

4th SUNDAY OF LENT YEAR B HOMILY ESSENDON 2021
SEEKING FAITH AND TRUTH

Jn 3.14-21 2Chron 36.14-23 Eph 2.4-10

“At this midpoint of Lent (Gaudete Sunday in Catholic tradition), what the readings seem to have in common is an insistence that God’s ultimate response to human wrongdoing is salvific, rather than judgmental and destructive... God brings salvation not judgement.” As suggests Brendan Byrne SJ, who finds more coherence in the readings this weekend. So it’s a call to overcome guilt and fear, and accept God’s truth in faith, and to live that truth in love, in our lives.

John’s contrasts are clear, between light and darkness, truth and falsehood, good and evil, love and hate, the latter images reflecting the human capacity for not accepting and living in the enlightenment Jesus’ message provides.

Pope Francis, in taking the risk of a visit to the people of war-ravaged Iraq, and not just to the Christians, shows the way in reaching out to the darker reaches of our world, bringing an enlightening message of peace and hope, not just in nice sounding words, but in action too, by actually being there, with the people, who have suffered so much.

Nicodemus, as supposedly a Greek Jew, represents you and me, on the path of life in search of meaning, whilst Jesus represents a God of life and love, ever present to humanity and ever ready to forgive and encourage. Dr Google tells us that his name is a combination of Nike (*Victory – I once had a Nike running shoes! I think I wore them for my one and only marathon in Ottawa August 1985!*) and Demos (*people*), and so ***‘victory of the people’!*** Some name!!

He has a mixed legacy, as some interpreters or detractors have identified him as a wimp or a coward, who wasn’t prepared to come out into the open about his faith in Jesus, as he was one of the higher-ups in the Temple scene, a member of the Sanhedrin, but, more commonly, he is seen to be a genuine seeker of truth, with an enquiring mind, having difficulty coming to terms with just who Jesus was, in the scheme of his understanding of Jewish traditions and faith.

We could understand his confusion, given that we all have our own predispositions, preconceptions, hopes expectations, from the way we have been brought up and influenced by family and surrounding environment. It can be difficult to be open to new ideas, thoughts and revelations, as we are challenged to think for ourselves and make our own decisions.

A number of times later in John’s Gospel, Nicodemus pops up again, appearing as almost a hero, defending Jesus’ right to a defence before the Sanhedrin, and then coming out to assist with Jesus’ burial, later immortalized by Michelangelo in a sculpture reminiscent of the Pieta, the dead Jesus in the arms of Nicodemus, in place of Mary, his mother. I think we can conclude that he is a genuine seeker of truth, and takes time to come to accepting that Jesus does offer a new way of understanding God as a God of love and mercy, as revealed in the person, words and deeds of Jesus. In the end, his faith comes to light in his appearance at the death of Jesus, and assistance with his burial.

Like Doubting or Honest, as I prefer to label him, Thomas, he takes time in coming to terms with his confusion and uncertainty about the identity of Jesus, particularly given the ultimate paradox of his suffering and death in human reality, but then his promise of life beyond the travesty and tragedy of the crucifixion.

The two Books of Chronicles, thought to be written earlier than 400BC, long as it is, barely appears in the Lectionary Cycle, but here we have an interesting insight into human intervention in history, with nasty Nebuchadnezzar pillaging and destroying the Jerusalem Temple and taking God’s People into Exile in Babylon, then overwhelmed by Cyrus, a pagan ruler of Persia, who sees his role as freeing the captive Jewish people and helping them rebuild their Temple on their return. He is seen a surprise agent of God, who is portrayed as concerned with restoration and salvation of the people, rather than punishment. (*Some fundamentalist Christians in the USA even saw the previous president in the image of Cyrus, coming to save the country, in a rather crazy and deluded stretch of the imagination!*)

Paul is worth a mention today, too, as he focusses on God's love revealed in Jesus, who saves us by God's grace, we being, as he puts it poetically, "***God's work of art, created in Christ Jesus, to lead the good life.***" So, let's do it, appreciate the wonder and beauty of life, and continue to try to live the good life with love.

Jesus calls us to seek the truth and to live by it, as he shows us the Way, gives us the Truth in the Good News of the Gospel, and shows us the path to fullness of Life in following him as faithful disciples, falling over as we do, along the way. We look to him, as the one raised up, who draws us to him in faith, as Nicodemus finally follows too, after his search throughout John's Gospel, the imagery being that he is the one lifted up, even if on a cross, which becomes the tree of life and paradoxical symbol of victory.

And now we have a short AV reflection on life in rural Indonesia, with Arsad, a farmer, helping improve sanitation and hygiene in the local community, through the support of Caritas.

Again, we are reminded the Project Compassion theme for this Lent of 2021 is "***Be more***", taken from Oscar Romero's words: "***Aspire not to have more, but to be more.***" So, once again, as we pass the half-way mark of the season, please continue to donate through your envelopes or boxes, or by credit card or on-line.

john hannon

14th March 2021

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