

## Nicodemus.

**Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> March. Second Sunday of Lent.**

John 3:1-17,

Also Romans 4:1-8, 13-17

**Opening prayer:** *Father, may the words of my lips and the contemplations of all our hearts be true to your Word and your will. Amen.*



*Henry Ossawa Tanner (1899) -Jesus and Nicodemus*

## The Sinner's Worry

In today's reading of John 3 we see an encounter with Nicodemus:

1. Whose name means *"Triumph of the (common) People"* in a Gospel that clearly and overtly focused on the *Kosmos* or the World.
2. A teacher of Israel (The)
3. Probably top 10 of all the Sanhedrin

In verse two he doesn't ask Jesus a question, but Jesus does answer what he knows to be in Nicodemus' heart. He says, *"no one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit"*.

What is this "Water and Spirit"? As a teacher of Israel and someone who knew the Old Testament or *Tanakh* by heart, his mind was probably not on the "breaking water" of natural birth or physical baptism, but on something like Ezekiel 36:24-27

*"For I will take you from the nations, gather you from all the lands and bring you into your own land. "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances."*

Naturally, Jesus provides this water, the same water he refers to in the next chapter: John 4:14 with the Samaritan woman at the well – Living Water and those who drink from it will never thirst again.

Nicodemus gets it – he retorts with a silly question about going back into your mother, but the concept of ‘born again’ was not an uncommon way for Jews to talk of proselytes.

You see, Nicodemus suspects what Jesus is going to say: the Pharisees saw themselves as God’s elect and everyone else, even common Jews, were the Great Unwashed with little chance of experiencing God’s full blessing.

He has what one commentator suggested was “The Sinner’s Worry” – this is a worry that perhaps one’s good works are not enough; perhaps I cannot save myself; perhaps if I were judged by God today I would fall short.

I think that commentator got it wrong. You think about people you know – are they worried that their good works are not enough? Are they worried that – at core – they are deeply sinful and in need of a Savior? I think this commentator was talking about what the Sinner *should* worry about, but my experience with sinners is different.

“Are you a good person?” I ask young, bright students. “Yes.” Are you lucky? – “Absolutely” (10-1 good to bad things). “Do you deserve it?” It is unanimous: Yes, they deserve it. “Have you earned it?” Yes, they have earned it.

In a certain sense they *have* earned it. We know that sacrificing your time, money, and energy today can and does lead to benefits tomorrow. Not always, but if you do your best in school, you can go on to higher education, get a better job; a bigger house; exclusive vacations. You have made a sacrifice to the future and, generally, the future will reward appropriate sacrifices. You can *earn* things.

But even a cursory examination of the history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century should convince even the most Pollyannic Humanist that humans are deeply sinful and undeserving of the bounty of blessings most of us enjoy. But this history isn't really taught in our schools today: the six million Ukrainians starved to death in Soviet Russia's Holodomor, 50-70 million in World War 2, that many again in the murderous reign of Stalin in the former Soviet Union; 50-100 million – (who knows?!) – in Mao's atheistic China in their Great Leap Forward: but we, today, are "good people" who in six American States have legalized 'post birth' abortion.

### **This is Satan's Lie.**

Like many lies, it is a comforting lie, but Nicodemus had his eyes opened. Somehow in the twisted theology of the Pharisees his heart had not been irretrievably hardened, his eyes not fully darkened, his ears not entirely deaf.

Romans 1 reminds us that we are without excuse – the signs of a Creator God – a *moral* Creator God – are there; we ignore them at our peril. What Nicodemus didn't

understand was the total depravity of sin. All that the fleshly goodness of the Pharisees could produce was more flesh. John 3:6 *“Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.”*

“The Sinner’s Worry” is a *rare* thing to see – this was one purpose of the Commandments: to show that by yourself, you cannot attain to eternal life. No one can keep the Commandments and for anyone who thought they could, Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount should have put paid to that: (Matt. 5:28) *“But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”*

The bar is higher than the Pharisees imagined.

The bar is higher than Muslims can imagine.

The bar is higher than Buddhists can imagine.

The bar is higher than Hindus can imagine.

And for Atheists: there is a bar and you could see it if you wanted to.

All these ideologies have Satan’s Lie at their core: “You can do it yourself”; “You are God”; “Your works will get you to Heaven”; “Your sacrifice is sufficient”; “Science will make us immortal.”

Unlike my students who feel “good”, “lucky”, and “deserving”, it dawned on Nicodemus that he was none of

those things. The Sinner's Lie ignores our helplessness in the midst of Sin, our lust for the World, and our obliviousness to the crimes we have committed against our God.

The Sinner's Lie would keep you from realizing: The Light has come into the world – The Logos – the Word was made flesh and lived with us. The Sinner's comfortable lie doesn't want you to know that Bible in your hands today is the Logos: God's Word to us; it is a Holy Message sealed with the signet ring of the Holy Spirit. It contains the righteousness reckoned to Moses but as we read in Romans 4, ...it is *“also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”*

### **The Sinner's Hope**

God's ascribed righteousness and His wisdom – not yours – is the only way to a life of ultimate meaning; a purpose above any you could imagine; a steadfast truth; and a Light to shine at your feet guiding you to His eternal service.

You can have this Light – through the Holy Spirit you can take the step of Faith. You cannot 'work' yourself there. You cannot be good enough. Romans 3 tells us that *“There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands; there is no one who seeks God.”* But later Paul shows our hope in Christ, *“For we maintain that a person is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.”*

Faith is not a work – it is a gift from God that you can act upon. Do so.

Nicodemus – *'The Triumph of the common People'* put his status as a Pharisee on the line in order to act upon the Word; the Word that stood before him in the form of Christ. The First Cause, the Prime Mover, the Uncreated Creator of this World we take for granted calls us, calls you, to humble yourself, submit your will, confess your need, and follow Him.

Let us pray. \_\_\_\_\_

Father, All we need is a 'mustard seed' of faith. We do not need to have an answer to all our questions before making a step toward you – we do not need to come without doubt, or blemish, or sin to your mercy and your saving grace. We can come as we are. Speak to each of our hearts today, renew your call to us, and help us to respond positively to the greatest of all gifts: that of eternal life through the crucified & risen Christ. Amen.