

Sermon 7 June 2009

Rev Nathalie Dürmüller, Subject: Nicodemus' faith

Dear Parishioners

Imagine a man, who knew the word of God extremely well. He studied it every day and sometimes even at night. He was really interested in the Scripture which he tried very hard to understand. As a result of this he knew many passages by heart and he could give an answer to most of the questions that he was being asked. One night this man couldn't sleep. The reason why he couldn't sleep was that there was a question in his mind that he couldn't solve and that he felt was absolutely essential for his life. It was a question about life and death and also about the universal truth. It was the question about how to enter the kingdom of heaven. He was asking himself: "Who will have access to the kingdom of heaven at the end of days and who won't? Is there something like an eternal life or are the years that we have on this planet all that we get?" That man was torn by these questions and even more so as he heard rumors about a man who was talking a lot about the Kingdom of Heaven, a man who even made people feel that the Kingdom of Heaven was actually very close. It was a man who healed people and publicly criticized the authorities of the time – of course this was Jesus. As this man couldn't sleep at night his thoughts were turning in circles and finally he decided that he had to get up and ask Jesus directly. So he got out of bed, threw on his toga-like dress and made his way to where he knew Jesus was staying that night. It was a bit dangerous to walk through the alley ways of Jerusalem at night and he nearly fell over a stone that his oil lamp didn't light on, but he didn't mind as he strongly felt that he had to find an answer to his questions.

Finally he made it to the house where Jesus was staying and knocked at the door. The servant asked with a sleepy voice: "Who is there?" A voice said: "It is Nicodemus, I have to talk to Jesus!" The servant tried to make him come back in the morning, but Nicodemus insisted. So finally he was able to talk to Jesus. This scene is described in John chapter 3 with the following words:

2He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God was not with him."

Nicodemus was a man of good education so he was always very polite, he wouldn't just explain directly what the reason for his late intrusion was. But Jesus gave him the answer right away: **"I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."**

So that was a straightforward answer from Jesus. Still for Nicodemus Jesus' words were not very clear, he asked back:

4"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked. "Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother's womb to be born!"

What a weird conversation! Jesus and Nicodemus seem to be talking at cross-purposes. It is certainly not a normal conversation with questions and answers. It is a situation of misunderstandings and misinterpreting each other's words. Yes, Jesus gives Nicodemus a prompt answer to the question of how to gain eternal life, but he gives him an unexpected and unusual answer, that Nicodemus finds difficult to understand. Still he tries to grasp it but he stays on the one to one level, whereas Jesus is talking in a metaphorical way. It might seem a bit ridiculous for us now but it is actually not the most obvious thing to understand what Jesus actually meant with somebody being born again. Some evangelical Christians might ask us still today: "Are you born again?" Is this for you an question that is easy to answer? I find it in a way difficult as I am not 100 per cent sure what they mean when they talk about being born again. If it means to believe in Jesus then I can say yes wholeheartedly but if it means – as some assume – that you must have had a particular experience with the Holy Spirit, then I might not be able to say yes. The term being born again is somehow confusing – not only for Nicodemus but also for most of us today.

In the story that is told to us in the gospel of John there is another reason why Nicodemus doesn't understand Jesus. In this gospel whenever there is an ambiguity or when people don't understand what Jesus is doing or saying then this is always considered as a moment of revelation. But this revelation is only obvious to those who already believe. So it means that faith has to come first if one truly wants to understand Jesus. The author of the gospel of John actually wants to tell us that this is the key problem that Nicodemus had: He found it hard to believe. He was the kind of person who asked a lot of questions. He would not rest until he could understand what this Jesus was all about. He also might

have been a person, who needed a lot of security. He couldn't just believe without thinking through rationally what Jesus meant when he was talking about the Kingdom of Heaven. And he actually risked quite a lot as he tried to get an answer to his questions. He had a reputation to lose, as he was probably a well-known and educated Pharisee, which meant at the time to be part of high society. But Nicodemus' will to understand this new kind of faith that so many people were adopting was so strong that he had set off at night to search for Jesus. The fact that all of this took place at night shows how much these questions troubled Nikodemus. His world of security was being questioned, his parents and his ancestor's faith was being put at stake. That was of course not easy! On top of this he didn't get an answer from Jesus as he might have expected it to be. Jesus was talking about a faith that was greater than that of ordinary human beings; he introduced his disciples to a faith that was intangible and beyond their control. Jesus was the one who said that human beings are more than Sabbath – imagine what a provocation for a Pharisee! Nicodemus must have felt that if all of this was true than his whole life, everything that he believed in was turned upside down. That is never a very comfortable thought. We probably all know that from our own experience.

Nicodemus is often looked upon as a person who wasn't born again and therefore was not meant to go to the Kingdom of Heaven. I sometimes think that many of us Christians today are actually like Nicodemus. And here I include myself as well. Many of us need a lot of security in our faith and we seek a comfortable, cozy Christian lifestyle that helps us to keep our lives as we like them to be. Well, that is to be expected. We all have our needs and wishes that we want to be feel secure. But deep down inside we all know this is not what Jesus was talking about - that was not His Gospel. His message was not like a sleeping pill but much more like a strong espresso that confronted people with their own truth and made them sit up and rethink their way of believing.

This is why for me in a way Nicodemus is a person to admire. He is a person who sets out to find the truth and to learn more about Jesus' faith. He left behind his education and maybe also his prejudices and went to talk to Jesus. After that he still might have not felt ready to agree with this new kind of faith. He might have sensed that this wasn't for him. Fair enough – he might have had his reasons for that. Nonetheless Nicodemus can serve us today

as a positive example. He was seeking the truth and he was seeking an understanding of what Jesus was talking about and the way he was living his life. If we manage to act like Nicodemus today and still be seeking the truth then we are a lot closer to the truth. To question certain dogmas is essential this brings us closer to God. This might stir us out of our Christian comfort zone that we might have built around ourselves to discover Jesus under a new light.

Amen