts the money changers in the temple, because they had been swindling the poor.

Jesus had already gained quite a following. John says, “many believed in his name because they saw the signs that he was doing.”

Our gospel passage begins with Nicodemus visiting Jesus at night. It's not really clear why Nicodemus wanted to visit Jesus in secret. Perhaps because he is part of the Jewish hierarchy he is afraid of how his fellow temple rulers will view this visit. But he gives, as his reason for visiting, that he was impressed by Jesus' signs (that is, his miracles). He acknowledges Jesus as a Rabbi, a teacher, who had come from God. Nicodemus was a Pharisee with a Greek name, an educated man and influential ruler of the Jews. Even though he doesn't seem to understand Jesus in this meeting, he does later defend Jesus at a meeting with the Sanhedrin court before the crucifixion. And later, after Jesus' crucifixion, he will bring a large quantity of expensive ointments to anoint Jesus' body.

In today's visit, Jesus explains to Nicodemus that no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above, *anōthen* in Greek. That's sometimes been translated recently as ‘born again’ in certain Christian groups. In fact, the Greek word, *anōthen*, carries a double meaning – “born anew” and “born from above” - an ambiguity that enriches this verse. Must we be born anew or born from above? Both, in this verse. Nicodemus doesn't understand these words, so Jesus explains another way – “no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit.” Jesus is referring to baptism – not a second baptism, as sometimes it's misunderstood. Jesus tries yet again – don't be surprised that I'm telling you that you must be born from above.

Then follows the most beautiful description of the work of the Holy Spirit; “⁸The 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.”

(Note that the Greek word for ‘wind’ and ‘spirit’ is the same).

Jesus was trying to explain to Nicodemus, “You don't understand everything about the wind, but you see its effects. That is just how it is with birth by the Spirit.” Jesus wanted Nicodemus to know that he didn't have to understand everything about the new birth to experience it.

We tend to think of the Holy Spirit arriving on the scene when promised by Jesus to the disciples, just before his death. Jesus says in John 14, ¹⁶ And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” Then Jesus says to the disciples, “²⁶ But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything.”

The Spirit was present at the Baptism of Jesus “The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus during his baptism and anointed him with power.”

We also hear about the Spirit at the very beginning of the Bible, in Genesis. We read “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.”

So, the Spirit always was, just as Jesus always was – part of the Trinitarian God. To me the Spirit seems to be the most mysterious part of the Trinity. A messenger from God who has the power to make things and people holy.

The Spirit moves and works as the Spirit chooses. We see evidence of it, like we see evidence of the wind, but we cannot fully understand the Spirit’s movements. If someone has been born of the Spirit, as in baptism, it has lasting consequences of which we cannot know. So, Jesus is answering Nicodemus’ question by saying - we don’t know who is born from above, of the Spirit, and we don’t know how it works. But the Spirit has power.

Nicodemus does not seem to get Jesus’ message, and Jesus sounds frustrated with this – ‘you don’t understand when I tell you about earthly things, so how can you believe when I tell you about heavenly things?’ Jesus tries anyway – ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up to heaven so that whoever believes in Him may have eternal life.’

Then follows the most important passage in the gospels:

“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.”

Martin Luther described this sentence as “The gospel in a nutshell.”

Jesus shows us that the promise of God’s love is universal, given to everyone, by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Jews of that day had thought that God loved only Israel because Abraham had promised God’s power only to the Israelites. But this universal offer of salvation and life in Jesus is revolutionary. It shows that the love of God is limitless; it embraces all of humankind.

Today, in this place, and in all places, and for all people, we know that the love of God is poured out into our hearts through power of the Holy Spirit.

And that is the Good News.

AMEN