

Fr James' homily for The Fourth Sunday of Lent 2021



First Reading: Second Book of Chronicles 36:14-23
Second Reading: Letter of St Paul to the Ephesians 2:4-10
Gospel: John 3:14-21

Once again the Gospel for this Sunday, as last Sunday, is from St John rather than from St Mark, supplementing our reading of St Mark with some of the richness and the particular genius of the Fourth Gospel. Today is a pivotal day, midway in our keeping of Lent, and set before us is a pivotal Gospel, showing us one of the crucial scenes in the ministry of Jesus, and including one of the most important and fundamental lines in all of Holy Scripture.

John Chapter 3 tells of a night-time conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Nicodemus is a Pharisee, so well versed in the practice of religion, and a leader of Israel. He is intrigued by Jesus, seeing the works he has done which clearly show that God is with him. Nicodemus, however, comes to Jesus under cover of dark so that he cannot be seen by others.

Day and night, light and darkness are symbolic for St John in telling his Gospel. Here, near the beginning of the Gospel, Nicodemus comes to Jesus by night because - like every one of us - is spiritually in the dark until Jesus turns on the light! In particular, he cannot understand what Jesus means when he says (a little before our passage today) that he must be "born anew". Here is the point. Jesus wants to make us anew. To be as St Paul will later say "a new creation". Bishop Fulton Sheen was fond of saying that Jesus didn't come to make us into nice people. Anyone can learn what is right and do it, or can discern what is morally good. A good example is the pagan king Cyrus in the first reading today who works out what is right to do.

Jesus, however, shares our life to make us into part of his life and find a new identity as part of him, thus transforming all that we are. This underlines the importance of physically being part of his church and the importance of our gathering for worship. So many in 2020 have experienced great sadness and deprivation by being isolated. There is a lot to talk about there that is a subject for another day.

Today we reflect on that most important line of scripture. ***"God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son..."*** (John 3:16). Jesus compares himself, and the coming Cross, to Moses raising up the standard of the serpent in the desert so that people could be healed. Nicodemus would have understood the reference, and will one day gaze upon and understand the Cross of Jesus. Looking at that Cross will bring healing. How? In the Cross we see our own sin and all the mess that is too much for us and from which we cannot find a way out. God, however, provides a way

out. His forgiving love swallows up all this sin and gives us a chance to come out of the darkness into light. Pray with this Gospel because of course the words of the Gospel speak more plainly and eloquently than my clumsy summary.

Jesus bids us believe. By this he doesn't not so much mean intellectually accepting a proposition about Jesus but accepting HIM. Trusting and gazing upon HIM. Finding a home in HIM. This midway point of Lent is a joyful day, because the light is dawning around us and it is a traditional day to come home - Mothering Sunday - to come home to our place of nurture. In the first reading that is Jerusalem, whose name resounds through the prayers of Mass today. In whatever way we participate in Mass today let us be filled with joyful hope that together in the embrace of our mother the Church we meet and touch and know Jesus. (In your prayers, you can always ask Nicodemus to help you).

Amen.

Fr James and Fr Tom wish you a blessed Sunday. Keep safe and well, and never hesitate to pick up the telephone and be in touch. See you in church I hope! Keep in close contact with the website for news of how practical plans are developing.