



Sunday Reflection

in the Charges of St Margarets, Renfrew
& St Johns, Johnstone



For Sunday 10 March 2024

Lent 4

The Rector will preach at both Charges:-

As we continue through Lent, we learn more about what it means for Jesus to be the Saviour of the world. Today, as we reflect on one of the most famous verses in scripture, we ask God to help us see the world as God sees it – both loved and saved.

"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." John 3:16

An illustration to set the scene

Transforming experiences often happen at night, when our usual senses are not available, and things become magnified in our imagination.

We may have to feel our way, using our intuition, conscious we're not in control of our environment.

Night is a time when we can't see, or be seen – so it's also a time when we are both limited by the lack of light and also set free, perhaps to explore different ways of being.

We may catch hold of something we would miss during the day, when we rely on our usual means of perception.

Today's Gospel teaching

John is setting out the heart of the Gospel, revealing just who Jesus is and the universality of God's salvation.

He has Nicodemus come to Jesus "by night" for the crucial conversation which culminates in this short passage.

Night makes it possible for Nicodemus to travel unseen, without being judged by those who ordinarily surround him.

But just as his night-time journey enables him to escape the judgement of his peers, he is perhaps also freed from his own preconceptions... or almost.

One of the commentaries describes him as being "so near and yet so far" – from recognising who Jesus really is.

As the conversation progresses we see him struggling with his inability to look at how God works in a new and different way – literally, in a different light.

Jesus points Nicodemus to the story from Exodus of the serpent lifted in the wilderness – a sign of salvation.

But this won't mean anything to him, or to John's readers, until they look back at this conversation from the other side of the cross.

Throughout John's Gospel we have to look backwards from the end of the story – from the promise of salvation, God's gift through Jesus.

For Nicodemus, this must have been a hard message to swallow.

As a faithful Pharisee he had been living his life for good, for the benefits which would be accrued through righteous study and practice, according to his tradition.

Jesus, in contrast, describes a different approach to salvation, which is a gift for anyone who wants to receive it.

In this place of darkness, he says, where you have come to find me, let your eyes be opened to a different way of seeing.

You cannot avoid condemnation through your own study and actions.

The story that takes its perspective from the end is about God.

The story that starts from where we are now is about us.

Our lives, Jesus is saying through John's Gospel, can be defined by what God has done for us, rather than what we can do for God; by what God has made us, rather than what we have made God.

How can we apply the teaching to our own lives?

Learning to see as God sees is the heart of the famous passage.

We are invited, like Nicodemus, to come to Jesus in the “night” of our own lives, to ask God to help us see ourselves, Jesus and the world as God sees these things.

We might want to imaginatively follow Nicodemus through the dark streets of Jerusalem to his night-time encounter with Jesus, and listen to him remind us of the Exodus story of healing as the people look up at the bronze snake.

We can, in our imagination, look up at the cross and find hope for our lives and the world.

We don't know how Nicodemus was changed by this encounter, although he appears again in John chapters 7 and 19, still following Jesus.

For ourselves, we are clearly challenged by Jesus' words through John to come into the light – to bring all our wounds, our sicknesses before the cross and allow them to be forgiven and healed.

John 3:16 has sometimes been called a “terror text” – defining who is condemned, rather than asserting that all may be saved.

We can use the passage as a prompt for our own prayers; that we see the world as God sees it, worth infinite love and not condemnation, and put that into practice, as Jesus did.

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