

SECOND SUNDAY IN LENT – 16th March 2014 7.00am Eucharist 8.00am Eucharist 9.30am Solemn Eucharist Readings: Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5 (6-12) 13-17; John 3:1-17

The Revd Dr Fred Craddock is one of the foremost authorities on preaching in the last few decades and *Newsweek* ranked him as one of America's greatest preachers. In his lectures and sermons he often bewails the tendency to shrink the Christian faith down to a manageable size, to squeeze it into the little boxes of our impoverished religious imagination. He refers to people who've reduced the faith to slogans like we see on T-shirts and car bumper stickers. When we shrink faith down and place it in little pigeonholes we run the risk of becoming 'boxed-in' people.

The box may be a theological one, an ethical one, an ecclesiastical or denominational one, or a liturgical one. Even the most faithful, resourceful, broad-minded, generous-hearted and tolerant among us have at times tried to reduce God to our dimensions. We can't even say the word 'God' without placing some limitations upon God, because we all have particular experiences and backgrounds that form us as human beings including our mental processes and the way we approach matters of faith, including our understanding of God.

Nicodemus seems to have gone to Jesus at night with his boxes all neatly labelled. Sometimes Nicodemus has been seen as a restless seeker. He had doubts and that's why he came by night. Whatever truth there is to that view, a close reading of the passage portrays Nicodemus as, in the beginning anyway, the picture of confidence and certainty. After all, his first words are "Rabbi, we know..."

Addressing Jesus as 'rabbi' indicates that Nicodemus saw Jesus as an equal. This is a conversation between two established authorities. "Let's talk teacher to teacher, Jesus. We speak the same language; we use the same religious jargon. We know." "We" could be Nicodemus and Jesus (we know between ourselves), or he could be speaking on behalf of the Sanhedrin, the 'supreme court' of the Jewish people. We know, we, the highest religious authorities, have you sized up Jesus. We know what you're about. We know how God does and doesn't work in the world. We know the signs, the limits, the proper categories within which he works.

"No, you don't," says Jesus in effect. "No one can really know what's possible with God, no one can enter the kingdom of God, unless one is born from above/born anew/ born of the Spirit." That's Jesus' opening salvo in reply to Nicodemus. With that response, he knocks down the walls, breaks open the little boxes and smashes through the narrow confines and limited categories Nicodemus tried to establish.

How do we react when our certainties are shaken? When opinions, attitudes and feelings we've held on to for a long time are challenged, how do we react, what's our response? Nicodemus was shocked and incredulous. "How can these things be? How is this possible?"

It's been suggested that the rest of Nicodemus' conversation can be summed up by this question, "How can these things be?" It was like Jesus was dismantling the boxes Nicodemus had come to rely on for his certainty and security. Jesus was leading Nicodemus into the wild and unexplored territory of the Spirit, into the unknown, and Nicodemus tried to rope him back into the safe regions of "we know."

Poet W. H. Auden observed that it is hard to be a Christian if one is not a poet. A poet respects the power of language but is also aware of mystery and of the fact that language gropes to try and describe the unknowable.

"Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above.'" Jesus was stretching the limits of the possible. The wind of the Spirit blows where it chooses and it is beyond your knowing. You hear the

sound of it “but you *do not know* where it comes from or where it is going. So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Jesus urges Nicodemus and us to allow ourselves to be carried by this wind which is not and cannot be under our control. Jesus doesn't give Nicodemus a technique or a formula. This is not 10 ways to live a successful life or, as I once saw on a bumper sticker, how to make Jesus your co-pilot.

Dan Wakefield is an American novelist, journalist and screenwriter. He was brought up in the church but became an atheist while in college. He attended a Christmas Eve service in King's Chapel Boston which began his return to the church and faith. He wrote about it in the *New York Times Magazine* and later in a book *Returning: A Spiritual Journey*. In the article he described an encounter with Henri Nouwen in which Wakefield's preoccupations, like those of Nicodemus, were challenged. He writes:

“I told Fr Nouwen I had read and appreciated his work but that it dismayed me to read of his anguish . . . ; it made me wonder with discouragement what chance a neophyte had in pursuit of the spiritual, when someone as advanced as Fr Nouwen experienced anguish and confusion in his relation to God . . . Fr Nouwen responded sharply that contrary to what many people may think, ‘Christianity is not for getting your life together!’”

That's why Jesus uses two experiences that we don't achieve, viz., birth and wind. We can't do anything to make ourselves be born. And we can't control the wind. We can harness it and channel it but we don't cause it. As babies we don't somehow engineer our own birth. It wasn't our decision. In making the image of birth central to what he says to Nicodemus, Jesus highlights a key element in our relationship with God. It's not something we make happen but rather something God does.

Birth and wind, two of the most passive and uncontrollable factors in life. You can hear the sound of the wind but *do not know* where it comes from or where it's going. It's a choice between “we know” and “we don't know.” Jesus is speaking to Nicodemus of a different plane of thought and life altogether, a heavenly plane. “If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things?” Jesus wasn't offering Nicodemus a new technique, nor was he offering him a new theology. He was moving him toward a whole new life, a new way of wonder and worship. The idea was not for Nicodemus to replace his little theological boxes with slightly larger ones; rather it was to fall on his knees in repentance then be carried along by the wind of the Spirit into a new life – one not of human but of divine origin; not of flesh but of the Holy Spirit. That's what Jesus is calling us all to this Lent.

Nicodemus went to see Jesus at night. It's interesting to ponder why that was. Often on a Sunday here at the Cathedral you see inquirers who come, if not under cover of darkness, at least not too publicly. They sit and observe and take it all in. On a Sunday or a weekday you see people praying or just sitting or looking at some feature of architecture or art. We have no way of knowing how the wind of the Spirit is at work, blowing where it wills.

Often we make the Christian life seem harder work than it is. Quiet contemplation is something we may undervalue in our society. That's one of the reasons for the current emphasis on mindfulness. A man named James Finney went to see the great scholar and Trappist monk, Thomas Merton with the aim of trying hard to improve his prayer life. He recounts, “Merton told me once to quit trying so hard in prayer. He said: How does an apple ripen? It just sits in the sun. A small green apple cannot ripen in one night by tightening all its muscles, squinting its eyes and tightening its jaw in order to find itself the next morning miraculously large,

red, ripe, and juicy beside its small green counterparts. Like the birth of a baby or the opening of a rose, the birth of the true self takes place in God's time. We must wait for God, we must be awake; we must trust in God's hidden action within us" (James Finney, *Merton's Palace of Nowhere*, quoted in *Pulpit Resource*, March 16, 2014, Vol. 42, No.1, p. 46).

What impact did all this have on Nicodemus? We see him again, this time at the end of John's Gospel. Jesus is dead, crucified, and there's Nicodemus. This time he comes, not as an interrogator but as a disciple. Now, he doesn't come saying, "We know." In fact, he doesn't say anything. He brings spices to help prepare the body of Jesus for burial. They were an offering of worship and praise and hope.

We can come to God with our preoccupations and our shrunken imaginations *or* we can come in worship and adoration and humility, willing to allow the Spirit to carry us where it will. We can fear the cracking open of whatever boxes make us secure and comfortable, or we can let ourselves be carried by the wind of the Spirit and allow ourselves to be brought to new birth. We can be boxed in or born again.

Fr Mark Watson

Canon Pastor, Christ Church Cathedral, Newcastle