

After the temptations in the desert, our Lenten readings all come from John's gospel, which is the text that accompanies us through the Lent and Easter season – with one exception, which is that we read Matthew's passion narrative on Palm Sunday.

There's a good reason for John being our Lent and Easter text. John's gospel is full of symbols and signs that point us to incarnation and resurrection – to the garden of joy where we experience union – union with God and with one another in Christ.

Across the next few Sundays we are going to witness Jesus having encounters with a handful of different people. While I trust that these encounters probably happened for real, the way that they're written is symbolic – we're meant to see these encounters not just as 'some people Jesus met' but as people who represent barriers to union, barriers to true communion with God.

Lazarus, the final encounter, is of course dead, which is a significant obstacle to living faith. But not, as we discover, an insurmountable barrier to experiencing God's grace and power. Before we get to Lazarus, Jesus' healing of the blind man will help us ponder on the ways in which we are blind– our failure to see and be aware of God's kingdom until Jesus clears our eyes. And we'll reflect next week on the Samaritan woman, who is thirsty for God's Spirit but not yet free to devote herself to Christ.

Today, we meet Nicodemus, a 'leader of the Jews', a 'teacher of Israel', who is struggling to fit Jesus into the religious categories that already make sense to him. He's seen and heard Jesus and is incredibly compelled by the signs he's seen Jesus do and the sense of God's presence that surrounds Jesus. But the things Jesus is saying confuse him. He wants to understand, to make his world all fit together and get everything in the right place in his mental map. So, he comes to Jesus 'by night' for a private audience.

It is significant that Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night. Nicodemus, who turns up three times in John's gospel, was probably a real human being that the first Christians would have known. But he is also a symbolic figure in this passage. He represents a way of thinking and believing in God that was all bound up with laws and rules and traditions that were designed to make people righteous, and to produce an ordered society. He represents all of us who are somewhat stuck in mental habits and assumptions about the spiritual life that are no longer fit for purpose and need to make room for new ways of seeing.

For Nicodemus to discover the transformative truth that God's Spirit dwells inside us, he has to go into a place of uncertainty, of risk and not knowing, all symbolised by the night in which he goes to question the Rabbi Jesus.

He finds it so hard to comprehend when Jesus tells him that his religious system isn't working any more. And don't we all? It's hard to see what we're so familiar with from the outside – particularly if we have positions of importance or authority.

What Nicodemus doesn't get is that the structures and rules are all very well, but in our natural selves, the product of evolutionary instincts, tribalism, competition and limited thinking – we always, always set up legalistic human systems that exclude the weak and oppress the poor and poor in spirit. Jesus tells Nicodemus that the Spirit 'blows where it wills', like the wind – a dynamic and unpredictable energy that breathes change and renewal. 'Inside and outside the fences', as James K. Baxter put it.

Nicodemus is a teacher of Israel, but he has only ever related to God through the system of laws and sacrifices that governed Jewish life. Suddenly Jesus is telling him that this system isn't capable of changing people from the inside – which is what needs to happen if humankind is really going to live in peace and uphold the dignity of all. Jesus invites Nicodemus into a relationship with God where God dwells within, moving and guiding him to live and behave in ways the law could not achieve.

This mysterious 'kingdom of God' that Jesus is ushering in, can only be seen and experienced by people who have been 'born from above' – a new start in life that is as radical and vulnerable as the moment when we physically came into the world as babies. "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit," Jesus says. This is the heart of our sacrament of baptism, the ritual of water and Spirit that begins our Christian life. Baptism ushers in a new way of being that casts off our entanglement with all that hurts and destroys, and re-births us as the 'new creation.' As those born from above our life is joined to Christ's life and the Spirit breathes in our breath, guiding us into the way of peace.

This is the theory, of course. In reality we get stuck over and over again – as individuals, as communities, as institutions. We fail to live as those ‘born from above’ and go back to protecting what we find familiar and safe, exposing ourselves to as little change as possible, holding on to whatever security and control we can.

Our Lenten journey asks us to consider the Nicodemus that lives inside of us:

What attracts us to Jesus?

What makes it hard for us to get our heads and hearts around his message?

How do the systems and traditions that we’re part of get in the way of living in the Spirit?

How willing are we to go into the unstable ‘night time’ of not knowing the way forward...for ourselves, for our faith and our church?

As I’ve said before and will go on saying, Easter is the great festival of baptism – it’s not just about remembering Jesus dying and rising again, but about us dying and rising again, with him. Only those who are willing to die can be reborn. This is the call, and baptism is the sacrament that enacts it. We are only baptised once, but every year we re-enter those waters – in prayer, in ritual, in letting go of all that holds us back, even if what we have to let go is everything we thought we knew. Amen.