

A sermon preached by Bishop Brian Farran at Living Waters Anglican Church, Craigie on Lent 2 2005
(Based on John 3: 1-17)

You may have had the experience of being at a public meeting, listening to a speaker who captures the mood of the meeting, and hearing a collective affirmation -sustained applause- that signals that this speaker has spoken for all present. In the forum of national governments, one speaker (the Prime Minister) speaks for the national viewpoint. We are familiar with the notion of one speaker not simply having an individual identity but exercising a collective identity.

This is the literary device that John the gospel writer is using in this conversation between Nicodemus and Jesus. Nicodemus is more than the one man Nicodemus. The figure of Nicodemus represents Judaism and their belief systems. This conversation in the gospel functions as a conversation between the early Christian church and Judaism. The conversation is personified in Jesus and Nicodemus.

The same literary device is continued by the gospel writer in chapter 4. The woman at the well is not a woman of suspect character, but Samaria and its religion. Again, this is a conversation between the early Christian church and Samaritan religion. This is an apologia for the church's mission to the Samaritans. Chapter 4 is the gospel for next week, so let me return to the conversation between Jesus (the early church) and Nicodemus (the various forms of Judaism) that the early church was encountering.

Nicodemus functions in this encounter with Jesus as yet another of those who simply rely on signs for believing and who are easily confused in their believing. The gospel writer has already in chapter 2 commented about insufficiency of faith that is based only on signs.

Nicodemus is named as a Pharisee, and the Pharisees have already, even at this early stage in Jesus' ministry, been critical of him, as they had also been of John the Baptist, the forerunner to the mission of Jesus. Further, Nicodemus comes to Jesus 'by night'. This gospel writer makes much of the dualism of light and darkness. The reference to 'night' suggests that Nicodemus is in the dark, as it were, because he is a Pharisee, and because he relies on the signs that Jesus has worked as the basis for his affirmation of Jesus.

Although Nicodemus is an individual in real life, Nicodemus in the text is a collective person, some high profile figure who represents the thinking of a vast number of others. Much like talk-back radio hosts (Liam Bartlett, Paul Murray and their like), although individuals are understood as representing Mr. and Mrs. Average Perth. This radio phenomenon is one reason that politicians either delight to be interviewed on such talk-back programmes or seek to avoid any encounters with these framers or representatives of public opinion. Nicodemus is a religious equivalent at the time of Jesus, a person whose thinking and attitudes to belief typified that of many others and who as a teacher influenced many others.

But there is a contemporary twist to our perception of Nicodemus. For although we might become embarrassed for him as the conversation progresses, we are meant to identify with Nicodemus. We are meant to recognize ourselves as believers and at the same time mistrust ourselves as those who too easily assume they understand the Christian gospel. We like Nicodemus can be religious people who tend to be overly-confident in our faith-based religious knowledge. Like Nicodemus we can be enslaved by the theological assumptions that we hold, so that we are not sensitive to what is really new in the revelation of Jesus.

Jesus in this conversation with Nicodemus insists that "no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he has been born again." This confuses Nicodemus who thinks only of physical birth, and so he makes his ridiculous retort. However, Jesus is requiring a huge shift in his (and Judaism's) thinking - that seeing the Kingdom of God is not some final, catastrophic apocalyptic event, a remote future hope, but can be a present experience. This present experience is dependent upon the action of the Holy

Spirit that changes a person's perception.

This need for such a profound change is reinforced by Jesus a second time, still with Nicodemus struggling to comprehend. Jesus increases the stakes in the conversation by questioning Nicodemus' capacity to be a teacher in Israel, that is a Jewish scholar. It seems, according to Jesus, that one who has been focussed on God, on the Torah, on the Prophets, ought to be aware of the sovereign nature of God's activity and God's own capacity to bring in the Kingdom.

The conversation must have stung Nicodemus as much as having stretched him and initially having bewildered him. We know through the ending of the gospel that Nicodemus develops into a disciple who comes with Joseph of Arimathea to beg Pilate for the body of the crucified Jesus. Nicodemus lavishes spices and perfume on the dead Jesus, just as the woman at the Pharisee's dinner party had done to Jesus earlier.

The conversation about the need to be open to the action of the Holy Spirit in order to see the Kingdom of God does not remain in the text. This is a conversation that continues to engage everyone, especially people like ourselves who declare in varying ways that we are this Jesus' disciples. The issue for us is whether we see the Kingdom of God, and if we have become alert to its presence, whether we live as samples of the Kingdom of God.

Indeed, the question continuously before the church, especially when the church is as ineffective as the western church is -be it Anglican or Pentecostal or Baptist or whatever- is this church living as a preview of the Kingdom of God, here and now? Or is this church a religious product on the shelves of the great supermarket of life which interested Sunday shoppers can use to make their lives more bearable?

Such a picture of the church is a little crude, but in many instances, not far from reality. How different is the church from Nicodemus -well-meaning, seeking, captured by his theological inheritance, diffident, and unable to sense the chasm between his way of thinking and the proclamation of Jesus?

John the gospel writer is parsimonious in his use of the phrase 'the Kingdom of God'. His preferred term is 'eternal life'. In company with the other three gospel writers, John makes it clear that Jesus is on a mission, that Jesus is God's 'sent-one', to bring in God's new order into human history. It seems as if by the time of Jesus, Jewish thinking had banished the prospect of the Kingdom of God to the end of history, with no expectation of its imminence.

