

For God so loved the world

A sermon on John 3.14-21 by the Revd Dr Simon Holt, 14 March 2021

Some time ago I was invited to a forum in the Docklands. About two hundred people were there to consider the next decade in the area's development. As far as I could tell I was the only church representative. After a rousing presentation, they broke us up into common interest groups: architects in one corner; developers in another; policy makers over here and business leaders over there. But what to do with the Baptist minister? My last minute assignment was to the table set aside for what they called the culture-and- community sector. I sat down with a very trendy looking group, all in uniform black. We went around and introduced ourselves. There were the directors of the Melbourne Arts Festival and the Food and Wine Festival, the conveners of the Comedy and Fringe Festivals, a representative of the Melbourne Women's Forum, etc. It was obvious they all knew each other well. And then it came to me. "Hello," I said, "I'm the minister of the Collins Street Baptist Church." There was an awkward pause. Some looked down. The young woman next to me, shifting uncomfortably in her seat, said, "Oh, how interesting ... my grandmother was a Catholic!" perhaps ensuring she was already spoken for. The group leader finally said, "Well, it's good to have a bit of divine inspiration in the group!" There was a nervous chuckle before we moved on to the business at hand.

To be honest, moments like these happen often. The inevitable question of "So what do you do?" is innocently asked by someone at a social gathering or a meeting at the Town Hall. My vocational confession is usually met with an "Oh!" before the enquirer quickly moves on to another subject or another person. The truth is, most people don't quite know what to do with clergy types. Perhaps we make them uncomfortable. In most cases, I suspect, people carry certain assumptions about people like me. Granted, we are an odd bunch. I have only to attend a meeting of religious leaders in the city, and I can feel myself pulling away uncomfortably.

As we make our way through the season of Lent, the gospel readings help us to notice some of the encounters Jesus had on his way to the events of Holy Week. Today, in our reading from John's gospel, it's his midnight rendezvous with the Pharisee Nicodemus. Though the lectionary has served us a very truncated version of that encounter — indeed, we get just the tail end of their conversation — the encounter itself is well known to gospel readers. It's here we find that much loved language of conversion — the language of being born again.

I suspect we readers of the gospels bring just as many assumptions to the Pharisees as most Melbournians bring to Baptist ministers. Since our Sunday school days when every story needed a goodie and baddie, we've learned to see the Pharisee as the enemy of the gospel: representative of the powerful religious institution that would not tolerate Jesus and his teaching.

In every caricature there is some truth. No doubt, the Pharisees played a key role in the execution of Jesus. No doubt, they were an intolerant and unforgiving bunch. But there was more to the Pharisees than this. Whatever else these Pharisees were, they were devoutly committed to God. They gave their lives to studying the Torah so that they could give flesh to their love of God and were deeply committed to the renewal of Judaism. They honestly sought truth, to know it and to live it. But they did so in the midst of a religious culture that was riddled with factions and divisions.

In essence the Pharisees were a small, minority sect, a right-wing faction within a larger religious and political system. Like all factions they had to constantly watch their own backs lest their power was diminished. Though at the time of Jesus the Pharisees played a key role in setting the direction of Jewish faith, their standing was always tenuous. They had to invest great energy into maintaining their political and religious influence.

Perhaps it was this that caused Nicodemus to come to Jesus ‘in the night’ as he did. He had to play his cards right. He couldn’t be seen to fraternise with the wrong types. Importantly, though, he came seeking truth. Nicodemus came to Jesus because he knew Jesus was more than just another religious fruitcake, more than just another political aspirant. “We know,” he said, “that you are a teacher who has come from God.” Whatever else Nicodemus was, whatever else he represented, he was a seeker of truth and he could sense that truth in Jesus.

Like every religious professional—Jewish, Christian, Muslim, New Age—Nicodemus was a mixed bag. I am. I’d like to think my motivations for being in Christian ministry are pure but of course they’re not. There are some pretty ordinary longings for approval and recognition and influence that are present every day. Then there are those more noble aspirations I have to serve God wholeheartedly and to love people selflessly. Somewhere in the midst of all that is God. Somewhere between my best self and my worst self in this defining call that I have to seek and proclaim truth. Nicodemus was no different.

