

Slowly But Surely

There are various symbols in the Bible to represent the Holy Spirit: the dove, oil, light, fire and wind. Each symbol emphasizes a different aspect of the Spirit. For example, all four Gospels use the image of the dove for the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus at his baptism, the comparison may be to the dove's gentle descent. When the disciples were gathered together on Pentecost, they were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit enabled them. Here the Spirit was described as fire which gave the disciples the power to speak up, and to change the world. And in today's text, the Spirit is described as wind. Jesus says, "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

I like how he describes the Spirit with wind. Think about wind. It is sometimes gentle, and sometimes powerful, but it always moves. It is invisible, but we can feel it. We can't control the wind; sometimes it's so strong we cannot even walk against it – it carries us where it will. It refreshes and it tears down, and life without it is dull and unchanging. One Greek word, "pneuma" means both wind and spirit. Whether you recognize it or not, and whether you like it or not, the Spirit affects your life. It leads you, moves you, and changes you. The Spirit, like wind, is a mystery, just as our lives, like the Spirit, have their own mysteries.

Today, we meet a mysterious person, Nicodemus. He was a teacher of the law and a member of the Jewish religious leadership. In many ways he is a sympathetic character. A successful and self-confident man, he plays a leadership role in his community. He is spiritually open and curious, yet also rational. He approaches Jesus directly and tries to figure out Jesus' actions and associations in the Jewish community. He is honest and curious enough that he doesn't rely on spies and rumours; he makes an appointment to talk with Jesus face to face. However, Nicodemus is not ready to go public with his interest in Jesus, so he schedules the meeting for the middle of the night, when he can keep his interest secret, separated from the rest of his life. He is not yet ready to declare his faith in the light of day, not prepared to let it change his life. No doubt it was difficult, perhaps even dangerous, for Nicodemus to follow Jesus publicly, during the bright light of the day.

Light and dark imagery is important in John. Light symbolizes the presence of God and darkness and night symbolize God's absence. For example, when Jesus foretold his betrayal to his disciples, John specifies that it was night when Judas immediately went out to betray Jesus after

receiving the piece of bread from Christ, who called himself the light of the world. At the end of the conversation with Nicodemus, Jesus said, in John 3:20-21, “For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.” I am not sure if Jesus was referring to Nicodemus’ night visitation, and inviting him to come into the light. But there is one thing I am sure of: Nicodemus was changed after his secret visit to Jesus.

Nicodemus appears three times in the Bible. The first is when he visits Jesus one night to listen to his teachings. The second is when he states the law concerning the arrest of Jesus during the Feast of Tabernacles in John 7:45-52; he was interceding for Jesus with the other Pharisees. And the last appearance follows the Crucifixion, when he assists Joseph of Arimathea in the burial of Jesus. They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. Nicodemus was not an official disciple of Jesus, but he stood for Jesus in the most dangerous times, even after his friend and teacher’s death.

I wonder if his first and personal encounter with Jesus at night affected his second and third story. I wonder what gave him strength to support Jesus against the confused and angry Pharisees. I wonder what brought Nicodemus there to honour the dead Jesus after all the disciples had fled in fear. I think there must have been something that drew him close to Jesus, something that moved him on his life journey, and something that changed him from a cloaked visitor at midnight to a brave companion.

Someone might want to say that it was just his curiosity that brought him to Jesus, and it was by chance that he spoke out of justice and acted out of kindness. But I’d like to say that it is the Spirit that led him from the beginning to the end. I would say that it is God who called Nicodemus to visit Jesus, and that it is the Spirit who changed him slowly but surely. He was being born anew, again, and from above throughout his life time, even though he did not fully understand Jesus’ teachings. He would not be there for the burial if Jesus didn’t mean much to him.

We wouldn’t be here if Jesus didn’t mean much to us. We come to church to be nurtured, to be loved, and to be touched, and we go out sometimes with more questions than answers. At times, we have wanted to change ourselves all at once, and we have wanted to change others all at once as well, but we have learned that it is only the Spirit who can change, and that the change comes as the Spirit wills – sometimes in a rush, completely, but also slowly and surely. And the story of Nicodemus reminds us of both our limitation and our hope. We don’t know where the Spirit goes – we cannot pattern it on a map, we cannot add it to our schedules. We have to let it find us, and accept both the gifts and the challenges it brings.