Bishop John V Taylor wrote a helpful book that developed an understanding of the radical nature of the Kingdom of God as disclosed in and through Jesus and of the task of Christians as living as a counter-cultural community now. Jesus taught his disciples to beseech God to ***bring in the Kingdom now***!

The Lord's Prayer has within a very well known petition a Greek word that only occurs in the New Testament in that context. The word epiousion is usually translated 'daily'. However, it most likely means 'tomorrow'. So the petition should run, 'give us tomorrow's bread, today'. But the 'tomorrow' is not Monday or Tuesday, it is God's tomorrow - the day of the full dawning of the Kingdom of God!¹

The petition is about living God's future now. In other words, being a preview of the Reign of God

¹ See John V. Taylor Kingdom Come. 1989. London: SCM, pp.54-72.

that is the full feature. Taylor writes,

The Gospels portray Jesus as enacting, and calling others to start enacting, God's way of dealing with people in the light of the nearness of God which had come upon them. 'Be merciful as your Father is merciful. 'Pray for your persecutors, so shall you be children of your heavenly Father who makes his sun rise on good and bad alike and sends the rain on honest and dishonest.'...[The Kingdom of God] still belongs to the future, but only just. It has come so near, or rather, God has come so near, that those who have faith may begin to live the life of the Kingdom, may begin to enact the nature of the Father, *in advance of that Kingdom's arrival*.²

And in the Reign of God there is a continuum of now and not yet. This is a feature of the Kingdom parables where the tension is described as, for instance, the servants waiting for the master to return.

The Kingdom of God has its own order too. Hence, the reversals or inversions that Jesus talked about - the first and the last, the greatest and the least, and Jesus' attention to the 'little ones' or as one translation has it 'those who cringe'.³ The priorities of Jesus, observed Bishop Barbara Harris, are for 'the least, the last, the left out and the lost'.

Barbara Harris' summary is a useful template to place over the priorities of a parish - where the parish expends its energy, its programmes, its finances, its personnel. If you did that for this parish what might you discover?

The notion of 'seeing' is very important too in John's gospel. What does it mean to see the Kingdom of God? Well, I offered a moment ago an alliteration of the kinds of people whom Jesus focussed upon in his ministry and care. Such people were incorporated into the Kingdom of God through Jesus' ministry to them.

I want to raise the issue of how we might be changed (by the Spirit's action) to such seeing of the Kingdom of God, here and now.

Again, I have been greatly helped by John Taylor whose attentive discipleship flows into his illuminating writing. In a most marvellous book on the Holy Spirit, John Taylor wrote,

The Holy Spirit is that power which opens eyes that are closed, hearts that are unaware and minds that shrink from too much reality. If one is open towards God, one is open to the beauty of the world, the truth of ideas, and the pain of disappointment and deformity. If one is closed up against being hurt, or blind towards one's fellows, one is inevitably shut off from

² op. cit. John V. Taylor. 1989. Pp.66,67.

³ I found this reference in Peter B. Price's book The Blue Note

God also.

One cannot choose to be open in one direction and closed in another. Vision and vulnerability go together. Insensitivity also is an all-rounder. If for one reason or another we refuse really to see another person, we become incapable of sensing the presence of God.⁴

I sense, I guess as you do too, when another person does not see me - talks over my shoulder, or at me, or tries to ignore me or dominate me. Seeing the other is just so basic to the values and attitudes of the Kingdom of God.

And we need to see too what is still affecting us from our past, what we are carrying from previous encounters or experiences. Novelists help us to notice how important such seeing is. Although we may talk as if we are open to the Kingdom of God, if our behaviour is shaped by our past regrets or by our caressing our hurts, we cannot be fully present to the Kingdom of God that is translucent with forgiveness.

Tim Winton, who worships at S. Paul's Church Beaconsfield, has written a series of insightful short stories about turning points in people's lives and their influence upon people's sense of self.

Here is one such scene from a story about Gail and Vic. They are driving in the South-West to visit friends who live in the Kari Forest.

You're stuck, Vic. You won't admit it but you are. Which, in case you hadn't noticed, leaves me stuck alongside you.

Stuck with me, you mean.

That's not what I said, she murmured. You're like someone under siege. And I know it's all these sudden memories. But are they coming because you've been sick, or are you sick from remembering?

Do you realize that every vivid experience in your life comes from your adolescence? You should hear yourself talk. You're trapped in it. Nothing you do now holds your attention like the past. I feel like I'm just part of some long, faded epilogue to your real life...⁵

Being born again, being open to the action of the Holy Spirit, living into the Kingdom of God now, gives the grace to live not from our past (however much it has captured us), but from God's future and God's promises.

Vic, Gail, John Taylor, Brian Farran, Andrew Beel, Nicodemus, you - we all need to be born again so as to see - to see the Kingdom of God, to see disappointment and deformity, and beauty and love.

⁴ John V. Taylor. 1972. The Go-Between God. London: SCM Press, p.19.

⁵ Tim Winton. The Turning. Sydney: Picador, pp.301,302.

The conversation begun with Nicodemus goes on; now between Jesus and each one of us...