14.4.21

Read John 3:1-21

Despite the fact that we have been born anew of water and the Holy Spirit in baptism, there remains still a bit of Nicodemus inside each of us through our reluctance to comply.

He was fearful; so are we. He came to Jesus by night (3:2), afraid of being seen to have a private conversation with him. Nicodemus was very much a member of the religious establishment, quite possibly even a member of the Sanhedrin (the Jewish court), and he was no doubt worried that this private approach to Jesus could be seen in a very bad light. He had a reputation to maintain, a position of respectability and authority, and quite probably a wife and family to support, and what he was doing was undoubtedly potentially dangerous to all of that. In this world's terms, he had every reason to be very careful, and so he came under cover of darkness.

He was puzzled and curious about Jesus; we may sometimes feel a bit like that. This man, Jesus, had none of the formal training and qualifications of the likes of Nicodemus, yet in view of the signs Jesus is producing "we know", said Nicodemus, "that you are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do, unless God is with him" (3:2). But Nicodemus is stuck there, intellectually and personally, and wants a good old academic discussion (head stuff) to answer his questions and resolve his doubts. But Jesus isn't willing to go there, for there is something more fundamental to address: whilst there is certainly a place for the head stuff, both for Nicodemus and for us, Jesus instead confronts Nicodemus at this moment with a much more important personal issue which, without Nicodemus even realising it, is what he is battling with inside himself, and so to a greater or lesser extent are we.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew (or, from the same word in Greek, 'from above'), he/she cannot see the kingdom of God." (3:3) Oh wow, what is the man on about? Nicodemus asks the earthbound question about being born again from his mother's womb, and Jesus replies that, no, he is talking on a spiritual level, about a necessary re-birth through divine power: "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he/she cannot enter the kingdom of God". (3:5). "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand this?", Jesus asks (3:10). The Old Testament (Nicodemus' particular field of knowledge, bear in mind) envisions God coming in the messianic age to pour out his spirit from above, like water specifically (e.g. Isaiah 32:15 and 44:3, and Ezekiel 39:29 and 36:25-26). Jesus' words will most surely have struck a chord for Nicodemus, given him something academic to go away and chew over.

And Jesus goes on to explain further. His slightly obscure reference to the action of the Spirit being like the behaviour of the wind (3:8) may be understood in various ways, but perhaps for Nicodemus especially (and for us too?) Jesus can be heard saying that we must give way to the power of its unpredictable and uncontrollable action; like autumn leaves in the wind, we have to be willing to be taken in directions chosen by the Spirit, rather than by us, which of course we may not always like.

Nicodemus, at least when he started the conversation, saw Jesus as essentially just a teacher, even if one sent by God. Our faith is that Jesus does not just teach us about the kingdom but actually personally brings it, and in a real sense we can say that only when we encounter him in the power of the Holy Spirit do we find the kingdom.