

***When you pray let go and start from nowhere.***

The second in a Lenten series on prayer

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

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*Genesis 12.1-4a, Psalm 121, Romans 4.1-5,13-17, John 3.1-17*

We are on a journey to Easter, a journey into wholeness, reconciliation and oneness. Today I am continuing our reflections on prayer—the way we communicate with God and God communicates with us throughout this journey.

Aristotle said, “Man is a goal seeking animal. His life only has meaning if he is reaching out and striving for his goals.” The truth of this is evident wherever you look—we are seekers of adventure, seekers of asylum, seekers of happiness, wealth and health, seekers of love and friendship, seekers of peace and reconciliation. Some of the things we seek are life-giving and enriching. Some of them end up being very disappointing. Human beings also seek God. Somewhere in us seems to be a drive that urges us to reclaim our lost home of Eden, the place where we are one with God and all of creation. Scientists have apparently now isolated a ‘God’ bit in our brain. As many have pointed out this does not prove anything about the existence or non-existence of God. However it does prove that we are wired for God, for seeking and experiencing the divine. Prayer is nothing if not a seeking for God, a longing to connect to God, to find the comfort, the oneness, the hope and healing that God alone can bring us. It is practice by which we help God deal with our chaotic disorientation from his love.

In today's Gospel we have a seeker, Nicodemus. Nicodemus is an interesting character to reflect upon when it comes to prayer. We find out that he is a Pharisee, a leader of the Jews, a teacher in Israel. He is obviously a pretty important person with lots of learning and expertise. In today's world he could be a Bishop or a top theologian. Yet Nicodemus comes to Jesus in the nighttime. The little picture on the front of your pew sheet is a painting of Nicodemus walking to Jesus in the dark.<sup>1</sup>



This has little to do with an idea that prayer is best done at night ... although as the desert mothers and fathers believed, the veil that separates heaven from earth is thinnest at dawn. In John's gospel the darkness represents separation from God. Possibly what was separating Nicodemus from God was his fear, the fear of being seen as a follower of Christ.

For Nicodemus the darkness is a safe place—a safe place to ponder the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven with one who appeared to know.

Nicodemus may be afraid and uncertain but he also has the first quality of a disciple of Jesus – that despite their fears and doubts they are prepared to seek. And this is a start, the willingness to seek God, to find time and space to begin to be attentive to God. One wants to

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<sup>1</sup> “Nicodemus came to Jesus by night...” by G. Eric and Edith Matson. Photograph Collection, Library of Congress.

cheer Nicodemus for his courage and his willingness but as we move through the story we find out that something is stopping him from truly seeing Jesus, for truly encountering God.

He comes to Jesus thinking that he has it all figured out—“I have seen your miracles, your signs and wonders, and I know that you are from God. I know who you are.” But Jesus answers him, “No, you haven’t a clue.” Well, actually he says, “No one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

You can just imagine Nicodemus’s confusion. He thinks he has it all worked out, that he has finally got the answers. But instead of applauding his ideas Jesus draws him into an amazing conversation. The whole dialogue between Nicodemus and Jesus has great depth and is designed to bring us, the readers, to a deeper faith. John does this by an amazing use of words. Words that when we translate them lose all their nuance. I’ll pick just one of the five obvious ones to illustrate this technique.

In verse 3, Jesus says, “Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” That’s in the NRSV translation. The NIV translation reads, “I tell you the truth, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again.” So which one is right? Born from above or born again? Well they both are. The Greek word *anōthen*, that the NRSV translates as born from above also means born again and it means both those things at one and the same time. There is no equivalent English or indeed Aramaic word that conveys that same meaning. So translators pick one or the other but as soon as they do they are only giving the reader 50 per cent of the meaning.

I think it is no mistake that John uses this complex word. What John asks the reader to do is to hold together the delicate balance of these two ideas—being born from above and being born again, being born from a particular place above, and being born in time, again. After stretching his mind with the notion of *anōthen*, Jesus then asks even more of Nicodemus with he says that no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless they are born of water and Spirit. The Greek word for Spirit is *pneuma* and it too has a dual meaning—it means both Spirit and wind or breath. Jesus is telling Nicodemus a birth story—a story of spiritual renewal.

Nicodemus of course is unable to do the delicate balancing act. He is unable to enter into the mystery of Jesus words. In a way he is unable to enter into the mystery of prayer. I don’t think many of us can. Nicodemus reverts to a very literal reading of Jesus words and naturally finds them incomprehensible. It is like Jesus is trying to open his eyes to mystery and wonder and Nicodemus cannot lift his eyes from the level of the obvious. He is trapped in his own preconceived ideas, his own ideas of what is possible or not. He is trapped by his inability to live with the tension and paradox of mystery.

But something in Nicodemus compels him to keep seeking. In the midst of his confusion he wants to find the answer, he wants to get closer to God. So he asks, “How are these things possible?” “How can this be?” Like all literalists Nicodemus wants to understand things as fully as possible. He thinks that if he just get more piece of information and slot it into the case he is building he will be certain and sure. He will have enough facts to move forward. Again he is on the wrong foot. Jesus has already told him—this is not about what you do, the wind blows wherever it pleases. You do not give birth to yourself. You cannot give birth to yourself. You cannot make this happen. God is the one who breathes life into you and gives you birth from above, birth into eternal life. God is the one who breathes into your prayer life and brings what God will.

It seems to me that we are not so different from Nicodemus. We have our preconceived ideas about God and the way the whole religious life thing works and we skim across the surface of our relationship with God. Like Nicodemus we somehow think we have to do a whole lot of

things to get close to God. We think prayer has to be a certain way to be acceptable. Perhaps our prayers actually get in the way more than they help. Our pre-conceived ideas actually shut God out and hinder the Spirit's movement in our life. Maybe we need to pray the prayer of knowing nothing, starting from nothing. The Zen teacher Suzuki Roshi calls this approach 'beginners mind'. Beginners mind implies that we enter the presence of mystery and bow down, because we are in awe of our own ignorance and our own inability to ever get things right. We let ourselves adjust to the fact that we will never be perfect 'pray-ers', or accomplished Holy men and women. We will always be at square one.

'Not knowing' and 'knowing nothing' is a fine way to approach any relationship—with God, with our wives and husbands, with our friends—even after thirty years. Imagine if we let go of all we think we know about our partners? When I know nothing and am willing to embrace that, I am soft, I can be directed and helped, I can be loved, I can be moved by the breath of God.

When Nicodemus let go of what he thought he knew, and began to allow himself to be born of the wind, things changed for him. In the chapters that follow, we read that Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus in the darkness of night, later publicly spoke up for Jesus. Then after Jesus' death on the cross when all the disciples had fled, Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus came forward to prepare Jesus' body for burial. Nicodemus was no longer intimidated or afraid. He came to realize that he was born from above not by his own doing but by the love of God who birthed him anew and gave him a life of boldness.

What would it mean for us to understand that we are born of the Spirit? What if we were to stop telling God what we know? What if we did not hold back but allowed the wind to take us to places not on our agenda or our prayer list? Can we allow ourselves to be vulnerable to the untamed wind of God? Can we listen for what we have been unwilling to hear? Can we see in one another not something to critique or judge but rather the image of the God who has given us birth? Can we let go of knowing and needing to know the answers and allow God's love to bring us into eternal life with him? Can we?