

Vespers Homily

The Second Sunday of Lent

March 1, 2015

Psalm 121
John 3:1-17

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Who was John? Who was the author of this fourth Gospel? From the very earliest times, the latter half of the second century, some very significant leaders of the Christian communities have asserted that the author was actually John, Son of Zebedee, a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, one of the first to be called to follow Jesus.

Such revered figures of the early church as Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria, and Irenaeus, all subscribed to that identity. On the other hand, other equally significant figures such as Ignatius and Justin Martyr disagreed.

There was also disagreement about where the Gospel was written. The three great centers of the earliest Christian communities, Antioch, Ephesus, and Alexandria, were all proposed to be the site. When it was written, Jerusalem had been laid waste by the Romans, and the Christians had been dispersed to those cities of the eastern Mediterranean in which Greek was a common language.

All of which probably tells us that the writer can best be called Anonymous, a resident in a city of the Christian Diaspora, writing for a Greek-speaking, Hellenistic community, retelling the story of the synoptic gospels not as a biography of Jesus but as a proclamation of the unfolding of God's plan of salvation for His creation.

Whoever John was, he had a wonderful command of the Greek language. It is truly improbable that an Aramaic-speaking fisherman could use the words with such subtlety and effect. Greek is a very subtle and flexible language. Words have second and third meanings according to their context. A difference of a single letter can change the meaning of a sentence.

Case in point: Nicodemus is not a Hebrew or Aramaic name; it is Greek, really clever Greek. Remember that the great majority of the earliest witnesses of the Gospel heard the Gospel spoken rather than reading it. Hearing the Gospel proclaimed in community was one of the purposes of the earliest Christian gatherings. A Greek-speaking congregation, on hearing the name “Nicodemus,” would hear two joined Greek words, *nike* and *demos*.

The word *nike* means “victory.” *The Winged Victory of Samothrace* in the Louvre is technically a *nike*. The word *demos* means “the body,” (or “the populace”), hence our word “Democracy,” meaning government of the body. Together they would mean “victory of the body.” That would not be lost on those Greek-speaking early listeners.

Nicodemus is introduced as “a Pharisee . . . a leader of the Jews.” From that we can assume that he is a member of the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, the political and religious figures associated with the Temple who were the self-appointed overseers of Jewish affairs. There were many Sanhedrins in Israel; none were really official.

The Sanhedrin in Jerusalem was in the hands of a group called Sadducees, not Pharisees. The Sadducees, including the high priest and Temple authorities, represented the interests of those who supported Rome, the wealthy and politically powerful, who had a great interest in maintaining things just as they were. Jewish custom and religion were subordinate to accommodating Rome. It is probable that some Pharisees were in accord with the Sadducees, but apparently some, call it a liberal minority, recognized that such a policy was destroying the Jews’ relationship to God and could only lead to the destruction of Israel.

Israel's relationship to God had a cyclical history. In the books of Genesis and Exodus, they were very close to God as God formed them into a people and led them out of bondage in Egypt to the land He had promised. Then, again and again, the people of Israel fell away, following other gods and putting their faith in earthly powers. Of course they would fail, disasters would follow, they would repent and attempt to return to that first relationship, and they would fail again, never quite as close again, slipping farther and farther away.

Nicodemus was one of that minority of Pharisees as were, apparently, Joseph of Arimathea and others, seeing clearly that the pattern had to be broken, that a radical change must be made in Israel; they are seeking a way to save Israel, seeking a way to restore Israel to its first relationship to God. Perhaps the way might be found in the teachings of this Jesus.

Nicodemus came to Jesus by night. If he were identified as a follower of Jesus, his position on the Sanhedrin would have been compromised, and, if he found what he sought in the teaching of Jesus, he would not have been able to help him before the council. He saw clearly that the teachings of Jesus and the policies of the Sadducees were inevitably in conflict. Later, he attempted to help Jesus, calling the Sanhedrin not to condemn Him without a trial. Still later, it is Nicodemus who brought the costly spices for the embalming of the crucified Jesus. Apparently he had found what he sought.

At this point he was asking questions. He sincerely wanted to understand Jesus. Once again the Greek-speaking listener would enjoy the subtle use of words in this interchange.

"No one can see the Kingdom of God without being born from above." The words are *genethe anothēn*, "begotten," not born, from above. One may see the Kingdom because it is God's will, God's volition to reveal it.

“No one can enter the kingdom without being born of water and the Spirit.”

Being born of water is the baptism of John, the repentance of sin and turning back toward the renewed relationship with God. The Greek word used for the Spirit is *pneuma*; it is also the word for wind. First, there is a turning away from a life of self-indulgent sin, then a surrender, a submission to the wind, a surrender to the breath of God blowing over you and filling you, a surrender to the Spirit – surrender, belief, salvation.

Finally, Jesus assures Nicodemus that he, Nicodemus, would see the symbol and example of perfect surrender and submission to the breath of God. The Son of Man, Jesus, would be lifted up, *hypsōthenai*, sometimes written *doxasthenai*, meaning glorified, just as the healing bronze serpents were lifted by Moses to redeem the people of Israel in the desert. In Wisdom 16:6 and following, those serpents are called *symbolon solterias*, symbols of salvation. In His crucifixion, Jesus will be both sacrifice and symbol.

Lifted up upon the Cross of His crucifixion, lifted up from the tomb in His Resurrection, lifted up to the throne of God in His Ascension, Jesus is the way and the symbol of change and salvation for Nicodemus, for Israel and for us all. That is what Nicodemus is cast as seeking; that is the “victory of the body.”

The dialogue being ended, the writer summarizes it in what is known as “The Gospel within the Gospel:”

“For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but have everlasting life.”

In His Holy Name.