

Seeking Nicodemus

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews. This man came to Jesus by night...(John 3:1,2)

Our Lord said, and continues to say through his Living Word to His disciples that “We are to be in the world, yet, not of the world (John 17)”. It means that we pay attention to popular culture without being seduced by it. We pay attention, so that we might relate the timeless truths of the Gospel to what we are happening in people’s lives today. We let the Spirit guide us to find the point of commonality or the hook where we can introduce a conversation about the Gospel.

This week, we can see all kinds of people out there seeking God as hard as Nicodemus in our text. Just as Nicodemus comes to Christ, others may come to you in the lost darkness of their lives as Christ’s Presence radiates forth from you as His representative. Remember that as the baptized the Christ lives through you. Maybe you’ve been lost on your own island and haven’t had time to connect with popular culture lately.

But when you read about all the hype around the concluding television series “Lost” you discover that many are intrigued with eternal mysteries. Sometime before the concluding episode one avid chat-room participant wrote: “I know where Jack Shepherd is”. “He’s in purgatory”. They’re all in purgatory”. They’ve all got to work something out on the island so they can move onto the Great Beyond. This is an interesting take on a program whose inner meaning baffles even the most avid fan.

But here, in this entertaining, yet confusing medium you have central themes covered in Scripture. See a smoke monster, a true likeness to the beast that emerges from the abyss, blood and fire and billowing smoke angrily devouring all. Good. Evil. Living under the constraints of time, and then breaking those constraints in time. Characters seek meaning and purpose in life. Believer’s enthralled with finding an island with purpose and character – a sort of pale shadow of a mysterious Kingdom of God. The writers groping in the dark for something long lost, that “eternity in our hearts” that wise King Solomon wrote of in Ecclesiastes.

We can connect a discussion of Satan with the smoke monster, the constraints of time with a discussion on eternal heaven or eternal hell. For those characters who seek meaning and purpose with a discussion of the character Nicodemus seeking the Kingdom of God. The possibilities are many.

Yet so many continue to say, “I don’t know how I’ll ever be able to evangelize”. “I need a Masters of Divinity degree and an electric shock of the Holy Spirit” we say. Yet the “Lost” following a program called “Lost” are ready, willing, even longing to be found. Enthralled with a mystery, mourning its end, we can stand up and proclaim our greater fascination with the Eternal Mystery of the Trinity.

Writers of human fictitious mystery kept interest going for 6 years. But the Divine Mystery of the Holy Trinity can hold the attention of the world, spanning time, and culture and place for an eternity. Such is its depth. God in Three Persons reveals himself continually, the story continues, yet the creative energy never dies.

We have an eternal mystery to proclaim today. On Trinity Sunday we boldly approach His Presence with Isaiah and all the hosts of heaven with God given “grace” as we pray in our opening collect “grace to acknowledge the glory of the eternal Trinity by the confession of the True Faith.

No doubt that Isaiah and all the Old Testament saints worshipped the same Triune God we worship here today. His Triune (Three in One) nature, revealed even from the beginning. Check out your “From the Catechism” section in your bulletins and you’ll know what I mean. Read the very first verses from Genesis and see as much in the very name we translate God “Elohim”. It is written in a plural in Hebrew. Yet it is referred to as one. Read how God the Father works alongside the Spirit hovering over the waters. See how a reference Bible cites John 1:1 at this point saying “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God”. This Word is Jesus.

With all this in mind Jesus chides a seeking Nicodemus with a “you should have known better” response. “You are Israel’s teacher” says Jesus, “and yet you do not understand these things”?

The passage from John’s Gospel this morning reveals the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The passage reveals their collaborative work of bestowing Salvation upon us. God the Father loves us and sends his Son to be lifted up on a cross. God the Son, the “Son of Man” is lifted up, and ascends into Heaven. And God the Holy Spirit blows wherever he wishes. But how now shall Nicodemus enter the Kingdom of God? What means shall the Triune God use?

Jesus says, “Unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God”. The prophet Isaiah had prepared Nicodemus for this sort of talk. For the prophet had said: “Wash yourselves and make yourselves clean” and “though your sins are like scarlet they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson they shall be as wool”. Now Jesus speaks of water and the Spirit here. John came baptizing with water. Now, Jesus comes instituting a baptism with water and the Spirit.

John, chapter 4 states that although Jesus himself did not baptize, his disciples did in his stead. Jesus gives an explicit command to baptize in Matthew 28 following the Resurrection because it is in His own Life, Death, and Resurrection that Baptism carries the true power to atone for sin and raise us up to eternal life.

How the rebirth comes is taught by Jesus himself. The power of water of the Spirit comes with the precious sacrifice of Jesus and his resurrection from the dead.

The sacrifice of the Messiah was foretold by Moses and fulfilled at the cross. “Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness so must the Son of Man be lifted up that whosoever believes on him may have eternal life”.

Truly our Lord was lifted up. But he rose higher than just being raised on the cross. He rose beyond the cross in his resurrection. He rose to the highest heavens as Jesus explains. “No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.”

In Baptism we are both given the gift of faith and demonstrate the gift of faith. In Baptism we are born anew, given a Second birth, a life from above in a Kingdom from Above. It is a Kingdom of Light whose reign for the believer begins the moment he is baptized and believes.

Nicodemus heard these mysteries from our Lord. His explanation of the Old Testament drew him in to know them as Eternal Mysteries. In them Nicodemus grew wise. He did not retreat from the world as he wrestled with such mysteries. He kept one foot firmly fixed in the affairs of his calling that God called him to as well as heeding his call to the Eternal Kingdom. Nicodemus was a true salt of the earth. He was a witness to the Light even before he was fully in the Light Himself.

Nicodemus was the one who the Holy Spirit used to speak up for justice and forestall the premature arraignment of our Lord. He brought the Jewish Council, the Sanhedrin back to consider justice, although they would later ignore him by saying “Does our law judge a man before it hears him and knows what he is doing”?

One might be tempted to be highly critical of Nicodemus for not acting out his faith more strongly, but even his mild support of justice brought him derision. The Sanhedrin answered and said to him, “Are you also from Galilee? Search and look, for no prophet has arisen out of Galilee”.

Jonah the prophet remained forgotten that day. The prophet Jonah came from Galilee from the town of Gath Hopher, which was only three miles from Nazareth. Ironically, the prophet they had forgotten was the very one Jesus would cite, foretelling his greatest work. “Just as Jonah was in the belly of the great fish for three days” Jesus said, “so also shall the Son of Man be in the depths of the earth for three days”. And then, just as Jonah would emerge from the darkness of death, being spewed forth onto the dry ground so also would Jesus emerge from an even greater darkness, and descend into unearthly darkness of hell itself to proclaim a victory over Satan before Ascending on high.

Nicodemus would accompany our Lord’s body to be placed into the darkness of the earth, bearing with Joseph of Arimathea the myrrh and aloes. John 19:39 reads “And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bring a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury”. He who first had come in the darkness had come hurrying to serve him in the last hours of the day. Nicodemus demonstrated great courage here in contrast to the disciples who had fled. His courage comes from possessing faith in the mystery of God and the Kingdom of Heaven which he already, although still earthbound lives in. In giving such a great earthly gift of value in the spices, and risking his life in the burial, Nicodemus stands as a testimony to his peers. Truly there must be some great value in this mystery he pledges his life to.

May we stand giving testimony also, in any way we can. There is a Nicodemus who may still seek. Perhaps, one night, he may come to you? Will you be ready? Will you be able to connect? Will the Christ speak His Word through your voice? By the grace of God it will be so.

Amen.