

Sunday 8th March 2020. Lent 2. Canongate Kirk.

St John 3:1 *Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night...*

Last week Lent began with the traditional account of Jesus' dramatic dialogue with the shadowy figure of the devil at the end of those forty days and forty nights in the wilderness. The Gospel reading for this week, the second Sunday of Lent, finds Jesus well and truly in from the wilderness and his ministry underway, but caught up in another dialogue, another conversation which the Gospel-writer enables us to listen in on. And this time the dialogue itself takes place in the shadows, for with the very first sentence of his third chapter, St John tells us that *there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night...* He doesn't explain why he came by night but I suppose we can assume that Nicodemus, who was clearly a powerful and influential figure amongst the leading Jewish authorities of the time and who counted himself among those who St Paul described as the descendants of Abraham, might not wish to be seen in the company of the provocative carpenter from Nazareth.

In the preceding chapter St John tells us that Jesus had begun his ministry not only with the miraculous turning of water into wine at the wedding in Cana of Galilee but with the controversial turning over of the tables of the money-changers in the temple-precincts, the latter action immediately drawing him to the alarmed attention of the Scribes and the Pharisees. And *Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night...* No wonder he didn't want to be seen. Or perhaps just as likely he didn't want to be disturbed. For Nicodemus was a thoughtful man. A man in his position would have already received news of the trouble-maker in the temple, but unlike his fellow Pharisees whose excessive dependence on the minutiae of the Law Jesus had begun vehemently to challenge, he had not rushed to condemn him. But he had questions in his mind, serious, important questions that no-one could answer except Jesus of Nazareth himself. And he would need time to hear and consider the answers. And so *Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night...*

Ironically the origin of the very term Lent is in the medieval English word for the lengthening of days, and the days are certainly getting longer but the season remains a dark and sombre time, for the Church at least. The liturgical colour for the penitential season is purple, the darkest in the range of colours used throughout the Christian year and the one that is also used at funerals to match the sombre mood. Except unlike at funerals there are no flowers to brighten the scene. Beyond the church walls the whole traditional business of giving things up for Lent means that for some it is a time of abstinence and even austerity, if not exactly a dark time then at the very least a dull time, without chocolate or coffee or alcohol or whatever other temptations we are inclined to try and deny ourselves until Easter at last lets us off the hook. But most seriously of all Lent is the time when we are called to focus our minds not so much on the beginning of Jesus' ministry as the prospect of its end, with his suffering and trial and death, and to prepare ourselves to stand once again in the shadow of the cross. The shadow of the cross, even that very expression suggests a darkening scene.

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night... And that night Jesus already knew exactly what lay ahead of him. He was under no illusions. He said they must all be born again. But he knew how much more was required of him before he too could be born again. “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness”, he tells Nicodemus, “so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life”. And he continues with what has become one of the most best-known and best-loved verses in all of Scripture “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life”. It’s too early to tell whether Nicodemus believes in him yet, but his curiosity is certainly enough to bring him through the darkened streets to confront Jesus face to face. And something works away in his mind over the ensuing months and years as he watches the events surrounding Jesus and he waits for what Jesus himself has told him must happen. The Son of Man must be lifted up.

We don’t hear much more of Nicodemus until almost the end of John’s Gospel, when he reappears from the shadows to join Joseph of Arimathea in lifting down the pierced and broken body of Jesus from the cross and preparing it for burial in the garden tomb, that most poignant moment when for a second time *there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. He came to Jesus by night...* On that occasion Joseph of Arimathea is described as “a secret disciple for fear of the Jews”. There is no such description for Nicodemus, but a realisation for him surely that now all his questions have been answered, that though he may well still be one of the Pharisees and a member of the Jewish Council, now he knows what has been missing, now he knows how you can be born again and make a new beginning.

And perhaps that ultimately is what Lent can still be about. For the days are lengthening right enough, and there are signs of new life and new birth and new hope all around. And even as Nicodemus leads us into the shadows, does he not also lead us out into the light of understanding how God so loved the world, the dark and dangerous world, that he gave his only Son for you and for me and even for *a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews, (who) came to Jesus by night...*

Amen.