

‘By night’. It’s not a throwaway line. John is far too skilful a wordsmith for that. Nicodemus came to Jesus ‘by night’. In fact Nicodemus has only three minute, cameo roles in John’s Gospel- and it is in John’s Gospel alone that we hear of him. He appears and disappears- here ‘by night’- in the dark, then a few chapters later he has an even briefer role, urging the Pharisees to give Jesus a fair hearing and thirdly at the crucifixion, to which he brings a ludicrous amount of spices, 33kg, for burying the body of Jesus, but utters not a word.

In art, Nicodemus is often portrayed as assisting at the deposition, the removal of Jesus from the cross, and I’ve often wondered in our altarpiece, painted for St Luke’s at the time of the church’s construction, whether the pair of hands we can see in the top of the altarpiece are those of Nicodemus- gently letting down the dead body of Jesus into a shroud? For his personality seems inquisitive,

intrigued, compassionate even, yet, somewhat less than committed,- he came to Jesus by night, he urges his colleagues to give him a hearing at least and then he offers what he can in death.

Why did Nicodemus get even marginally involved with this outsider Jesus- after all, Nicodemus was a member of the Sanhedrin, the leaders of the Jewish establishment in Jerusalem, with whom Jesus of Nazareth- Nazareth- can any good thing come from there- was already in dispute. Yet the brief conversation seems to indicate that Nicodemus was aware of the 'signs' Jesus was undertaking (John never uses the word miracle), but signs of what? That an unknown hick from the backwaters might really have something to say, might be the presence of the living God in human form?

Jesus doesn't see this conversation as an easy way to make inroads into the Jewish leadership- but rather he bates Nicodemus- a supposed teacher of Israel, - what- you still don't get it?

Perhaps this coming by night, this give him a hearing, this kindness at the time of Jesus' death is Nicodemus both having his cake and eating it- attracted by the idea of Jesus incarnating God's way of being human, but not willing or able to go the whole hog, not committing full on. And as for Nicodemus, so perhaps for us? Having our cake and eating it- though being Lent- perhaps having a dry biscuit and eating it.

Yes, we come to church, not by night, but on Sunday morning when our friends, colleagues, neighbours, might hardly notice our commitment; we might put up a brief defence of talking about faith and religion- even at a Chelsea dinner party, but brief and just to give a fair hearing, we might be

generous in extremis- yes, perhaps quite like Nicodemus.

But the Gospel today is set over against God's challenge to Abraham. 'Go'. And he goes-he leaves his home and people and country and sets out, he knows not where, he commits. There is no going back for Abraham, unlike Nicodemus. The juxtaposition of these two readings, these two reactions to the presence of God, is stark. And, of course, begs the question, where are we? Keen to keep all options open, not to offend, or willing to set out on an unknown journey in faith. Paul calls this 'folly'- and of course it is, that is both the absurdity and mystery of following Christ in our worlds, every bit as much as in the world of Abraham or Nicodemus.

Many of you will have known our parishioner, Fleur de Villiers, loyal, faithful, yes, bloody-minded, determined, but with a fantastic humility and sense of fun, and I do hope that as many of you as possible will come to her funeral at Christ Church on

Wednesday at 11am. What you may not know about Fleur is the risk she took, for faith's sake. She was a very significant journalist in South Africa throughout the ghastly era of apartheid to which she was utterly opposed, both because of her faith and common humanity. As a journalist and as a Public Affairs executive for a well known, massive South African mining interest, behind the scenes, in secret, she brokered the very earliest conversations between the ANC and big business, to start to build a future for a new South Africa, based on equity and unity- for Fleur, based on her Christian faith. Like Abraham she stepped out in faith, took huge personal and professional risks for the sake of doing what was right and just and faithful. She was an Abraham, not a Nicodemus.

And yet, perhaps **we** still need Nicodemus. Not as a sidelines sitter, not to teach us to hedge our bets- we're all rather good at that already. Here we are sitting in the presence of God, like Nicodemus, ,and

like Nicodemus and those anonymous hands I think of as his, in the Altarpiece, we too shall be fed by Christ as we receive him into our hands in communion. Body broken and blood outpoured.

Dare we take the risk of fuller involvement with this Jesus of Nazareth, this folly, ending up racked on a cross beyond the city walls. Jesus, spells it out to Nicodemus- there really is only one way to find out what God's purposes may be for you, for the world, and that is like Abraham to go- not go home to our securities but to step out with Jesus of Nazareth, whose lifting high on the cross in self offering is the truest sign of God's loving design for the world he loves so much that he comes not in judgement but for healing. Nicodemus has to decide- and so do we.

BL

03.03.23