

Second Sunday in Lent – 12 March – St David’s Red Hill.**Genesis 12: 1-4a****Psalm 121****Romans 4: 1-5, 13-17****John 3: 1-17**

Nicodemus, whom we meet in today’s Gospel, had a real challenge. He was one of the Pharisees and so as a Jewish religious leader he had lots of baggage to go with his status – but he also wanted to speak to Jesus – there was something in Jesus that made him want to come closer. What would Jesus think though if he came up to him and spoke to him? What would the other Pharisees say? Would he be ridiculed?

It seems that he was in a catch 22 situation and whatever he did a challenge confronted him, but he went straight up to Jesus, took the challenge and spoke to him. To his great surprise Jesus spoke with him, telling Nicodemus some amazing information. Jesus gave him deep spiritual teaching and said that he must be born again.

Now Nicodemus must have been a little confused about this. How could he be born again he wondered?

Jesus cuts straight to the chase and replies that if a person wants to enter the kingdom of heaven, then that person must be born of water and the Spirit. Jesus was speaking of baptism of course. In baptism we are born again by water and the Spirit and we are incorporated into the body of Christ using the powerful symbols of water, oil and light. God’s Spirit works through these signs in a way that brings new life and in which we are born again in a spiritual sense. This talk of a spiritual birth interested Nicodemus too and so he asks another question wanting to know how this can be.

Jesus answers by speaking about how God loved the world so much that he sent his only Son so that everyone who believes in him might not die but have eternal life. Now this love that Jesus speaks of is not just some sugary surface feature emotion like we might see in a soap on the TV or a trashy novel. What Jesus is saying here is a radical idea indeed. In the Greek in which the New Testament was written the word used for love here (*agape*) means a self-sacrificing love, one that does not count the cost but gives itself unsparingly for the other person. The word Jesus used for world here (*cosmos*) means the whole of creation – the whole universe – every thing, living and not living, in creation. The love of

God, says Jesus, is not limited to just the right sort of people or those who believe certain things or even to just people. God's love is bigger than what we think or believe or know. God's love is an inclusive love – no one or no thing is left out in the cold.

Nicodemus had the courage to approach and ask the big questions and Jesus gives him some pretty important teaching. Nicodemus has faced his fears and now he stands in the presence of Jesus – at a crossroads really.

Being born again implies that we are prepared to make that step of faith, to look at ourselves and to start growing and giving of ourselves. Nicodemus began that process and God holds out the same promise to you and me. Like Nicodemus we need to be open to God's calling, working in us and changing us through our baptism and into the rest of our life, helping us to grow in faith and life. When we are open to God's Spirit working we have the power to live a new life in Christ. In our baptism we are made children of God and it is the grace of God that grows our incorporation in Christ's body the Church. Today we pray that God's Holy Spirit will work in us to strengthen and grow us as we come more and more into contact with Jesus through the Eucharist in which we all share fully.

With all this in mind today's readings speak to us clearly about the of journey of life. It's not just a physical journey but a moving towards – a preparedness to move forward in faith and hope and trust. Abraham in the Old Testament was challenged by God to leave his home and go with his family to a new land God has prepared for him. He undoubtedly found this challenging but goes in obedience to God's call. The Psalmist in Psalm 121 assures those who follow the call that our help in confronting our fears is in the Lord. The Lord will be our keeper – come what may from this time and for ever more. Paul assures us in the Romans reading that as we journey with God and as we respond to God's call to us all that God will sustain us with the gift of faith. Faith is not something we produce but the gracious gift of God and it is through this gift we can be justified and face the road ahead. When we make the decision of faith we move ahead in confidence that God will sustain us in the ministry we are called to do.

Nicodemus too is journeying. He comes to Jesus by night so that others will not see him but at the same time he acknowledges that Jesus is a teacher sent from God. He knows there is great and divine power in the presence of Jesus but he does not fully understand it. He talks in a literal

way wondering how a person can be born again and so misses the spiritual birth of a life of faith. But he does grow. He comes closer to Jesus, not understanding everything immediately but wanting to know, wanting to be close.

All this is about growth and change. The Christian life is not a static life. Lent reminds us as we prepare for and journey towards Easter that when we come into the presence of Jesus, like Nicodemus came into the presence of Jesus, we are bound to change and grow. The great nineteenth century theologian, John Henry Newman, at one time an Anglican and then a Roman Catholic, speaks about this in a powerful way. In his writing there is the recurring theme of changing oneself in order to be changed and he famously said in his *Essay on Development of Christian Doctrine*: ‘In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often’. For Newman and seemingly for Nicodemus change is a normal and essential part of our human life. Perfection for Newman was not some final state in the sense that we are ‘perfect’ without error or fault, but perfection is a process of change and the willingness to enter that process. Nicodemus was willing to do that and to grow. He seemed to have realised that unless he changed he could never enter the process of being perfected into the image of God.

As we continue our Lenten journey we have the same challenge. We face the need to change and to enter into the process of being perfected into God. We never reach the end point of perfection as some sort of product but rather come to know that our life is a process of moving towards – being perfected into the image of God as we seek to live out our life of faith in ways that follow God’s call to us and help us to live with God and others in truth and justice.

The calling of God to us all and the response of faith which impels us to journey is at the heart of the Christian life. We follow Christ and in so doing we are graced by the God who loves us. We keep moving along that road of being perfected. May God bless, encourage and gift us in the journey we make together in this Lenten season and may God be with us as we live and change and as we change often.