What’s really interesting in the story of this encounter — the full story — is where Jesus takes the conversation right from the beginning. Before Nicodemus has the chance to set the agenda or ask any questions, Jesus launches into a statement: “Truly I tell you, Nicodemus, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born from above.” Perhaps Jesus knew the agenda Nicodemus had in mind, or the sorts of questions he would ask. Perhaps Jesus just wanted to cut to the chase, to address the heart of the truth that Nicodemus longed for but couldn’t even touch.

For Nicodemus, as for so many deeply religious people, the primary concern was to understand what he and others must do to secure a future in God’s kingdom: what rules must we follow? What boxes of belief must we tick? What rites and rituals do we need to participate in to ensure our security with God? This had become an obsession with the Pharisees: the business of maintaining and protecting the racial and ritual purity of God’s chosen people. Their expression of religious commitment had become an issue of border protection: understanding how they maintained their own place in God’s Kingdom and how they protected the boundaries of that kingdom lest anyone should enter unlawfully, thus compromising their own security.

Jesus’ response is to paint a very different picture of what it means to live in God’s presence. He describes this conversion process as one of being reborn. When one encounters the presence and reign of God, one’s life is turned inside out and upside down. Nothing is left the same as it was. It marks a radical change that touches both the flesh and the spirit; every aspect of our lives is impacted. This encounter with God is so much more than creeds and rules and rituals. It is a rebirth available to all. God’s kingdom is not some walled city with protected borders and secret passwords; it is not some hidden realm that only some will ever see. It is all around us.

The wind blows where it chooses, Nicodemus. God's kingdom is among us, here and now and everywhere. And as such it is open to all those who will allow the transforming presence of God in, no matter who they are, no matter where they are. There are no borders to the kingdom to God, Nicodemus; there is no system of priority boarding. Rather, God reigns in every aspect of human life and in every corner of this earth, and that, Nicodemus, is what you need to understand. "For God so loved the world," the whole world, not just some corner of it, not even just the human part of it, but all of it, the cosmos, the whole awful, wonderful thing. This is the wideness of God's love: "that the world might be saved through him." But we religious people, whatever brand, are obsessed with narrowing its scope.

Not long after I began at Collins Street, I was invited to participate in a forum at what was then called BMW Edge at Fed Square, a forum on the value of community and place in our city. There were four of us on the panel: Justin Madden, then State Minister for Planning, Daniel Grollo, a prominent urban developer (now in all sorts of grief), Kim Dovey, Professor of Architecture at Melbourne University, and me, representing the community sector in the city. It was an inspiring event. Each of my fellow panel members spoke well. I got talk about the inclusivity of God's table and how in our place-making we can set our shared table of city life in ways that all are included. I came away so excited by the capacity of theology to speak into the very heart of our common human concerns as residents of this city.

Still high on the energy I felt from this gathering, I drove that same night from the city out to Syndal for a theological consultation on the future of the Baptist churches in Victoria. It too was inspiring. People like Whitley's then professor of theology Frank Rees and my colleague Carolyn Francis made compelling presentations on the challenges facing us as Baptists in a pluralist society.

In his presentation Frank Rees called the church to understand itself as part of the world and not withdrawn from it. We must be willing to understand what unites us with this earth and its people, he said, and not what separates us from them. This must include, he said, people of other faiths and no faith. But this was not easy for everyone to hear. Sadly, what transpired was a heated response from those who wanted to more clearly mark the boundaries of the Christian church, to more clearly delineate who is in and who is out of God's kingdom, as though their own security depended on it. I left early, feeling frustrated, even a bit angry.

As I drove home, much more discouraged than I was earlier in the night, I was struck again by the fact that when theology is a purely in-house conversation, it inevitably deteriorates to debates on boundaries and borders. But when theology follows the path of God, the God who loves the entire world, the cosmos, it takes us beyond an obsession with borders to a new engagement with the kingdom of God, present and tangible in all the earth.

Friends, as we follow Jesus this Lenten season to the events of Holy Week and beyond, let me remind you that we follow Jesus into the world, not away from it. We follow Jesus not into some ethereal and disconnected place but into every nook and cranny of earthly life with a new vision of what that life can be: life reborn, life re-imagined in light of God's pervasive reign, life lived in all its fullness because the Son of God has been lifted up above all the earth. This is the call of Jesus. "Come," he says to us today, "follow me."