

Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; Psalm 121; John 3:1-17

Pastor Giuseppe Mattei

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We are a little over a week into Lent. How is it going? Are you carving out of your schedule some prayer time? Are you taking advantage of our Wednesday night prayer services and fellowship time? Have you experimented not just with abstaining from a particular item but with full-blown 24-hour fasting? Have you intentionally found ways to give generously of your talents, time and energy for the benefit of others rejecting any calculation for personal gain?

Lent affords us the opportunity to consider the extreme generosity of Jesus who did not fear giving himself away for our sake. A closer walk with him as he faces his accusers and their lies about him, their fake indignation and abuse of power, their cruelty that violates his body and murders him on a cross will allow us to rejoice in his resurrection.

During the Sundays of Lent, we read about personal encounters of Jesus with several characters as reported by the gospel of John. Today, we read about Nicodemus.

Pilgrims from around the region have gathered in Jerusalem for the upcoming celebration of Passover. John tells us that even “Jesus went up to Jerusalem” and created quite a disturbance with the turning of the tables of the money changers in the Temple (John 2:13–25).

Considering this, I can’t blame Nicodemus for going to Jesus by night. Nicodemus was a prominent leader in the sect of the Pharisees and probably didn’t want to be seen with the new agitator in town.

He wasn’t quite sure what to make of Jesus of whom he had heard positive things and seen perform signs that can only be done in the power of God (Jn 3:2). Jesus was spiritually attractive and at the same time a political liability. He needed to use his best judgment and the utmost caution in socializing with Jesus.

Yet Nicodemus was genuinely curious about Jesus and probably serious about his spiritual journey. He wanted to know. He wanted to grow. He

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indicated (see the “we know” in Jn 3:2) he was one of the “many” who have seen the signs and have believed (Jn 2:23). Acting against his sect’s obvious antagonistic attitude towards Jesus, he came to see him.

[Besides their frustration at not being able to control this popular Rabbi Jesus within their legalistic boundaries, and besides their jealousy towards his healings, they had a genuine concern: “If we let him go on like this...the Romans will come and destroy both our holy place and our nation” (John 11:48).

Their logic is evident: Jesus’s healings inspire the crowd’s trust, which, in turn, could draw Roman attention and trigger violence against Israel’s people and sacred spaces. If this is the case, the Pharisees’ concerns seem understandable. Authoritarian powers often shape local religious debates about proper public expressions of faith. The Pharisees’ frustration with Jesus grew to the point of wanting to eliminate him and insisted on various occasions that he be arrested.

Nicodemus showed independence from his sectarian group when he came to see Jesus, albeit at night, to learn from him. Eventually, he remained impressed with his teachings and took a stand to defend Jesus (John 7:45-52).]

So, Nicodemus affirmed that Jesus was capable of powerful signs because he came from God and found favor with God. He came from the darkness of night into the light (“of all people”),¹ a significant movement toward believing.

Jesus clarified that for people to be able to “see” the kingdom of God they must be “born from above” (also translated “again”). If Nicodemus were able to affirm the divine origin of Jesus’ power, then he was part of those born from above and is beginning to see.

¹ See John 1:4.11-13

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He saw Jesus as a rabbi and miracle worker but found himself confronted with news beyond comprehension.

Nicodemus heard it literally: “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” (v. 4), but Jesus pointed to something deeper, a spiritual rebirth initiated by God.

Being “born from above” is about enlightenment and being rooted in the Divine Spirit. It is something God does, not dependent on anything we can do or achieve. It’s a steppingstone, though, the beginning of a new life transformed in the Spirit of Jesus. It’s not the end goal of the Jesus’ message as in “Are you born again? Are you saved?” The goal is to see God’s glory, to pursue God’s justice and to live Shalom.

Being born from above is not the static stage of one who has been perfected and has achieved a higher state above all other people. With the divine gift of being born from above, we are equipped to check all our life habits and attitudes, and pray for and engage in personal and communal transformation into the justice of God.

The Light of God comes into our life, and we find ourselves immersed in that Light. We are brought to Light and we bask in it. The darkness cannot overcome it, but God leaves us free to reject the Light, we may shield ourselves to it:

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it...He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.²

We can witness Nicodemus’ journey of faith with Jesus throughout John’s gospel: evolving from this initial spiritual guidance (John 3:1-17), to a stance of

² Jn 1:5.11-13

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advocating for fair treatment of Jesus by his fellow Jews (John 7:50-51), to his final positive acceptance of and compassion for Jesus, even with its possible social and political repercussions (John 19:39).

The presence and movement of the Spirit are evident by the unpredictable transformation in the life of a disciple. One touched by the Spirit of Jesus sees reality differently and assumes new loyalties: from self-centeredness to other centeredness, from self-interest to generosity, from narcissistic self-preoccupation to empathy and altruism, from individualism to community, from arrogant power-over to inclusive power-with. When the Spirit is present there is change in the air:

The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.³

Then there's John 3:16, one of the most quoted verses in all the Bible. Often, when it's quoted or memorized, the emphasis lies on "whoever believes...will have eternal life."

However, there are a few things one can easily miss.

First, God's love *precedes* our belief. It's only by grace that we believe. It's only when our eyes are opened that we see. It's only when we are washed into the holy waters of forgiveness that we are born anew.

Secondly, it's important to note that God's love reaches the *whole* world and not just the church, our country, the people who look like us, the ones who believe as we do, but the whole world. God's salvation is universal, that is catholic, reaching out far and wide and bringing all in in an inclusive, cohesive embrace and connecting people to one another. Any divisive, exclusive, abusive and dismissive stance is not from God.

³ Jn 3:8

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Thirdly, verse 17 reminds us that God sent God's Son into the world to save it, not to condemn it. God wants to heal and reconcile the world and not destroy it.

May we be blessed by the transforming, healing presence of the Spirit calling us to new birth and new life. Amen.