

We have just listened to some of the most often cited words of the Bible: *“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life”* (Jn. 3:16).

Jesus addresses these words to a man by the name of Nicodemus. We learn from the third chapter of St. John’s Gospel that Nicodemus was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling body, that governed Jewish religious practice at the time of Jesus. Nicodemus was someone who was faithful to religious practice; he said his prayers, went to synagogue service each Sabbath, and lived his life guided by the Ten Commandments, just as we try to do.

Nicodemus had heard about Jesus, what he had been saying, and the signs he had been working. He was curious to meet him. But, he was hesitant about following him. And so, John tells us, Nicodemus arranges a private meeting with Jesus at night, secretly. For John night and darkness are the domain of sin, evil and death as well as lack of, or incomplete, faith. Jesus, in John’s Gospel is presented, and proclaims himself to be, the “Light of the world” (Jn. 9). Nicodemus has many questions. He is looking for a “sign” from Jesus, some proof that would validate placing faith in Jesus, not unlike many people today.

Jesus informs Nicodemus that in order to truly know him he must be “born again”. Nicodemus understands this literally at the level of physical birth and scoffs at Jesus’ word. Jesus patiently explains to Nicodemus that being “born again” as he demands is not a matter of physically reentering his mother’s womb. Being “born again” means a choice to totally re-orientate the purpose and direction of one’s life, putting faith and trust in the person of Jesus who and living the whole of life out of this relationship. Jesus himself is the “sign” of what living a “born again” life is all about--the outpoured love of God become human, a love so profound and complete it will be completely poured out on a cross for the forgiveness of the sin of the world, just the image of the snake mounted on a pole, the physical sign of Israel’s sin in the desert, became a sign and means of healing and salvation, so of the poisonous snakes which killed and everyone who looks at the crucified God-in-

Jesus on the cross will experience forgiveness of sin, complete reconciliation with God, will be “born again”. Such is the richness of mercy offered us by God or which St. Paul also speaks today.

The Gospel story does not tell us what Nicodemus did after his initial encounter with Jesus. However, Nicodemus does appear again in John’s Gospel; at Calvary under the cross on Good Friday. Now Nicodemus beholds the “sign” saw with his eyes, fully sees that **“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son”** a love out of which Jesus speaks from the cross: **“Father, forgive them, they know not what they do”** not only to the Romans who physically crucified him, but the Jewish leaders who had pushed for his death: **“Today, you will be with me in paradise”** to a convicted criminal who in the desperation of his punishment for his sin, turned at the last minutes of his life to Jesus, and received fullness of divine forgiveness: **“Father, into your hands, I commend my spirit”** from a man who experienced the sense of abandonment by the God to whom he had given his life, yet amid his own darkness and despair reached out in trust and faith that God would not ultimately abandon him.

John tells us that after Jesus’ death it was Nicodemus along with Joseph of Arimethea, Mary, Jesus’ mother, and the other women, who prepared the body of Jesus for burial and, laid it in the tomb. Tradition has it that Nicodemus understood the “sign”, became a believer, was “born again” and eventually was martyred for his witness to Jesus near the end of the first century.

Today we are Nicodemus. Today the Evangelist reminds us that the only “sign” is Jesus raised on the Cross: Jesus who died and rose for our salvation. Today, we are invited to relationship with Jesus, to be “born again”! From this experience, personally and in the community of the Church, flows a new way of thinking and acting: we stand forgiven, made new. “Reborn” in Jesus, we now are “signs”—signs of the presence and on-going grace of God in the world to all who find themselves in darkness.

This love is the true secret of Christian joy to which today, ***Laetare Sunday***, invites us.