

In the Gospel readings of the last several Sundays, led by Mark at first, then by John, we have followed Jesus through the first months of his public life. We have witnessed the powerful moment of his baptism in the Jordan when the Father's voice proclaimed "This is my Son; listen to him."—the same words also spoken on Mt. Tabor at the Transfiguration. We have seen him choose his disciples. And then we heard of his temptation in the desert, where he literally told the devil to go to hell. And last week, we saw him expel the money-changers from the Temple.

Many people came to believe in him after those early miracles. A few, without hesitation, believed with *deep faith*. Others refused to believe and violently rejected him. But the great majority, I suppose, had something of a middle-of-the-road, ambiguous faith: a mixture of natural curiosity about religion and a natural *attraction* toward the extraordinary or the miraculous—a faith without too much commitment.

One of those ambiguous believers was Nicodemus. I have always liked Nicodemus, because I think he is so much like us. He believes, but he doesn't quite have the courage to *totally accept* all the consequences of his faith. Nevertheless, Jesus takes him seriously. Being a doctor of Israel, Nicodemus knows the Scriptures. He can see that God is *with* Jesus, but he doesn't go so far as to recognize that God is *in* Jesus. He comes to him so that he can learn more, *but he comes during the night*, (that detail was a few verses before this section of today's gospel) he doesn't want to be seen. He is a seeker, but a seeker in the darkness. His faith will grow, but he will always remain somewhat ambiguous. He feels drawn to Jesus, but he also stays away from him. He will even be there at the time of Jesus' death and burial, but not *too* close.

Today's Gospel passage is taken from the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus in the famous 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of John, which contains that great expression of faith of the early Christian community: "God so loved the world that..." John 3:16. (NFL stadiums)

Here we find Jesus taking Nicodemus where he is on his journey and leading him further. Exactly what He does with us when we come to Him in our own darkness! Nicodemus had come to look for light in darkness. They don't go together, light and darkness; and Jesus challenged him to choose—either live in the light or live in the dark; you can't have it both ways, Nick.

The real light, Jesus shows us, is the one of Transfiguration: it implies death, change, conversion. And it requires living the TRUTH—not just *speaking* the truth, but *living* it. Salvation, as Paul tells us today, is this great gift of God, and if we grab onto that gift, it is only natural that we will do good, that we will live the truth.

Jesus' words to Nicodemus must have been shocking. It was all so new. The message is that God is not some abstract, all-seeing, all-knowing, all-powerful *Principle*. God is real, as real as a son is to a father. *God has a future*, and He has placed it in our hands. Salvation is not at the end of history, but it is a part of it. And right in the middle of this history, with all its misery and agony, is planted the **cross**. Planted in the middle of a world where the mighty trample the lowly, a world that Jesus knew so well, a world that put him to death, a world that he came to redeem.

*That* is what Lent and the Passion are all about—*that* is the *really* Good News: Rejoice! Laetare! By taking on this human misery, which we all face in some way, Jesus made it possible for us to be delivered from it. Not through miracles—the signs which the Pharisees demanded as proof that He was the Messiah—but through a conversion, a transformation of people's minds and hearts, starting with my own.

There is so much darkness out there, but *we* are called to be people of the light. May we have the courage to let our hearts be changed enough to see that light and live the truth!