

why doesn't nicodemus know?

a sermon preached on the
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the lections: Genesis 12:1-4a, Psalm 121, Romans 4:1-5,13-17, John 3:1-17

Anyone listening to today's account of Nicodemus' night-time dialogue with Jesus must surely be struck by Jesus' tone of voice. Not Anglican politeness! "Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?"¹ It certainly sounds like Jesus *expects* that Nicodemus *should* know about the spiritual matters they have been discussing – and the fact that Nicodemus does not seems to prompt in Jesus a mixture of disbelief and ironic scorn. This seems a harsh way to treat a person who appears to have gone to some trouble – and taken something of a risk. After all, Nicodemus was a "ruler of the Judeans"² – and he sought Jesus out by night.

What is it that Nicodemus is meant to have known? Well it appears that Jesus expects he should know about spiritual rebirth by water and Spirit³ – about spiritual rebirth being an inner reality⁴; about the kingdom of God being accessible only to those thus reborn, who have been penetrated by the Spirit who blows where she will⁵; about the Son of humanity and the healing capacity of the serpent⁶. But the dialogue repeatedly reveals that Nicodemus, though a leader of the religious establishment, is in the dark. Indeed, he came by night!⁷

So why doesn't Nicodemus know these things? It has been common in Christianity to make the claim that it is because Nicodemus is a Jew – and not a 'saved' Christian, like us. But it ought to be painfully obvious by now that this is nothing other than *eisegetis* – not reading *out* of the text, but reading back *into* the text of Scripture the triumphal attitude of Christian empire. And here we are touching on one of the sources of lethal Christian anti-Semitism which justified the murder of six million Jews – and God alone knows how many others down the last seventeen centuries. It's crucial to remember that Nicodemus and Jesus are *both* Jews.

So why doesn't Nicodemus know these spiritual things? An explanation which makes sense for me is this: Nicodemus represents institutionalised religion. I'll explain what I mean by that in a moment. But first, how *could* Nicodemus know about such things?

All religious insight arises out of encounter – an actual experience of the Numinous, the Holy, the Divine. The Hebrew scriptures are littered with such encounters – too many to name just now, though we've overheard just one of the many fragments in this morning's piece of the Abraham story.⁸ The Scriptures themselves are the testimony of those who have personally experienced the Divine influence – who have reflected upon their experiences, and passed these reflections on as a testimony of the numinous encounter.

But, what typically happens to those written testimonies is that – once accepted by a religious community – they become concretised into an institution with authority, doctrines, rituals, and rules. "This has the advantage of offering [to many] people the benefits of the religious experiences that originated with a few, but has the disadvantage of substituting an outer order for an inner experience."⁹ What begins as direct experience gets codified, normalised, and concretised. This is good for societal order and structure. But those who adhere to the codified structures may not themselves have their own experience of the Holy. Worse still, adherence to the codified and institutionalised scriptures and doctrines can in fact thwart actual experience – the inevitable consequence of which is literalism, historicism, and legalism, counterfeit religion which is all too easily bandied about.

¹ John 3:10

² John 3:1 The NRSV translates the Greek as "leader", but the Greek word is **ἄρχων** *archōn*, ruler.

³ John 3:5

⁴ John 3:3 The Greek word **ἀνωθεν** *anōthen* frequently translated into English as 'from above' literally means "again".

⁵ John 3:8

⁶ John 3:14

⁷ John 3:2

⁸ Genesis 12:1

⁹ John A Sanford, *Mystical Christianity: A Psychological Commentary on the Gospel of John*, New York: Crossroad, 1993, pp90-91.

And this is at the core of Jesus' rebuke of the religious leaders of his day – through their control over the scriptures and doctrines they give the *impression* of knowing about spiritual realities, but in fact they do not. Words and doctrines do not of themselves constitute spiritual experience, spiritual reality. Look at what's soon coming in chapter five. Paul's way of saying this is to claim that Abraham's inheritance did not come through the law – but through the 'righteousness of faith'.¹⁰ This term does not mean moralistic obsession – as the lives of Abraham and so many others clearly reveals. Rather, it has something to do with experience of the Holy, and living out of that experience.

By contrast, all institutionalised religion knows about is second-hand things – things written in books, words, words, words. Such knowledge is not our own. It has no living ground in our own experience. Such religion is institutionalised, external, superficial. And, shockingly, Jesus declares that such persons in such a state cannot enter the kingdom of God!

It should be obvious that Jesus' critique is not of Jews – but of all institutionalised religion which has not been born again, of any persons who have not themselves gone the way of water and Spirit. To employ a more contemporary turn of phrase: those who have not have undergone an inner transformation. We might say these days that such a person is in an unconscious state.

What Jesus expects of Nicodemus is that a person cannot come to the fullness of life¹¹ except by transcending their unconscious state – into a state described in the Greek Scriptures as a 'spiritual being'.¹² The person who is born again has made a passage, a dark and hidden passage, through an inner transformation – which is hinted at in the birth imagery Nicodemus mistakenly stumbles upon.¹³ This is an encounter with the Spirit who blows where she will.

To say this another way: Jesus expects Nicodemus should know about spiritual things not as mere religious information – so readily bandied about and forced onto others – but *as his own interior experience*, not external rule, but inner reality. Only such knowledge can truly be called an 'evangel'. Religious information that does not come from such a ground is counterfeit.

Well, the gift to us of this gospel story on the second Sunday in Lent can be seen. Whatever religious information may have been handed down to us – no matter how authorised it may be, or how effective it may be in regulating moral affairs – it is no substitute for becoming a spiritual being, and indeed leads to deadness. The gospels chillingly warn about the devilish consequences of institutionalised religion which has not been reborn by water and Spirit. Jesus clearly expects that those who presume to know about religious matters must speak and act out of their own direct encounter with the Divine – the fruit of their own experience of the birth passage through darkness by water and Spirit.

Lent's drained, dry, and sealed font, along with Lent's bowl of ashes, stand as symbols of this spiritual path. We ourselves remain dry, sealed, institutionally religious – unable to receive 'eternal life'¹⁴ – until we experience the deluge of direct encounter by water and Spirit.

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¹⁰ Romans 4:13

¹¹ John 10:10

¹² 1 Corinthians 2:1-14

¹³ John 3:4

¹⁴ John 3:16